This chapter examines eight enduring problems, from how to hold interest, to how to adapt from other media, to how to cope with holes in logic. For each problem the craft provides solutions.

THE PROBLEM OF INTEREST

Marketing may entice an audience into the theatre, but once the ritual begins, it needs compelling reasons to stay involved. A story must capture interest, hold it unswervingly through time, then reward it at Climax. This task is next to impossible unless the design attracts both sides of human nature—intellect and emotion.

Curiosity is the intellectual need to answer questions and close open patterns. Story plays to this universal desire by doing the opposite, posing questions and opening situations. Each Turning Point hooks curiosity. As the protagonist is put at increasingly greater risk, the audience wonders, “What’s going to happen next? And after that?” And above all, “How will it turn out?” The answer to this will not arrive until the last act Climax, and so the audience, held by curiosity, stays put. Think of all the bad films you’ve sat through for no other reason than to get the answer to that nagging question. We may make the audience cry or laugh, but above all, as Charles Reade noted, we make it wait.

Concern, on the other hand, is the emotional need for the positive values of life: justice, strength, survival, love, truth, courage.
Human nature is instinctively repelled by what it perceives as negative, while drawn powerfully toward positive.

As a story opens, the audience, consciously or instinctively, inspects the value-charged landscape of world and characters, trying to separate good from evil, right from wrong, things of value from things of no value. It seeks the *Center of Good*. Once finding this core, emotions flow to it.

The reason we search for the Center of Good is that each of us believes that we are good or right and want to identify with the positive. Deep inside we know we’re flawed, perhaps seriously so, even criminal, but somehow we feel that despite that, our heart is in the right place. The worst of people believe themselves good. Hitler thought he was the savior of Europe.

I once joined a gym in Manhattan not knowing it was a mafia hangout and met an amusing, likable guy whose nickname was Mr. Coney Island, a title he’d won as a bodybuilder in his teens. Now, however, he was a “button man.” “To button up” means to shut up. A button man “puts the button on” or shuts people up . . . forever. One day in the steam room he sat down and said, “Hey, Bob, tell me something. Are you one of the ‘good’ people?” In other words, did I belong to the mob?

Mafia logic runs like this: “People want prostitution, narcotics, and illicit gambling. When they’re in trouble, they want to bribe police and judges. They want to taste the fruits of crime, but they’re lying hypocrites and won’t admit it. We provide these services but we’re not hypocrites. We deal in realities. We are the ‘good’ people.” Mr. Coney Island was a conscienceless assassin, but inside he was convinced he was good.

No matter who’s in the audience, each seeks the Center of Good, the positive focus for empathy and emotional interest.

At the very least the Center of Good must be located in the protagonist. Others may share it, for we can empathize with any number of characters, but we must empathize with the protagonist. On the other hand, the Center of Good doesn’t imply “niceness.” “Good” is defined as much by what it’s not as by what it is. From the audience’s point of view, “good” is a judgment made in rela-
tionship to or against a background of negativity, a universe that's thought or felt to be "not good."

**THE GODFATHER:** Not only is the Corleone family corrupt, but so too are the other mafia families, even the police and judges. Everyone in this film is a criminal or related to one. But the Corleones have one positive quality—loyalty. In other mob clans gangsters stab one another in the back. That makes them the bad bad guys. The loyalty of the Godfather's family makes them the good bad guys. When we spot this positive quality, our emotions move toward it and we find ourselves in empathy with gangsters.

How far can we take the Center of Good? With what kind of monsters will an audience empathize?

**WHITE HEAT:** Cody Jarrett (James Cagney), the film's Center of Good, is a psychopathic killer. But the writers design a masterful balancing act of negative/positive energies by first giving Jarrett attractive qualities, then landscaping around him a grim, fatalistic world: His is a gang of weak-willed yes-men, but he has leadership capacities. He's pursued by an FBI squad of lackluster dullards, whereas he's witty and imaginative. His "best friend" is an FBI informant, while Cody's friendship is genuine. No one shows affection for anyone in this film, except Cody, who adores his mother. This moral management draws the audience into empathy, feeling, "If I had to lead a life of crime, I'd want to be like Cody Jarrett."

**THE NIGHT PORTER:** In a Backstory of dramatized flashbacks, protagonists and lovers (Dirk Bogarde and Charlotte Rampling) met in this fashion: He was the sadistic commandant of a Nazi death camp, she a teenage prisoner of masochistic nature. Their passionate affair lasted for years inside the death camp. With the war's end, they went their separate ways. The film opens in 1957 as they eye each other in the lobby of a Viennese hotel. He's now a hotel porter, she a guest traveling with her concert pianist husband. Once up in their room she tells her husband she's ill, sends him on ahead to his concert, then stays behind to resume her affair with her former lover. This couple is the Center of Good.

Writer/director Liliana Cavani manages this feat by encircling the lovers with a depraved society of malevolent SS officers in
hiding. Then she lights one little candle to blaze at the heart of this cold, dark world: Despite how the lovers met and the nature of their passion, in the deepest and truest sense, their love is real. What’s more, it’s tested to the limit. When SS officers tell their friend he must kill the woman because she may expose them, he replies, “No, she’s my baby, she’s my baby.” He’d sacrifice his life for his lover and she for him. We feel a tragic loss when at Climax they choose to die together.

SILENCE OF THE LAMBS: The writers of novel and screenplay place Clarice (Jodie Foster) at the positive focal point, but also shape a second Center of Good around Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) and draw empathy to both. First, they assign Dr. Lecter admirable and desirable qualities: massive intelligence, a sharp wit and sense of irony, gentlemanly charm, and most importantly, calmness. How, we wondered, could someone who lives in such a hellish world remain so poised and polite?

Next, to counterpoint these qualities the writers surround Lecter with a brutish, cynical society. His prison psychiatrist is a sadist and publicity hound. His guards are dimwits. Even the FBI, which wants Lecter’s help on a baffling case, lies to him, trying to manipulate him with false promises of an open-air prison on a Carolina island. Soon we’re rationalizing: “So he eats people. There are worse things. Offhand I can’t think what, but . . . .” We fall into empathy, musing, “If I were a cannibalistic psychopath, I’d want to be just like Lecter.”

Mystery, Suspense, Dramatic Irony

Curiosity and Concern create three possible ways to connect the audience to the story: Mystery, Suspense, and Dramatic Irony. These terms are not to be mistaken for genres; they name story/audience relationships that vary according to how we hold interest.

In Mystery the audience knows less than the characters.

Mystery means gaining interest through curiosity alone. We create but then conceal expository facts, particularly facts in the
Backstory. We arouse the audience’s curiosity about these past events, tease it with hints of the truth, then deliberately keep it in the dark by misleading it with “red herrings,” so that it believes or suspects false facts while we hide the real facts.

“Red herrings” has an amusing etymology: As peasant poachers of deer and grouse made off with their booty through medieval forests, they would drag a fish, a red herring, across the trail to confuse the lord of the manor’s bloodhounds.

This technique of compelling interest by devising a guessing game of red herrings and suspects, of confusion and curiosity, pleases the audience of one and only one genre, the Murder Mystery, which has two subgenres, the Closed Mystery and the Open Mystery.

The Closed Mystery is the Agatha Christie form in which a murder is committed unseen in the Backstory. The primary convention of the “Who done it?” is multiple suspects. The writer must develop at least three possible killers to constantly mislead the audience to suspect the wrong person, the red herring, while withholding the identity of the real killer to Climax.

The Open Mystery is the Columbo form in which the audience sees the murder committed and therefore knows who did it. The story becomes a “How will he catch him?” as the writer substitutes multiple clues for multiple suspects. The murder must be an elaborate and seemingly perfect crime, a complex scheme involving a number of steps and technical elements. But the audience knows by convention that one of these elements is a fatal flaw of logic. When the detective arrives on the scene he instinctively knows who did it, sifts through the many clues searching for the telltale flaw, discovers it, and confronts the arrogant perfect-crime-committer, who then spontaneously confesses.

In the Mystery form the killer and detective know the facts long before Climax but keep it to themselves. The audience runs from behind trying to figure out what the key characters already know. Of course, if we could win the race, we’d feel like losers. We try hard to guess the who or how, but we want the writer’s master detective to be just that.
These two pure designs may be mixed or satirized. CHINA-TOWN starts Closed but then turns Open at the Act Two Climax. THE USUAL SUSPECTS parodies the Closed Mystery. It starts as a "Who done it?" but becomes a "Nobody done it... whatever "it" may be.

In Suspense the audience and characters know the same information.

Suspense combines both Curiosity and Concern. Ninety percent of all films, comedy and drama, compel interest in this mode. In Suspense, however, curiosity is not about fact but outcome. The outcome of a Murder Mystery is always certain. Although we don't know who or how, the detective will catch the killer and the story will end "up." But the Suspense story could end "up" or "down" or in irony.

Characters and audience move shoulder to shoulder through the telling, sharing the same knowledge. As the characters discover expositional fact, the audience discovers it. But what no one knows is "How will this turn out?" In this relationship we feel empathy and identify with the protagonist, whereas in pure Mystery our involvement is limited to sympathy. Master detectives are charming and likable, but we never identify with them because they're too perfect and never in real jeopardy. Murder Mysteries are like board games, cool entertainments for the mind.

In Dramatic Irony the audience knows more than the characters.

Dramatic Irony creates interest primarily through concern alone, eliminating curiosity about fact and consequence. Such stories often open with the ending, deliberately giving away the outcome. When the audience is given the godlike superiority of knowing events before they happen, its emotional experience switches. What in Suspense would be anxiety about outcome and fear for the protagonist's well-being, in Dramatic Irony becomes dread of the moment the character discovers what we already know and compassion for someone we see heading for disaster.
SUNSET BOULEVARD: In the first sequence the body of Joe Gillis (William Holden) floats facedown in Norma Desmond's (Gloria Swanson) swimming pool. The camera goes to the bottom of the pool, looks up at the corpse, and in voice-over Gillis muses that we’re probably wondering how he ended up dead in a swimming pool, so he’ll tell us. The film becomes a feature-length flashback, dramatizing a screenwriter’s struggle for success. We’re moved to compassion and dread as we watch this poor man heading toward a fate we already know. We realize that all of Gillis’s efforts to escape the clutches of a wealthy harridan and write an honest screenplay will come to nothing and he’ll end up a corpse in her swimming pool.

BETRAYAL: The antiplot device of telling a story in reverse order from end to beginning was invented in 1934 by Phillip Kaufman and Moss Hart for their play Merrily We Roll Along. Forty years later Harold Pinter used this idea to exploit the ultimate use of Dramatic Irony. BETRAYAL is a Love Story that opens with former lovers, Jerry and Emma (Jeremy Irons and Patricia Hodge) meeting privately for the first time in the years since their breakup. In a tense moment she confesses that her husband “knows,” her husband being Jerry’s best friend. As the film proceeds it flashes back to scenes of the breakup, then follows with the events that brought about the breakup, back farther to cover the golden days of the romance, then ends on boy-meets-girl. As the eyes of the young lovers glitter with anticipation, we’re filled with mixed emotions: We want them to have their affair, for it was sweet, but we also know all the bitterness and pain they’ll suffer.

Placing the audience in the position of Dramatic Irony does not eliminate all curiosity. The result of showing the audience what will happen is to cause them to ask, “How and why did these characters do what I already know they did? Dramatic Irony encourages the audience to look more deeply into the motivations and causal forces at work in the characters’ lives. This is why we often enjoy a fine film more, or at least differently, on second viewing. We not only flex the often underused emotions of compassion and dread, but freed from curiosity about facts and outcome, we now concentrate on inner lives, unconscious energies, and the subtle workings of society.
However, the majority of genres do not lend themselves to either pure Mystery or pure Dramatic Irony. Instead, within the Suspense relationship writers enrich the telling by mixing the other two. In an overall Suspense design, some sequences may employ Mystery to increase curiosity about certain facts, others may switch to Dramatic Irony to touch the audience’s heart.

CASABLANCA: At the end of Act One we learn that Rick and Ilsa had an affair in Paris that ended in breakup. Act Two opens with a flashback to Paris. From the vantage of Dramatic Irony, we watch the young lovers head for tragedy and feel a special tenderness for their romantic innocence. We look deeply into their moments together, wondering why their love ended in heartbreak and how they’ll react when they discover what we already know.

Later, at the climax of Act Two, Ilsa is back in Rick’s arms, ready to leave her husband for him. Act Three switches to Mystery by showing Rick make his Crisis decision but not letting us in on what he’s chosen to do. Because Rick knows more than we, curiosity is piqued: Will he run off with Ilsa? When the answer arrives, it hits us with a jolt.

Suppose you were working on a Thriller about a psychopathic axe murderer and a female detective, and you’re ready to write the Story Climax. You’ve set it in the dimly lit corridor of an old mansion. She knows the killer is near and clicks the safety off her gun as she moves slowly past doors left and right extending into the dark distance. Which of the three strategies to use?

Mystery: Hide a fact known to the antagonist from the audience. Close all the doors so that as she moves down the hall the audience’s eyes search the screen, wondering. Where is he? Behind the first door? The next door? The next? Then he attacks by crashing through . . . the ceiling!

Suspense: Give the audience and characters the same information.

At the end of the hall a door is ajar with a light behind it casting a shadow on the wall of a man holding an axe. She sees the shadow and stops. The shadow retreats from the wall. CUT TO: Behind the door a man, axe in hand, waits: He knows that she’s there and he
knows that she knows that he’s there because he heard her footsteps stop. CUT TO: The hallway where she hesitates: She knows that he’s there and she knows that he knows that she knows that he’s there because she saw his shadow move. We know that she knows that he knows, but what no one knows is how will this turn out? Will she kill him? Or will he kill her?

Dramatic Irony: Employ Hitchcock’s favorite device and hide from the protagonist a fact known to the audience.

She slowly edges toward a closed door at the end of the hall.

CUT TO: Behind the door a man waits, axe in hand. CUT TO: The hallway as she moves closer and closer to the closed door. The audience, knowing what she doesn’t know, switches its emotions from anxiety to dread: “Don’t go near that door! For God’s sake, don’t open that door! He’s behind the door! Look out!”

She opens the door and . . . mayhem.

On the other hand, if she were to open the door and embrace the man . . .

MAN WITH AXE

(rubbing sore
muscles)

Honey, I’ve been shopping
wood all afternoon.
Is dinner ready?

. . . this would not be Dramatic Irony, but False Mystery and its dim-witted cousin, Cheap Surprise.

A certain amount of audience curiosity is essential. Without it, Narrative Drive grinds to a halt. The craft gives you the power to conceal fact or outcome in order to keep the audience looking ahead and asking questions. It gives you the power to mystify the audience, if that’s appropriate. But you must not abuse this power. If so, the audience, in frustration, will tune out. Instead, reward the filmgoer for his concentration with honest, insightful answers to his questions. No dirty tricks, no Cheap Surprise, no False Mystery.

False Mystery is a counterfeit curiosity caused by the artificial concealment of fact. Exposition that could and should have been
given to the audience is withheld in hope of holding interest over long, undramatized passages.

FADE IN: The pilot of a crowded airliner battles an electrical storm. Lightning strikes the wing and the plane plunges toward a mountainside. CUT TO: Six months earlier, and a thirty-minute flashback that tediously details the lives of the passengers and crew leading up to the fatal flight. This tease or cliffhanger is a lame promise made by the writer: "Don't worry, folks, if you stick with me through this boring stretch, I'll eventually get back to the exciting stuff."

THE PROBLEM OF SURPRISE

We go to the storyteller with a prayer: "Please, let it be good. Let it give me an experience I've never had, insights into a fresh truth. Let me laugh at something I've never thought funny. Let me be moved by something that's never touched me before. Let me see the world in a new way. Amen." In other words, the audience prays for surprise, the reversal of expectation.

As characters arrive onscreen, the audience surrounds them with expectations, feeling "this" will happen, "that" will change, Miss A will get the money, Mr. B will get the girl, Mrs. C will suffer. If what the audience expects to happen happens, or worse, if it happens the way the audience expects it to happen, this will be a very unhappy audience. We must surprise them.

There are two kinds of surprise: cheap and true. True surprise springs from the sudden revelation of the Gap between expectation and result. This surprise is "true" because it's followed by a rush of insight, the revelation of a truth hidden beneath the surface of the fictional world.

Cheap Surprise takes advantage of the audience's vulnerability. As it sits in the dark, the audience places its emotions in the storyteller's hands. We can always shock filmgoers by smash cutting to something it doesn't expect to see or away from something it expects to continue. By suddenly and inexplicably breaking the narrative flow we can always jolt people. But as Aristotle complained, "To be about to act and not to act is the worst. It is shocking without being tragic."
In certain genres—*Horror, Fantasy, Thriller*—cheap surprise is a convention and part of the fun: The hero walks down a dark alley. A hand shoots in from the edge of the screen and grabs his shoulder, the hero spins around—and it’s his best friend. Outside these genres, however, cheap surprise is a shoddy device.

**MY FAVORITE SEASON:** A woman (Catherine Deneuve) is married but not happily. Her possessive brother agitates his sister’s marriage, until finally convinced she cannot be happy with her husband, she leaves and moves in with her brother. Brother and sister share a top-floor apartment. He comes home one day feeling uncertain qualms. As he enters, he sees a window open, curtains billowing. He rushes to look down. In his POVs we see his sister smashed on the cobbles far below, dead, surrounded by a pool of blood. CUT TO: The bedroom and his sister waking up from a nap.

Why, in a serious *Domestic Drama*, would a director resort to horrific shock images from the brother’s nervous imagination? Perhaps because the previous thirty minutes were so unbearably boring, he thought it was time to kick us in the shins with a trick he learned in film school.

**THE PROBLEM OF COINCIDENCE**

Story creates meaning. Coincidence, then, would seem our enemy, for it is the random, absurd collisions of things in the universe and is, by definition, meaningless. And yet coincidence is a part of life, often a powerful part, rocking existence, then vanishing as absurdly as it arrived. The solution, therefore, is not to avoid coincidence, but to dramatize how it may enter life meaninglessly, but in time gain meaning, how the antilogic of randomness becomes the logic of life-as-lived.

First, bring coincidence in early to allow time to build meaning out of it.

The Inciting Incident of *JAWS*: a shark, by random chance, eats a swimmer. But once in the story the shark doesn’t leave. It stays and gathers meaning as it continuously menaces the innocent
until we get the feeling that the beast is doing it on purpose and, what's more, enjoying it. Which is the definition of evil: Doing harm to others and taking pleasure in it. We all hurt people inadvertently but instantly regret it. But when someone purposely seeks to cause pain in others and takes pleasure from it, that's evil. The shark then becomes a powerful icon for the dark side of nature that would love to swallow us whole and laugh while doing it.

Coincidence, therefore, must not pop into a story, turn a scene, then pop out. Example: Eric desperately seeks his estranged lover, Laura, but she's moved. After searching in vain, he stops for a beer. On the stool next to him sits the real estate agent who sold Laura her new house. He gives Eric her exact address. Eric leaves with thanks and never sees the salesman again. Not that this coincidence couldn't happen, but it's pointless.

On the other hand, suppose that the salesman can't remember the address, but does recall that Laura bought a red Italian sports car at the same time. The two men leave together and spot her Maserati on the street. Now they both go up to her door. Still angry with Eric, Laura invites them in and flirts with the salesman to annoy her ex-lover. What was meaningless good luck now becomes a force of antagonism to Eric's desire. This triangle could build meaningfully through the rest of the story.

As a rule of thumb do not use coincidence beyond the midpoint of the telling. Rather, put the story more and more into the hands of the characters.

Second, never use coincidence to turn an ending. This is deus ex machina, the writer's greatest sin.

*Deus ex machina* is a Latin phrase taken from the classical theatres of Greece and Rome, meaning “god from machine.” From 500 B.C. to A.D. 500 theatre flourished throughout the Mediterranean. Over those centuries hundreds of playwrights wrote for these stages but only seven have been remembered, the rest mercifully forgotten, due primarily to their propensity to use deus ex machina to get out of story problems. Aristotle complained about
this practice, sounding much like a Hollywood producer: “Why can’t these writers come up with endings that work?”

In these superb, acoustically perfect amphitheatres, some seating up to ten thousand people, at the far end of a horseshoe-shaped stage was a high wall. At the bottom were doors or arches for entrances and exits. But actors who portrayed gods would be lowered down to the stage from the top of the wall standing on a platform attached to ropes and pulley. This “god from machine” device was the visual analogy of the deities coming down from Mount Olympus and going back up to Mount Olympus.

Story climaxes were as difficult twenty-five hundred years ago as now. But ancient playwrights had a way out. They would cook a story, twist Turning Points until they had the audience on the edge of their marble seats, then if the playwright’s creativity dried up and he was lost for a true Climax, convention allowed him to dodge the problem by cranking a god to the stage and letting an Apollo or Athena settle everything. Who lives, who dies, who marries who, who is damned for eternity. And they did this over and over.

Nothing has changed in twenty-five hundred years. Writers today still cook up stories they can’t end. But instead of dropping a god in to get an ending, they use “acts of god”—the hurricane that saves the lovers in HURRICANE, the elephant stampede that resolves the love triangle in ELEPHANT WALK, the traffic accidents that end THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE and THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING, the T-Rex that hops in just in time to devour the velociraptors in JURASSIC PARK.

Deus ex machina not only erases all meaning and emotion, it’s an insult to the audience. Each of us knows we must choose and act, for better or worse, to determine the meaning of our lives. No one and nothing coincidental will come along to take that responsibility from us, regardless of the injustices and chaos around us. You could be locked in a cell for the rest of your life for a crime you did not commit. But every morning you would still have to get up and make meaning. Do I bludgeon my brains against this wall or do I find some way to get through my days with value? Our lives are ultimately in our own hands. Deus ex machina is an insult because it is a lie.
The one exception is Antistructure films that substitute coincidence for causality: WEEKEND, CHOOSE ME, STRANGERS IN PARADISE, and AFTER HOURS begin by coincidence, progress by coincidence, end on coincidence. When coincidence rules story, it creates a new and rather significant meaning: Life is absurd.

THE PROBLEM OF COMEDY

Comedy writers often feel that in their wild world the principles that guide the dramatist don't apply. But whether coolly satiric or madly farcical, comedy is simply another form of storytelling. There are, however, important exceptions that begin in the deep division between the comic and tragic visions of life.

The dramatist admires humanity and creates works that say, in essence: Under the worst of circumstances the human spirit is magnificent. Comedy points out that in the best of circumstances human beings find some way to screw up.

When we peek behind the grinning mask of comic cynicism, we find a frustrated idealist. The comic sensibility wants the world to be perfect, but when it looks around, it finds greed, corruption, lunacy. The result is an angry and depressed artist. If you doubt that, ask one over for dinner. Every host in Hollywood has made that mistake: "Let's invite some comedy writers to the party! That'll brighten things up." Sure . . . till the paramedics arrive.

These angry idealists, however, know that if they lecture the world about what a rotten place it is, no one will listen. But if they trivialize the exalted, pull the trousers down on snobbery, if they expose society for its tyranny, folly, and greed, and get people to laugh, then maybe things will change. Or balance. So God bless comedy writers. What would life be like without them?

Comedy is pure: If the audience laughs, it works; if it doesn't laugh, it doesn't work. End of discussion. That's why critics hate comedy; there's nothing to say. If I were to argue that CITIZEN KANE is a bloated exercise in razzle-dazzle spectacle, populated by stereotypical characters, twisted with manipulative storytelling,
stuffed full of self-contradictory Freudian and Pirandellian clichés, made by a heavy-handed showoff out to impress the world, we might bicker forever because the CITIZEN KANE audience is silent. But if I were to say A FISH CALLED WANDA is not funny, you’ll pity me and walk away. In comedy laughter settles all arguments.

The dramatist is fascinated by the inner life, the passions and sins, madness and dreams of the human heart. But not the comedy writer. He fixes on the social life—the idiocy, arrogance, and brutality in society. The comedy writer singles out a particular institution that he feels has become encrusted with hypocrisy and folly, then goes on the attack. Often we can spot the social institution under assault by noting the film’s title.

THE RULING CLASS attacks the rich; so too TRADING PLACES, A NIGHT AT THE OPERA, MY MAN GODFREY. M*A*S*H assaults the military, as do PRIVATE BENJAMIN and STRIPES. Romantic Comedies—HIS GIRL FRIDAY, THE LADY EVE, WHEN HARRY MET SALLY—satirize the institution of courtship. NETWORK, POLICE ACADEMY, ANIMAL HOUSE, THIS IS SPINAL TAP, PRIZZI’S HONOR, THE PRODUCERS, DR. STRANGELOVE, NASTY HABITS, and CAMP NOWHERE strike at television, school, fraternities, rock ‘n’ roll, the mafia, the theatre, Cold War politics, the Catholic Church, and summer camp, respectively. If a film genre grows thick with self-importance, it too is ripe for mockery: AIRPLANE, YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN, NAKED GUN. What was known as Comedy of Manners has become the sitcom—a satire of middle-class behavior.

When a society cannot ridicule and criticize its institutions, it cannot laugh. The shortest book ever written would be the history of German humor, a culture that has suffered spells of paralyzing fear of authority. Comedy is at heart an angry, antisocial art. To solve the problem of weak comedy, therefore, the writer first asks: What am I angry about? He finds that aspect of society that heats his blood and goes on an assault.
Comic Design

In drama the audience continuously grabs handfuls of the future, pulling themselves through, wanting to know the outcome. But Comedy allows the writer to halt Narrative Drive, the forward projecting mind of the audience, and interpolate into the telling a scene with no story purpose. It’s there just for the yucks.

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS: Masochistic patient (Bill Murray) visits sadistic dentist (Steve Martin), and as he cuddles up in the chair, says: “I want a long, slow root canal.” It’s drop-dead funny but has nothing to do with the story. If cut, no one would notice. But should it be cut? Hell no, it’s hysterical. How little story can be told and how much pure comedy worked into a film? Watch the Marx Brothers. A sharp story, complete with Inciting Incident, first, second, and third act climaxes, always holds a Marx Brothers film together . . . for a total screen time of about ten minutes. The other eighty minutes are surrendered to the dizzying genius of Marx Brothers shtick.

Comedy tolerates more coincidence than drama, and may even allow a deus ex machina ending . . . if two things are done: First, the audience is made to feel that the comic protagonist has suffered enormously. Second, that he never despairs, never loses hope. Under these conditions the audience may think: “Oh, hell, give it to him.”

THE GOLD RUSH: At Climax the Little Chap (Charlie Chaplin) is nearly frozen to death when a blizzard rips his cabin off the ground, blows it and Chaplin across Alaska, then drops him smack on a gold mine. CUT TO: He’s rich, dressed to the nines, smoking a cigar, heading back to the States. A comic coincidence that leaves the audience thinking, “This guy ate his shoes, was almost cannibalized by other miners, devoured by a grizzly bear, rejected by the dance hall girls—he walked all the way to Alaska. Give ‘im a break.”

The incisive difference between comedy and drama is this: Both turn scenes with surprise and insight, but in comedy, when the Gap cracks open, the surprise explodes the great belly laughs of the night.

A FISH CALLED WANDA: Archie takes Wanda to a borrowed love nest. Panting with anticipation, she watches from the sleeping loft as Archie pirouettes around the room, stripping buck naked,
intoning Russian poetry that makes her writhe. He puts his underwear on his head and declares himself free of the fear of embarrassment... the door opens and in walks an entire family. A killer Gap between expectation and result.

Simply put, a Comedy is a funny story, an elaborate rolling joke. While wit lightens a telling, it doesn’t alone make it a true Comedy. Rather, wit often creates hybrids such as the Dрамедy (ANNIE HALL), or the Crимедy (LETHAL WEAPON). You know you’ve written a true comedy when you sit an innocent victim down and pitch your story. Just tell him what happens, without quoting witty dialogue or sight gags, and he laughs. Every time you turn the scene, he laughs; turn it again and he laughs again; turn, laugh, until by the end of the pitch you have him collapsed on the floor. That’s a Comedy. If you pitch your story and people don’t laugh, you’ve not written a Comedy. You’ve written... something else.

The solution, however, is not found in trying to devise clever lines or pie in the face. Gags come naturally when the comic structure calls for them. Instead, concentrate on Turning Points. For each action first ask, “What’s the opposite of that?” then take it a step farther to “What’s off-the-wall from that?” Spring gaps of comic surprise—write a funny story.

THE PROBLEM OF POINT OF VIEW

For the screenwriter Point of View has two meanings. First, we occasionally call for POV shots. For example:

INT. DINING ROOM—DAY

Jack sips coffee, when suddenly he hears a SCREECH OF BRAKES and a CRASH that shakes the house. He rushes to the window.

JACK's POV

out the window: Tony’s car crumpled against the garage door and his son staggering across the lawn, giggling drunk.
ON JACK

throwing open the window in a rage.

The second meaning, however, applies to the writer's vision. From what Point of View is each scene written? From what Point of View is the story as a whole told?

POV WITHIN A SCENE

Each story is set in a specific time and place, yet scene by scene, as we imagine events, where do we locate ourselves in space to view the action? This is Point of View—the physical angle we take in order to describe the behavior of our characters, their interaction with one another and the environment. How we make our choices of Point of View has enormous influence on how the reader reacts to the scene and how the director will later stage and shoot it.

We can imagine ourselves anywhere 360 degrees around an action or at the center of the action looking out in 360 different degrees—high above the action, below it, anywhere globally. Each choice of POV has a different effect on empathy and emotion.

For example, continuing the father/son scene above, Jack calls Tony to the window and they argue. The father demands to know why a son in medical school is drunk and learns that the university has expelled him. Tony wanders off, distraught. Jack races through the house to the street and consoles his son.

There are four distinctively different POV choices in this scene: One, put Jack exclusively at the center of your imagination. Follow him from table to window, seeing what he sees and his reactions to it. Then move with him through the house to the street as he chases after Tony to embrace him. Two, do the same with Tony. Stay with him exclusively as he weaves his car up the street, across the lawn, and into the garage door. Show his reactions when he stumbles out of the wreck to confront his father at the window. Take him down the street, then suddenly turn him as his father
runs up to hug him. Three, alternate between Jack’s POV and Tony’s POV. Four, take a neutral POV. Imagine them, as a comedy writer might, at a distance and in profile.

This first encourages us to empathize with Jack, the second asks empathy for Tony, the third draws us close to both, the fourth with neither and prompts us to laugh at them.

POV WITHIN THE STORY

If in the two hours of a feature film you can bring audience members to a complex and deeply satisfying relationship with just one character, an understanding and involvement they will carry for a lifetime, you have done far more than most films. Generally, therefore, it enhances the telling to style the whole story from the protagonist’s Point of View—to discipline yourself to the protagonist, make him the center of your imaginative universe, and bring the whole story, event by event, to the protagonist. The audience witnesses events only as the protagonist encounters them. This, clearly, is the far more difficult way to tell story.

The easy way is to hopscotch through time and space, picking up bits and pieces to facilitate exposition, but this makes story sprawl and lose tension. Like limited setting, genre convention, and Controlling Idea, shaping a story from the exclusive Point of View of the protagonist is a creative discipline. It taxes the imagination and demands your very best work. The result is a tight, smooth, memorable character and story.

The more time spent with a character, the more opportunity to witness his choices. The result is more empathy and emotional involvement between audience and character.

THE PROBLEM OF ADAPTATION

The conceit of adaptation is that the hard work of story can be avoided by optioning a literary work and simply shifting it into a
screenplay. That is almost never the case. To grasp the difficulties of adaptation we look again at story complexity.

In the twentieth century we now have three media for telling story: prose (novel, novella, short story), theatre (legit, musical, opera, mime, ballet), and screen (film and television). Each medium tells complex stories by bringing characters into simultaneous conflict on all three levels of life; however, each has a distinctive power and innate beauty at one of these levels.

The unique strength and wonder of the novel is the dramatization of inner conflict. This is what prose does best, far better than play or film. Whether in first- or third-person, the novelist slips inside thought and feeling with subtlety, density, and poetic imagery to project onto the reader’s imagination the turmoil and passions of inner conflict. In the novel extra-personal conflict is delineated through description, word pictures of characters struggling with society or environment, while personal conflict is shaped through dialogue.

The unique command and grace of the theatre is the dramatization of personal conflict. This is what the theatre does best, far better than novel or film. A great play is almost pure dialogue, perhaps 80 percent is for the ear, only 20 percent for the eye. Non-verbal communication—gestures, looks, lovemaking, fighting—is important, but, by and large, personal conflicts evolve for better or worse through talk. What’s more, the playwright has a license screenwriters do not—he may write dialogue in a way no human being has ever spoken. He may write, not just poetic dialogue, but, like Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, and Christopher Frye, use poetry itself as dialogue, lifting the expressivity of personal conflict to incredible heights. In addition, he has the live voice of the actor to add nuances of shading and pause that take it even higher.

In the theatre inner conflict is dramatized through subtext. As the actor brings the character to life from the inside, the audience sees through the sayings and doings to the thoughts and feelings underneath. Like a first-person novel, the theatre can send a character to the apron in soliloquy to speak intimately with the audience. In direct address, however, the character isn’t necessarily telling the truth, or if sincere, isn’t able to understand his inner life
and tell the whole truth. The theatre’s power to dramatize inner conflict through unspoken subtext is ample but, compared to the novel, limited. The stage can also dramatize extra-personal conflicts, but how much of society can it hold? How much environment of sets and props?

The unique power and splendor of the cinema is the dramatization of extra-personal conflict, huge and vivid images of human beings wrapped inside their society and environment, striving with life. This is what film does best, better than play or novel. If we were to take a single frame from BLADE RUNNER and ask the world’s finest prose stylist to create the verbal equivalent of that composition, he would fill page after page with words and never capture its essence. And that is only one of thousands of complex images flowing through the experience of an audience.

Critics often complain about chase sequences, as if they were a new phenomenon. The first great discovery of the Silent Era was the chase, enlivening Charlie Chaplin and the Keystone Cops, thousands of Westerns, most of D. W. Griffith’s films, BEN HUR, THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN, STORM OVER ASIA, and the beautiful SUNRISE. The chase is a human being pursued by society, struggling through the physical world to escape and survive. It’s pure extra-personal conflict, pure cinema, the most natural thing to want to do with a camera and editing machine.

To express personal conflict the screenwriter must use plain-spoken dialogue. When we use theatrical language on screen the audience’s rightful reaction is: “People don’t talk like that.” Other than the special case of filmed Shakespeare, screenwriting demands naturalistic talk. Film, however, gains great power in nonverbal communication. With close-up, lighting, and nuances of angle, gestures and facial expressions become very eloquent. Nonetheless, the screenwriter cannot dramatize personal conflict to the poetic fullness of the theatre.

The dramatization of inner conflict on screen is exclusively in the subtext as the camera looks through the face of the actor to thoughts and feelings within. Even the personal direct-to-camera narration in ANNIE HALL or Salieri’s confession in AMADEUS is
layered with subtext. The inner life can be expressed impressively in film, but it cannot reach the density or complexity of a novel.

That is the lay of the land. Now imagine the problems of adaptation. Over the decades hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to option the film rights to literary works that are then tossed into the laps of screenwriters who read them and go running, screaming into the night, “Nothing’s happens! The whole book is in the character’s head!”

Therefore, the first principle of adaptation: The purer the novel, the purer the play, the worse the film.

“Literary purity” does not mean literary achievement. Purity of novel means a telling located exclusively at the level of inner conflict, employing linguistic complexities to incite, advance, and climax story with relative independence of personal, social, and environmental forces: Joyce’s Ulysses. Purity of theatre means a telling located exclusively at the level of personal conflict, employing the spoken word in poetic excess to incite, advance, and climax story with relative independence of inner, social, and environmental forces: Eliot’s The Cocktail Party.

Attempts to adapt “pure” literature fail for two reasons: One is aesthetic impossibility. Image is prelinguistic; no cinematic equivalents or even approximations exist for conflicts buried in the extravagant language of master novelists and playwrights. Two, when a lesser talent attempts to adapt genius, which is more likely? Will a lesser talent rise to the level of genius, or will genius be dragged down to the level of the adaptor?

The world’s screens are frequently stained by pretentious filmmakers who wish to be regarded as another Fellini or Bergman, but unlike Fellini and Bergman cannot create original works, so they go to equally pretentious funding agencies with a copy of Proust or Woolf in hand, promising to bring art to the masses. The bureaucrats grant the money, politicians congratulate themselves to their constituents for bringing art to the masses, the director gets a paycheck, the film vanishes over a weekend.

If you must adapt, come down a rung or two from “pure” literature and look for stories in which conflict is distributed on all three
levels . . . with an emphasis at the extra-personal. Pierre Boulle’s *The Bridge on the River Kwai* won’t be taught alongside Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka in postgraduate seminars, but it’s an excellent work, populated with complex characters driven by inner and personal conflicts and dramatized primarily at extrapersonal level. Consequently, Carl Foreman’s adaptation became, in my judgment, David Lean’s finest film.

To adapt, first read the work over and over without taking notes until you feel infused with its spirit. Do not make choices or plan moves until you’ve rubbed shoulders with its society, read their faces, smelled their cologne. As with a story you’re creating from scratch, you must achieve a godlike knowledge and never assume that the original writer has done his homework. That done, reduce each event to a one- or two-sentence statement of what happens and no more. No psychology, no sociology. For example: “He walks into the house expecting a confrontation with his wife, but discovers a note telling him she’s left him for another man.”

That done, read through the events and ask yourself, “Is this story well told?” Then brace yourself, for nine times out of ten you’ll discover it’s not. Just because a writer got a play to the stage or a novel into print doesn’t mean that he has mastered the craft. Story is the hardest thing we all do. Many novelists are weak storytellers, playwrights even weaker. Or you’ll discover that it’s beautifully told, a clockwork of perfection . . . but four hundred pages long, three times as much material as you can use for a film, and if a single cog is taken out, the clock stops telling time. In either case, your task will not be one of adaptation but of reinvention.

The second principle of adaptation: Be willing to reinvent.

Tell the story in filmic rhythms while keeping the spirit of the original. To reinvent: No matter in what order the novel’s events were told, reorder them in time from first to last, as if they were biographies. From these create a step-outline, using, where valuable, designs from the original work, but feeling free to cut scenes and, if necessary, to create new ones. Most testing of all, turn what is mental into the physical. Don’t fill characters’ mouths with self-explanatory dialogue but find visual expression for their inner conflicts. This is
where you'll succeed or fail. Seek a design that expresses the spirit of the original yet stays within the rhythms of a film, ignoring the risk that critics may say, "But the film's not like the novel."

The aesthetics of the screen often demand reinvention of story, even when the original is superbly told and of feature-film size. As Milos Foreman told Peter Shaffer while adapting AMADEUS from stage to screen, "You're going to have to give birth to your child a second time." The result is that the world now has two excellent versions of the same story, each true to its medium. While struggling with an adaptation bear this in mind: If reinvention deviates radically from the original—PELLE THE CONQUEROR, DANGEROUS LIAISONS—but the film is excellent, critics fall silent. But if you butcher the original—THE SCARLET LETTER, THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES—and do not put a work as good or better in its place, duck.

To learn adaptation study the work of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. She is, in my view, the finest adapter of novel to screen in film history. She's a Pole born in Germany who writes in English. Having reinvented her nationality, she's become the master reinventor for film. Like a chameleon or trance-medium, she inhabits the colors and spirit of other writers. Read Quartet, A Room with a View, The Bostonians, pull a step-outline from each novel, then scene by scene compare your work to Jhabvala. You'll learn a lot. Notice that she and director James Ivory restrict themselves to the social novelists—Jean Rhys, E. M. Forster, Henry James—knowing that the primary conflicts will be extra-personal and camera attractive. No Proust, no Joyce, no Kafka.

Although the natural expressivity of cinema is extra-personal, it shouldn't inhibit us. Rather, the challenge that great filmmakers have always accepted is to start with images of social/environmental conflict and lead us into the complexities of personal relationships, to begin on the surface of what's said and done and guide us to a perception of the inner life, the unspoken, the unconscious—to swim upstream and achieve on film what the playwright and novelist do most easily.

By the same token, playwright and novelist have always understood that their challenge is to do on stage or page what film does
best. Flaubert’s famous cinematic style was developed long before there was cinema. Eisenstein said he learned to cut film by reading Charles Dickens. Shakespeare’s stunning fluidity through time and space suggests an imagination hungry for a camera. Great storytellers have always known that “Show, don’t tell” is the ultimate creative task: to write in a purely dramatic and visual way, to show a natural world of natural human being behavior, to express the complexity of life without telling.

THE PROBLEM OF MELODRAMA
To avoid the accusation “This script is melodramatic,” many avoid writing “big scenes,” passionate, powerful events. Instead, they write minimalist sketches in which little if anything happens, thinking they’re subtle. This is folly. Nothing human beings do in and of itself is melodramatic, and human beings are capable of anything. Daily newspapers record acts of enormous self-sacrifice and cruelty, of daring and cowardliness, of saints and tyrants from Mother Teresa to Saddam Hussein. Anything you can imagine human beings doing, they have already done and in ways you cannot imagine. None of it is melodrama; it’s simply human.

Melodrama is not the result of overexpression, but of under motivation; not writing too big, but writing with too little desire. The power of an event can only be as great as the sum total of its causes. We feel a scene is melodramatic if we cannot believe that motivation matches action. Writers from Homer to Shakespeare to Bergman have created explosive scenes no one would call melodrama because they knew how to motivate characters. If you can imagine high drama or comedy, write it, but lift the forces that drive your characters to equal or surpass the extremities of their actions and we’ll embrace you for taking us to the end of the line.

THE PROBLEM OF HOLES
A “hole” is another way to lose credibility. Rather than a lack of motivation, now the story lacks logic, a missing link in the chain of
cause and effect. But like coincidence, holes are a part of life. Things often happen for reasons that cannot be explained. So if you’re writing about life, a hole or two may find its way into your telling. The problem is how to handle it.

If you can forge a link between illogical events and close the hole, do so. This remedy, however, often requires the creation of a new scene that has no purpose other than making what’s around it logical, causing an awkwardness as annoying as the hole.

In which case ask: Will they notice? You know it’s a jump in logic because the story sits still on your desk with its hole glaring up at you. But onscreen the story flows in time. As the hole arrives, the audience may not have sufficient information at that point to realize that what just happened isn’t logical or it may happen so quickly, it passes unnoticed.

CHINATOWN: Ida Sessions (Diane Ladd) impersonates Evelyn Mulwray and hires J. J. Gittes to investigate Hollis Mulwray for adultery. After Gittes discovers what appears to be an affair, the real wife shows up with her lawyer and a lawsuit. Gittes realizes that someone is out to get Mulwray, but before he can help the man is murdered. Early in Act Two Gittes gets a phone call from Ida Sessions telling him that she had no idea that things would lead to murder and wants him to know she’s innocent. In this call she also gives Gittes a vital clue to the motivation for the killing. Her words, however, are so cryptic he’s only more confused. Later, however, he pieces her clue to other evidence he unearths and thinks he knows who did it and why.

Early in Act Three he finds Ida Sessions dead and in her wallet discovers a Screen Actors Guild card. In other words, Ida Sessions couldn’t possibly have known what she said over the phone. Her clue is a crucial detail of a citywide corruption run by millionaire businessmen and high government officials, something they would never have told the actress they hired to impersonate the victim’s wife. But when she tells Gittes, we have no idea who Ida Sessions is and what she could or could not know. When she’s found dead an hour and a half later, we don’t see the hole because by then we’ve forgotten what she said.
So maybe the audience won’t notice. But maybe it will. Then what? Cowardly writers try to kick sand over such holes and hope the audience doesn’t notice. Other writers face this problem manfully. They expose the hole to the audience, then deny that it is a hole.

CASABLANCA: Ferrari (Sidney Greenstreet) is the ultimate capitalist and crook who never does anything except for money. Yet at one point Ferrari helps Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) find the precious letters of transit and wants nothing in return. That’s out of character, illogical. Knowing this, the writers gave Ferrari the line: “Why I’m doing this I don’t know because it can’t possibly profit me . . .” Rather than hiding the hole, the writers admitted it with the bold lie that Ferrari might be impulsively generous. The audience knows we often do things for reasons we can’t explain. Complimented, it nods, thinking, “Even Ferrari doesn’t get it. Fine. On with the film.”

THE TERMINATOR doesn’t have a hole—it’s built over an abyss: In 2029 robots have all but exterminated the human race, when the remnants of humanity, lead by John Connor, turn the tide of the war. To eliminate their enemy, the robots invent a time machine and send the Terminator back to 1984 to kill the mother of John Connor before he’s born. Connor captures their device and sends a young officer, Reese, back to try to destroy the Terminator first. He does this knowing that indeed Reese will not only save his mother but get her pregnant, and therefore his lieutenant is his father. What?

But James Cameron and Gail Anne Hurd understand Narrative Drive. They knew that if they exploded two warriors from the future into the streets of Los Angeles and sent them roaring in pursuit of this poor woman, the audience wouldn’t be asking analytical questions, and bit by bit they could parse out their setup. But respecting the intelligence of the audience, they also knew that after the film over coffee the audience might think: “Wait a minute . . . if Connor knew Reese would . . .,” and so on, and the holes would swallow up the audience’s pleasure. So they wrote this resolution scene.

The pregnant Sarah Connor heads for the safety of remote mountains in Mexico, there to give birth and raise her son for his future mission. At a gas station she dictates memoirs to her
unborn hero into a tape recorder and she says in effect: "You know, my son, I don’t get it. If you know that Reese will be your father... then why...? How? And does that mean that this is going to happen again... and again...?" Then she pauses and says, "You know, you could go crazy thinking about this." And all over the world audiences thought: "Hell, she’s right. It’s not important." With that they happily threw logic into the trash.