THE TEXT

DIALOGUE

All the creativity and labor that goes into designing story and character must finally be realized on the page. This chapter looks at the text, at dialogue and description, and the craft that guides their writing. Beyond text, it examines the poetics of story, the Image Systems embedded in words that ultimately result in filmic images that enrich meaning and emotion.

Dialogue is not conversation.

Eavesdrop on any coffee shop conversation and you’ll realize in a heartbeat you’d never put that slush onscreen. Real conversation is full of awkward pauses, poor word choices and phrasing, non sequiturs, pointless repetitions; it seldom makes a point or achieves closure. But that’s okay because conversation isn’t about making points or achieving closure. It’s what psychologists call “keeping the channel open.” Talk is how we develop and change relationships.

When two friends meet on the street and talk about the weather, don’t we know that theirs isn’t a conversation about the weather? What is being said? “I’m your friend. Let’s take a minute out of our busy day and stand here in each other’s presence and reaffirm that we are indeed friends.” They might talk about sports, weather, shopping ... anything. But the text is not the subtext. What is said and done is not what is thought and felt. The scene is not about what it
seems to be about. Screen dialogue, therefore, must have the swing of everyday talk but content well above normal.

First, screen dialogue requires compression and economy. Screen dialogue must say the maximum in the fewest possible words. Second, it must have direction. Each exchange of dialogue must turn the beats of the scene in one direction or another across the changing behaviors, without repetition. Third, it should have purpose. Each line or exchange of dialogue executes a step in design that builds and arcs the scene around its Turning Point. All this precision, yet it must sound like talk, using an informal and natural vocabulary, complete with contractions, slang, even, if necessary, profanity. "Speak as common people do," Aristotle advised, "but think as wise men do."

Remember, film is not a novel; dialogue is spoken and gone. If words aren't grasped the instant they leave the actor's mouth, annoyed people suddenly whisper, "What did he say?" Nor is film theatre. We watch a movie; we hear a play. The aesthetics of film are 80 percent visual, 20 percent auditory. We want to see, not hear as our energies go to our eyes, only half-listening to the soundtrack. Theatre is 80 percent auditory, 20 percent visual. Our concentration is directed through our ears, only half-looking at the stage. The playwright may spin elaborate and ornate dialogue—but not the screenwriter. Screen dialogue demands short, simply constructed sentences—generally, a movement from noun to verb to object or from noun to verb to complement in that order.

Not, for example: "Mr. Charles Wilson Evans, the chief financial officer at Data Corporation in the 666 building on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, who was promoted to that position six years ago, having graduated magna cum laude from Harvard Business School, was arrested today, accused by the authorities of embezzlement from the company's pension fund and fraud in his efforts to conceal the losses." But with a polish: "You know Charlie Evans? CFO at Data Corp? Ha! Got busted. Had his fist in the till. Harvard grad ought to know how to steal and get away with it." The same ideas broken into a series of short, simply constructed, informally spoken sentences, and bit by bit the audience gets it.
Dialogue doesn’t require complete sentences. We don’t always bother with a noun or a verb. Typically, as above, we drop the opening article or pronoun, speaking in phrases, even grunts.

Read your dialogue out loud or, better yet, into a tape recorder to avoid tongue twisters or accidental rhymes and alliterations such as: “They’re moving their car over there.” Never write anything that calls attentions to itself as dialogue, anything that jumps off the page and shouts: “Oh, what a clever line am I!” The moment you think you’ve written something that’s particularly fine and literary—cut it.

**Short Speeches**

The essence of screen dialogue is what was known in Classical Greek theatre as *stikonymnia*—the rapid exchange of short speeches. Long speeches are antithetical with the aesthetics of cinema. A column of dialogue from top to bottom of a page asks the camera to dwell on an actor’s face for a talking minute. Watch a second hand crawl around the face of a clock for a full sixty seconds and you’ll realize that a minute is a long time. Within ten or fifteen seconds the audience’s eye absorbs everything visually expressive and the shot becomes redundant. It’s the same effect as a stuck record repeating the same note over and over. When the eye is bored, it leaves the screen; when it leaves the screen, you lose the audience.

The literary ambitious often shrug this problem off, thinking the editor can break up long speeches by cutting to the listening face. But this only introduces new problems. Now an actor is speaking offscreen, and when we disembow a voice, the actor must slow down and overarticulate because the audience, in effect, lip-reads. Fifty percent of its understanding of what is being said comes from watching it being said. When the face disappears it stops listening. So offscreen speakers must carefully spit out words in the hope the audience won’t miss them. What’s more, a voice offscreen loses the subtext of the speaker. The audience has the subtext of the listener, but that may not be what it’s interested in.
Therefore, be very judicious about writing long speeches. If, however, you feel that it’s true to the moment for one character to carry all the dialogue while another remains silent, write the long speech, but as you do, remember that there’s no such thing in life as a monologue. Life is dialogue, action/reaction.

If, as an actor, I have a long speech that begins when another character enters and my first line is “You’ve kept me waiting,” how do I know what to say next until I see the reaction to my first words? If the other character’s reaction is apologetic, his head goes down in embarrassment, that softens my next action and colors my lines accordingly. If, however, the other actor’s reaction is antagonistic, as he shoots me a dirty look, that may color my next lines with anger. How does anyone know from moment to moment what to say or do next until he senses the reaction to what he just did? He doesn’t know. Life is always action/reaction. No monologues. No prepared speeches. An improvisation no matter how we mentally rehearse our big moments.

Therefore, show us that you understand film aesthetics by breaking long speeches into the patterns of action/reaction that shape the speaker’s behavior. Fragment the speech with silent reactions that cause the speaker to change the beat, such as this from AMADEUS as Salieri confesses to a priest:

SALIERI
All I ever wanted was to sing
to God. He gave me that
longing. And then made me
muta. Why? Tell me that.

The Priest looks away, pained and embarrassed, so Salieri answers his own question rhetorically:

SALIERI
If he didn’t want me to praise
Him with music, why implant
the desire . . . like a lust in
my body and then deny me
the talent?

Or put parentheticals within dialogue for the same effect, such as this from later in the scene:

SALIERI
You understand, I was in love
with the girl . . .

(amused by his own
choice of words)

. . . or at least in lust.

(seeing the priest
look down at a
crucifix held in his
lap)

But I swear to you, I never
laid a finger on her. No.

(as the priest looks
up, solemn, judgmental)

All the same, I couldn't bear
to think of anyone else
touching her.

(angered at the
thought of Mozart)

Least of all . . . the creature.

A character can react to himself, to his own thoughts and emotions, as does Salieri above. That too is part of the scene's dynamics. Demonstrating on the page the action/reaction patterns within characters, between characters, between characters and the physical world projects the sensation of watching a film into the reader's imagination and makes the reader understand that yours is not a film of talking heads.
The Suspense Sentence

In ill-written dialogue useless words, especially prepositional phrases, float to the ends of sentences. Consequently, meaning sits somewhere in the middle, but the audience has to listen to those last empty words and for that second or two they’re bored. What’s more, the actor across the screen wants to take his cue from that meaning but has to wait awkwardly until the sentence is finished. In life, we cut each other off, slicing the wiggling tails off each other’s sentences, letting everyday conversation tumble. This is yet another reason why in production actors and directors rewrite dialogue, as they trim speeches to lift the scene’s energy and make the cueing rhythm pop.

Excellent film dialogue tends to shape itself into the periodic sentence: “If you didn’t want me to do it, why’d you give me that . . .” Look? Gun? Kiss? The periodic sentence is the “suspense sentence.” Its meaning is delayed until the very last word, forcing both actor and audience to listen to the end of the line. Read again Peter Shaffer’s superb dialogue above and note that virtually every single line is a suspense sentence.

The Silent Screenplay

The best advice for writing film dialogue is don’t. Never write a line of dialogue when you can create a visual expression. The first attack on every scene should be: How could I write this in a purely visual way and not have to resort to a single line of dialogue? Obey the Law of Diminishing Returns: The more dialogue you write, the less effect dialogue has. If you write speech after speech, walking characters into rooms, sitting them in chairs and talking, talking, talking, moments of quality dialogue are buried under this avalanche of words. But if you write for the eye, when the dialogue comes, as it must, it sparks interest because the audience is hungry for it. Lean dialogue, in relief against what’s primarily visual, has salience and power.

THE SILENCE: Ester and Anna (Ingrid Thulin and Gunnel Lindblom) are sisters living in a lesbian and rather sadomasochistic
relationship. Ester is seriously ill with tuberculosis. Anna is bisexual, has an illegitimate child, and enjoys tormenting her older sister. They’re traveling home to Sweden, and the film takes place in a hotel during their journey. Bergman has written a scene in which Anna goes down to the hotel restaurant and allows herself to be seduced by a waiter in order to provoke her sister with this afternoon affair. The “waiter seduces the customer” scene . . . how would you write it?

Does the waiter open a menu and recommend certain items? Ask her if she’s staying at the hotel? Traveling far? Compliment her on how she’s dressed? Ask her if she knows the city? Mention he’s getting off work and would love to show her the sights? Talk, talk . . .

Here’s what Bergman gave us: The waiter walks to the table and accidentally on purpose drops the napkin on the floor. As he bends to pick it up, he slowly sniffs and smells Anna from head to crotch to foot. She, in reaction, draws a long, slow, almost delirious breath. CUT TO: They’re in a hotel room. Perfect, isn’t it? Erotic, purely visual, not a word said or necessary. That’s screenwriting.

Alfred Hitchcock once remarked, “When the screenplay has been written and the dialogue has been added, we’re ready to shoot.”

Image is our first choice, dialogue the regretful second choice. Dialogue is the last layer we add to the screenplay. Make no mistake, we all love great dialogue, but less is more. When a highly imagistic film shifts to dialogue, it crackles with excitement and delights the ear.

DESCRIPTION

Putting a Film in the Reader’s Head

Pity the poor screenwriter, for he cannot be a poet. He cannot use metaphor and simile, assonance and alliteration, rhythm and rhyme, synecdoche and metonymy, hyperbole and meiosis, the grand tropes. Instead, his work must contain all the substance of literature but not be literary. A literary work is finished and complete within itself. A screenplay waits for the camera. If not litera-
ture, what then is the screenwriter's ambition? To describe in such a way that as the reader turns pages, a film flows through the imagination.

No small task. The first step is to recognize exactly what it is we describe—the sensation of looking at the screen. Ninety percent of all verbal expression has no filmic equivalent. "He's been sitting there for a long time" can't be photographed. So we constantly discipline the imagination with this question: What do I see on the screen? Then describe only what is photographic: Perhaps "He stubs out his tenth cigarette," "He nervously glances at his watch," or "He yawns, trying to stay awake" to suggest waiting a long time.

**Vivid Action in the Now**

The ontology of the screen is an *absolute present tense in constant vivid movement*. We write screenplay in the present tense because, unlike the novel, film is on the knife edge of the now—whether we flash back or forward, we jump to a new now. And the screen expresses relentless action. Even static shots have a sense of aliveness, because although the imagery may not move, the audience's eye constantly travels the screen, giving stationary images energy. And, unlike life, film is vivid. Occasionally, our daily routine may be broken by light glinting off a building, flowers in a shop window, or a woman's face in the crowd. But as we walk through our days we're more inside our heads than out, half-seeing, half-hearing the world. The screen, however, is intensely vivid for hours on end.

On the page vividness springs from the names of the things. Nouns are the names of objects; verbs the names of actions. To write vividly, avoid generic nouns and verbs with adjectives and adverbs attached and seek the name of the thing: Not "The carpenter uses a big nail," but "The carpenter hammers a spike." "Nail" is a generic noun, "big" an adjective. The solid, Anglo-Saxon "spike" pops a vivid image in the reader's mind, "nail" a blur. How big?

The same applies to verbs. A typical line of nondescription: "He starts to move slowly across the room." How does somebody "start" across a room on film? The character either crosses or takes a step and
stops. And "move slowly"? "Slowly" is an adverb; "move" a vague, bland verb. Instead, name the action: "He pads across the room." "He (ambles, stalks, moseys, saunters, drags himself, staggers, waltzes, glides, lumbers, tiptoes, creeps, slouches, shuffles, waddles, minces, trudges, teeters, lurches, gropes, hobbles) across the room." All are slow but each vivid and distinctively different from the others.

Eliminate "is" and "are" throughout. Onscreen nothing is in a state of being; story life is an unending flux of change, of becoming. Not: "There is a big house on a hill above a small town." "There is," "They are," "It is," "He/She is" are the weakest possible ways into any English sentence. And what's a "big house"? Chateau? Hacienda? A "hill"? Ridge? Bluff? A "small town"? Crossroads? Hamlet? Perhaps: "A mansion guards the headlands above the village." With a Hemingwayesque shunning of Latinate and abstruse terms, of adjectives and adverbs, in favor of the most specific, active verbs and concrete nouns possible, even establishing shots come alive. Fine film description requires an imagination and a vocabulary.

Eliminate all metaphor and simile that cannot pass this test: "What do I see (or hear) onscreen?" As Milos Forman observed, "In film, a tree is a tree." "As if," for example, is a trope that doesn't exist onscreen. A character doesn't come through a door "as if." He comes through the door—period. The metaphor "A mansion guards . . ." and simile "The door slams like a gunshot . . ." pass the test in that a mansion can be photographed from a foreground angle that gives the impression it shelters or guards a village below it; a door slam can crack the ear like a gunshot. In fact, in MISSING the sound effects of all door slams were done with gunshots to subliminally increase tension as the conscious mind hears a door slam but the unconscious reacts to a gunshot.

These, on the other hand, were found in submissions to the European Script Fund: "The sun sets like a tiger's eye closing in the jungle," and, "The road twists and knifes and gouges its way up the hillside, struggling until it reaches the rim, then disappears out of sight before bursting onto the horizon." They are director traps, seductive but unphotographable. Although the European writers of these passages lack screenwriting discipline, they are ingenuously
trying to be expressive; whereas American writers, out of cynicism and laziness, often resort to sarcasm:

"BENNY, in his thirties, is a small, muscular Englishman with an air of mania that suggests that, at least once in his life, he's bitten the head off a chicken." And, "You guessed it. Here comes the sex scene. I'd write it, but my mother reads these things." Amusing, but that's what these writers want us to think so we don't notice that they can't or won't write. They've resorted to bald telling masked by sarcasm because they haven't the craft, talent, or pride to create a scene that acts out the simplest of ideas.

Eliminate "we see" and "we hear." "We" doesn't exist. Once into the story ritual, the theatre could be empty for all we care. Instead, "We see" injects an image of the crew looking through the lens and shatters the script reader's vision of the film.

Eliminate all camera and editing notations. In the same way actors ignore behavioral description, directors laugh at RACK FOCUS TO, PAN TO, TIGHT TWO SHOT ON, and all other efforts to direct the film from the page. If you write TRACK ON, does the reader see a film flowing through his imagination? No. He now sees a film being made. Delete CUT TO, SMASH CUT TO, LAP DISSOLVE TO, and other transitions. The reader assumes that all changes of angle are done on a cut.

The contemporary screenplay is a Master Scene work that includes only those angles absolutely necessary to the telling of the story and no more. For example:

INT. DINING ROOM—DAY

Jack enters, dropping his briefcase on the antique chair next to the door. He notices a note propped up on the dining room table. Strolling over, he picks up the note, tears it open, and reads. Then crumpling the note, he drops into a chair, head in hands.

If the audience knows the contents of the note from a previous scene, then the description stays on Jack reading
and slumping into a chair. If, however, it’s vital that the audience read the note with Jack or it wouldn’t be able to follow the story, then:

INT. DINING ROOM—DAY

Jack enters, dropping his briefcase on the antique chair next to the door. He notices a note propped up on the dining room table. Strolling over, he picks it up and tears it open.

INSERT NOTE:

Calligraphic handwriting reads: Jack, I’ve packed and left. Do not try to contact me. I have a lawyer. She will be in touch. Barbara.

ON SCENE

Jack crumples the note and drops into a chair, head in hands.

Another example: If, as Jack sits, head in hands, he were to hear a car pull outside and hurry to a window, and it’s critical to audience comprehension that they see what Jack sees at that moment, then continuing from above:

ON SCENE

Jack crumples the note and drops into a chair, head in hands.

Suddenly, a car PULLS UP outside. He hurries to the window.

JACK’s POV

through the curtains to the curb. Barbara gets out of her station wagon, opens the hatch and takes out suitcases.
ON JACK

turning from the window, hurling Barbara's note across the room.

If, however, the audience would assume that car pulling up is Barbara coming back to Jack because she's done it twice before and Jack's angry reaction says it all, then the description would stay on the Master Shot of Jack in the dining room.

Beyond the essential storytelling angles, however, the Master Scene screenplay gives the writer a strong influence on the film's direction. Instead of labeling angles, the writer suggests them by breaking single-spaced paragraphs into units of description with images and language subtly indicating camera distance and composition. For example:

INT. DINING ROOM—DAY

Jack enters and looks around the empty room. Lifting his briefcase above his head, he drops it with a THUMP on the fragile, antique chair next to the door. He listens. Silence.

Pleased with himself, he ambles for the kitchen, when suddenly he's brought up short.

A note with his name on it sits propped against the rose-filled vase on the dinning table.

Nervously he twists his wedding ring.

Taking a breath, he strolls over, picks up the note, tears it open, and reads.

Rather than writing the above into a thick block of single spaced prose, lines of white split it into five units that suggest in
order: A wide angle covering most of the room, a moving shot through the room, a close-up on the note, an even tighter close-up on Jack's ring finger, and a medium follow-shot to the table.

The briefcase insult to Barbara's antique chair and Jack's nervous gesture with his wedding ring express his shifts of feeling. Actor and director are always free to improvise new business of their own, but the miniparagraphs lead the reader's inner eye through a pattern of action/reaction between Jack and the room, Jack and his emotions, Jack and his wife as represented in her note. That's the life of the scene. Now director and actor must capture it under the influence of this pattern. How exactly will be their creative tasks. In the meantime, the effect of the Master Scene technique is a readability that translates into the sensation of watching a film.

**IMAGE SYSTEMS**

**The Screenwriter As Poet**

"Pity the poor screenwriter, for he cannot be a poet" is not in fact true. Film is a magnificent medium for the poet's soul, once the screenwriter understands the nature of story poetics and its workings within a film.

Poetic does not mean pretty. Decorative images of the kind that send audiences out of disappointing films muttering "but it's beautifully photographed" are not poetic. THE SHELTERING SKY: Its human content is aridity, a desperate meaninglessness—what was once called an existential crisis, and the novel's desert setting was metaphor for the barrenness of the protagonists' lives. The film, however, glowed with the postcard glamour of a tourist agency travelogue, and little or nothing of the suffering at its heart could be felt. Pretty pictures are appropriate if the subject is pretty: THE SOUND OF MUSIC.

Rather, poetic means an enhanced expressivity. Whether a story's content is beautiful or grotesque, spiritual or profane, quietistic or violent, pastoral or urban, epic or intimate, it wants full expression. A good story well told, well directed and acted, and perhaps a good
film. All that plus an enrichment and deepening of the work's expressivity through its poetics, and perhaps a great film.

To begin with, as audience in the ritual of story, we react to every image, visual or auditory, symbolically. We instinctively sense that each object has been selected to mean more than itself and so we add a connotation to every denotation. When an automobile pulls into a shot, our reaction is not a neutral thought such as "vehicle"; we give it a connotation. We think, "Huh. Mercedes . . . rich. Or, "Lamborghini . . . foolishly rich." "Rusted-out Volkswagen . . . artist." "Harley-Davidson . . . dangerous." "Red Trans-Am . . . problems with sexual identity." The storyteller then builds on this natural inclination in the audience.

The first step in turning a well-told story into a poetic work is to exclude 90 percent of reality. The vast majority of objects in the world have the wrong connotations for any specific film. So the spectrum of possible imagery must be sharply narrowed to those objects with appropriate implications.

In production, for example, if a director wants a vase added to a shot, this prompts an hour's discussion, and a critical one. What kind of vase? What period? What shape? Color? Ceramic, metal, wood? Are there flowers in it? What kind? Where located? Foreground? Mid-ground? Background? Upper left of the shot? Lower right? In or out of focus? Is it lit? Is it touched as a prop? Because this isn't just a vase, it's a highly charged, symbolic object resonating meaning to every other object in the shot and forward and backward through the film. Like all works of art, a film is a unity in which every object relates to every other image or object.

Limited to what's appropriate, the writer then empowers the film with an Image System, or systems, for there are often more than one.

An IMAGE SYSTEM is a strategy of motifs, a category of imagery embedded in the film that repeats in sight and sound from beginning to end with persistence and great variation, but with equally great subtlety, as a subliminal communication to increase the depth and complexity of aesthetic emotion.
“Category” means a subject drawn from the physical world that’s broad enough to contain sufficient variety. For example, a dimension of nature—animals, the seasons, light and dark—or a dimension of human culture—buildings, machines, art. This category must repeat because one or two isolated symbols have little effect. But the power of an organized return of images is immense, as variety and repetition drive the Image System to the seat of the audience’s unconscious. Yet, and most important, a film’s poetics must be handled with virtual invisibility and go consciously unrecognized.

An Image System is created one of two ways, via External or Internal Imagery. External Imagery takes a category that outside the film already has a symbolic meaning and brings it in to mean the same thing in the film it means outside the film: for example, to use the national flag—a symbol of patriotism and love of country—to mean patriotism, love of country. In ROCKY IV, for example, after Rocky defeats the Russian boxer, he wraps himself in a massive American flag. Or to use a crucifix, a symbol of love of God and religious feelings, to mean love of God, religious feelings; a spider’s web to mean entrapment; a teardrop to mean sadness. External Imagery, I must point out, is the hallmark of the student film.

Internal Imagery takes a category that outside the film may or may not have a symbolic meaning attached but brings it into the film to give it an entirely new meaning appropriate to this film and this film alone.

LES DIABOLIQUE: In 1955 director/screenwriter Henri-Georges Clouzot adapted Pierre Boileau’s novel, Celle Qui N’était Pas to the screen. In it Christina (Vera Clouzot) is an attractive young woman but very shy, quiet, and sensitive. She has suffered from a heart condition since childhood and is never in the best of health. Years before she inherited an impressive estate in the suburbs of Paris that has been turned into an exclusive boarding school. She runs this school with her husband, Michel (Paul Meurisse), a sadistic, abusive, malignant bastard who delights in treating his wife like dirt. He’s having an affair with one of the school’s teachers, Nicole (Simone Signoret), and he’s as vicious and cruel to his mistress as he is to his wife.
Everybody knows about this affair. In fact, the two women have become best friends, both suffering under the heel of this brute. Early in the film they decide that the only way out of their problem is to kill him.

One night they lure Michel to an apartment in a village well away from the school where they've secretly filled a bathtub full of water. He comes in, dressed in his three-piece suit, and arrogantly taunts and insults his two women while they get him as drunk as they possibly can, then try to drown him in the bathtub. But he's not that drunk and it's a hell of a struggle. The terror nearly kills the poor wife, but Nicole rushes into the living room and grabs a ceramic statue of a panther from the coffee table. She loads this heavy thing on the man's chest. Between the weight of the statue and her own strength she manages to hold him down under the water long enough to drown him.

The women wrap the body in a tarp, hide it in the back of a pickup truck, and sneak back to the campus in the middle of the night. The school's swimming pool hasn't been used all winter; an inch of algae covers the water. The women dump the body in and it submerges out of sight. They quickly retire and wait for the next day when the body will float up and be discovered. But the next day comes and goes and the body does not float up. Days go by and the body will not float up.

Finally, Nicole accidentally on purpose drops her car keys in the pool and asks one of the older students to retrieve them. The kid dives down under the scum and searches and searches and searches. He comes up, gulps some air, then goes down again and searches and searches and searches. He comes up to gulp air, then goes down a third time and searches and searches and searches. At last he surfaces . . . with the car keys.

The women then decide it's time to clean the swimming pool. They order the pool drained and stand at its edge, watching as the scum goes down and down and down and down . . . to the drain. But there is no body. That afternoon a dry cleaner's van drives out from Paris to deliver the cleaned and pressed suit that the man died in. The women rush into Paris to the cleaners where they find
a receipt, and on it is the address of a boardinghouse. They head there and talk to a concierge who says, "Yes, yes, there was a man living here but . . . he moved this morning."

They go back to the school and even more bizarre things happen: Michel appears and disappears in the windows of the school. When they look at the senior class graduation photo, there he is standing behind the students, slightly out of focus. They can't imagine what's going on. Is he a ghost? Did he somehow survive the drowning and he's doing this to us? Did someone else find the body? Are they doing this?

Summer vacation comes and all the students and teachers leave. Then Nicole herself departs. She packs her bags, saying she can't take this anymore, abandoning the poor wife alone.

That evening Christina can't sleep; she sits up in bed, wide awake, her heart pounding. Suddenly in the dead of night she hears the sound of typing coming from her husband's office. She slowly gets up and edges down a long corridor, hand on her heart, but just as she touches the office doorknob, the typing stops.

She eases open the door and there, alongside the typewriter, are her husband's gloves . . . like two huge hands. Then she hears the most terrifying sound imaginable: dripping water. Now she heads toward the bathroom off the office, her heart raging. She creaks open the bathroom door and there he is—still in his three-piece suit, submerged in a bathtub full of water, the faucet dripping.

The body sits up, water cascades off. Its eyes open but there are no eyeballs. Hands reach out for her, she grabs her chest, has a fatal heart attack, and drops dead on the floor. Michel reaches under his eyelids and removes white plastic inserts. Nicole jumps out of a closet. They embrace and whisper, "We did it!"

The opening titles of LES DIABOLIQUE look as if they're over an abstract painting of grays and blacks. But suddenly, as titles end, a truck tire splashes from bottom to top of the screen and we realize we've been looking at the top angle view of a mud puddle. The camera comes up on a rainy landscape. From this first moment on, Image System "water" is continually and subliminally
repeated. It's always drizzly and foggy. Condensation on windows runs in little drops to the sills. At dinner they eat fish. Characters drink wine and tea while Christina sips her heart medicine. When the teachers discuss summer vacation, they talk of going to the South of France to "take the waters." Swimming pool, bathtubs... it's one of the dampest films ever made.

Outside this film water is a universal symbol of all things positive: sanctification, purification, the feminine—archetype for life itself. But Clouzot reverses these values until water takes on the power of death, terror, and evil, and the sound of a dripping faucet brings the audience up out of its seats.

CASABLANCA weaves three Image Systems. Its primary motifs create a sense of imprisonment as the city of Casablanca becomes a virtual penitentiary. Characters whisper their "escape" plans as if the police were prison guards. The beacon on the airport tower moves through the streets like a searchlight scanning a prison compound, while window blinds, room dividers, stair railings, even the leaves of potted palms create shadows like the bars of prison cells.

The second system builds a progression from the particular to the archetypal. Casablanca starts as a refugee center but becomes a mini-United Nations filled with not only Arab and European faces but Asian and African ones as well. Rick and his friend Sam are the only Americans we meet. Repeated images, including dialogue in which characters speak to Rick as if he were a country, associate Rick to America until he comes to symbolize America itself and Casablanca the world. Like the United States in 1941 Rick is steadfastly neutral, wanting no part in yet another World War. His conversion to the fight subliminally congratulates America for finally taking sides against tyranny.

The third system is one of linking and separating. A number of images and compositions within the frame are used to link Rick and Ilsa, making the subliminal point that although these two are apart, they belong together. The counterpoint to this is a series of images and compositional designs that separate Ilsa from Laszlo, giving the opposite impression that although these two are together, they belong apart.
THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY is a multiplot film with six story lines—three positive climaxes devoted to the father, three negative endings to his daughter—in a point/counterpoint design that interweaves no fewer than four Image Systems. The father’s stories are marked by open spaces, light, intellect, and verbal communication; the daughter’s conflicts are expressed in closed spaces, darkness, animal images, and sexuality.

CHINATOWN also employs four systems, two of External Imagery, two of Internal Imagery. The primary internalized system is motifs of “blind seeing” or seeing falsely: Windows; rearview mirrors; eyeglasses, and particularly broken spectacles; cameras; binoculars; eyes themselves, and even the open, unseeing eyes of the dead, all gather tremendous forces to suggest that if we are looking for evil out in the world, we’re looking in the wrong direction. It is in here. In us. As Mao Tse-tung once said, “History is the symptom, we are the disease.”

The second internalized system takes political corruption and turns it into social cement. False contracts, subverted laws, and acts of corruption become that which hold society together and create “progress.” Two systems of External Imagery, water versus drought and sexual cruelty versus sexual love have conventional connotations but are used with a sharp-edged effectiveness.

When ALIEN was released Time magazine ran a ten-page article with stills and drawings asking the question: Has Hollywood gone too far? For this film incorporates a highly erotic Image System and contains three vivid “rape” scenes.

When Gail Anne Hurd and James Cameron made the sequel, ALIENS, they not only switched genres from Horror to Action/Adventure, they reinvented the Image System to motherhood as Ripley becomes the surrogate mother of the child Newt (Carrie Henn), who in turn is the surrogate mother of her broken doll. The two are up against the most terrifying “mother” in the universe, the gigantic monster queen who lays her eggs in a womblike nest. In dialogue, Ripley remarks, “The monsters make you pregnant.”

AFTER HOURS works on only one internalized refrain but with a rich variety: Art. But not as the ornament of life. Rather, art
as a weapon. The art and artists of Manhattan's Soho district constantly assault the protagonist, Paul (Griffin Dunne), until he's encapsulated inside a work of art and stolen by Cheech and Chong.

Going back through the decades, Hitchcock's *Thrillers* combine images of religiosity with sexuality, while John Ford's *Westerns* counterpoint wilderness with civilization. In fact, traveling back through the centuries we realize that Image Systems are as old as story itself. Homer invented beautiful motifs for his epics, as did Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides for their plays. Shakespeare submerged a unique Image System into each of his works, as did Melville, Poe, Tolstoy, Dickens, Orwell, Hemingway, Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, Beckett—all great novelists and playwrights have embraced this principle.

And who, after all, invented screenwriting? Novelists and playwrights who came to the cradles of our art in Hollywood, London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, and Moscow to write the scenarios of silent films. Film's first major directors, such as D. W. Griffith, Eisenstein, and Murnau, did their apprenticeship in the theatre; they too realized that, like a fine play, a film can be taken to the sublime by the repetition of a subliminal poetics.

And an Image System *must be* subliminal. The audience is not to be aware of it. Years ago as I watched Buñuel's *VIRIDIANA*, I noticed that Buñuel had introduced an Image System of rope: A child jump ropes, a rich man hangs himself with a rope, a poor man uses rope as a belt. About the fifth time a piece of rope came on the screen the audience shouted in unison, "Symbol!"

Symbolism is powerful, more powerful than most realize, as long as it bypasses the conscious mind and slips into the unconscious. As it does while we dream. The use of symbolism follows the same principle as scoring a film. Sound doesn't need cognition, so music can deeply affect us when we're unconscious of it. In the same way, symbols touch us and move us—*as long as we don't recognize them as symbolic*. Awareness of a symbol turns it into a neutral, intellectual curiosity, powerless and virtually meaningless.

Why, then, do so many contemporary writer/directors label their symbols? The hamhanded treatment of "symbolic" images in
the remake of CAPE FEAR, BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA, and THE PIANO, to name three of the more barefaced examples. I can think of two likely reasons: First, to flatter the elite audience of self-perceived intellectuals that watches at a safe, unemotional distance while collecting ammunition for the postfilm ritual of cafe criticism. Second, to influence, if not control, critics and the reviews they write. Declamatory symbolism requires no genius, just egotism ignited by misreadings of Jung and Derrida. It is a vanity that demeans and corrupts the art.

Some argue that the film's Image System is the director's work and that he or she alone should create it. And I've no argument with that, for ultimately the director is responsible for every square inch of every shot in the film. Except... how many working directors understand what I've explained above? Few. Perhaps two dozen in the world today. Just the very best, while, unfortunately, the vast majority cannot tell the difference between decorative and expressive photography.

I argue that the screenwriter should begin the film's Image System and the director and designers finish it. It's the writer who first envisions the ground of all imagery, the story's physical and social world. Often, as we write, we discover that spontaneously we've already begun the work, that a pattern of imagery has found its way into our descriptions and dialogue. As we become aware of that, we devise variations and quietly embroider them into the story. If an Image System doesn't arrive on its own, we invent one. The audience won't care how we do it; it only wants the story to work.

**TITLES**

A film's title is the marketing centerpiece that "positions" the audience, preparing it for the experience ahead. Screenwriters, therefore, cannot indulge in literary, nontitle titles: TESTAMENT, for example, is actually a film about postnuclear holocaust; LOOKS AND SMILES portrays desolate lives on welfare. My favorite nontitle tile is MOMENT BY MOMENT. MOMENT BY MOMENT is the working title I always use until I figure out the title.
To title means to name. An effective title points to something solid that is actually in the story—character, setting, theme, or genre. The best titles often name two or all elements at once.

JAWS names a character, sets the story in the wilds, and gives us the theme, man against nature, in the Action/Adventure genre. KRAMER VS. KRAMER names two characters, a divorce theme, and Domestic Drama. STAR WARS titles an epic conflict of galactic warriors. PERSONA suggests a cast of psychologically troubled characters and a theme of hidden identities. LA DOLCE VITA places us in a decadent setting among the urban rich. MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING establishes characters, setting, and Romantic Comedy.

A title, of course, isn't the only marketing consideration. As the legendary Harry Cohn once observed, "MOGAMBO is a terrible title. MOCAMBO, starring Clark Gable and Ava Gardner, is a great f...ing title."
Professional writers may or may not receive critical acclaim, but they're in control of the craft, have access to their talent, improve their performance over the years, and make a living from the art. A struggling writer may at times produce quality, but from day to day he cannot make his talent perform when and as he wants, doesn't progress in quality from story to story, and receives little, if any, income from his efforts. On the whole, the difference between those who succeed and those who struggle is their opposed methods of work: inside out versus outside in.

WRITING FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

The struggling writer tends to have a way of working that goes something like this: He dreams up an idea, noodles on it for a while, then rushes straight to the keyboard:

EXT. HOUSE—DAY

Description, description, description. Characters A and B enter.

CHARACTER A
Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

CHARACTER B
Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.
Description, description, description, description, description, description.

He imagines and writes, writes and dreams until he reaches page 120 and stops. Then he hands out Xerox copies to friends and back come their reactions: "Oh, it's nice, and I love that scene in the garage when they threw paint all over each other, was that funny or what? And when the little kid came down at night in his pajamas, how sweet! The scene on the beach was so romantic, and when the car blew up, exciting. But I don't know . . . there's something about the ending . . . and the middle . . . and the way it starts . . . that just doesn't work for me."

So the struggling writer gathers friends' reactions and his own thoughts to start the second draft with this strategy: "How can I keep the six scenes that I love and that everyone else loves and somehow pretzel this film through them in a way that'll work?" With a little more thought he's back at the keyboard:

INT. HOUSE—NIGHT

Description, description, description. Characters A and C enter while Character B watches from hiding.

CHARACTER A
Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

CHARACTER C
Dialogue, dialogue, dialogue.

Description, description, description, description, description, description.

He imagines and writes, writes and dreams, but all the while he clings like a drowning man to his favorite scenes until a rewrite comes out the other end. He makes copies and hands them out to friends and back come reactions: "It's different, decidedly different. But I'm so glad you kept that scene in the garage and with the kid in his pajamas and the car on the beach . . . great scenes. But . . .
there's still something about that ending and the middle and the way it starts that just doesn't work for me.”

The writer then does a third draft and a fourth and a fifth but the process is always the same: He clings to his favorite scenes, twisting a new telling through them in hopes of finding a story that works. Finally a year’s gone by and he’s burned out. He declares the screenplay perfect and hands it to his agent, who reads it without enthusiasm, but because he’s an agent, he does what he must. He too makes copies, papers Hollywood, and back come reader reports: “Very nicely written, good crisp,actable dialogue, vivid scene description, fine attention to detail, the story sucks. PASS ON IT.” The writer blames the Philistine tastes of Hollywood and gears up for his next project.

WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Successful writers tend to use the reverse process. If, hypothetically and optimistically, a screenplay can be written from first idea to last draft in six months, these writers typically spend the first four of those six months writing on stacks of three-by-five cards: a stack for each act—three, four, perhaps more. On these cards they create the story’s step-outline.

Step-Outline

As the term implies, a step-outline is the story told in steps.

Using one- or two-sentence statements, the writer simply and clearly describes what happens in each scene, how it builds and turns. For example: “He enters expecting to find her at home, but instead discovers her note saying she’s left for good.”

On the back of each card the writer indicates what step in the design of the story he sees this scene fulfilling—at least for the moment. Which scenes set up the Inciting Incident? Which is the Inciting Incident? First Act Climax? Perhaps a Mid-Act Climax? Second Act? Third? Fourth? Or more? He does this for Central Plot and subplots alike.

He confines himself to a few stacks of cards for months on end
for this critical reason: He wants to destroy his work. Taste and experience tell him that 90 percent of everything he writes, regardless of his genius, is mediocre at best. In his patient search for quality, he must create far more material than he can use, then destroy it. He may sketch a scene a dozen different ways before finally throwing the idea of the scene out of the outline. He may destroy sequences, whole acts. A writer secure in his talent knows there's no limit to what he can create, and so he trashes everything less than his best on a quest for a gem-quality story.

This process, however, doesn't mean the writer isn't filling pages. Day after day a huge stack grows on the side of the desk: but these are biographies, the fictional world and its history, thematic notations, images, even snippets of vocabulary and idiom. Research and imaginings of all kinds fill a file cabinet while the story is disciplined to the step-outline.

Finally, after weeks or months, the writer discovers his Story Climax. With that in hand, he reworks, as needed, backward from it. At last he has a story. Now he goes to friends, but not asking for a day out of their lives—which is what we ask when we want a conscientious person to read a screenplay. Instead he pours a cup of coffee and asks for ten minutes. Then he pitches his story.

The writer never shows his step-outline to people because it's a tool, too cryptic for anyone but the writer to follow. Instead, at this critical stage, he wants to tell or pitch his story so he can see it unfold in time, watch it play on the thoughts and feelings of another human being. He wants to look in that person's eyes and see the story happen there. So he pitches and studies the reactions: Is my friend hooked by my Inciting Incident? Listening and leaning in? Or are his eyes wandering? Am I holding him as I build and turn the progressions? And when I hit the Climax, do I get a strong reaction of the kind I want?

Any story pitched from its step-outline to an intelligent, sensitive person must be able to grab attention, hold interest for ten minutes, and pay it off by moving him to a meaningful, emotional experience—just as my LES DIABOLIQUE pitch hooked, held, and moved you. Regardless of genre, if a story can't work in ten
minutes, how will it work in 110 minutes? It won’t get better when it gets bigger. Everything that’s wrong with it in a ten-minute pitch is ten times worse onscreen.

Until a good majority of listeners respond with enthusiasm, there’s no point going forward. “With enthusiasm” doesn’t mean people leap up and kiss you on both cheeks, rather they whisper “Wow” and fall silent. A fine work of art—music, dance, painting, story—has the power to silence the chatter in the mind and lift us to another place. When a story, pitched from a step-outline, is so strong it brings silence—no comments, no criticism, just a look of pleasure—that’s a hell of a thing and time is too precious to waste on a story that hasn’t that power. Now the writer’s ready to move to the next stage—the treatment.

Treatment

To “treat” the step-outline, the writer expands each scene from its one or two sentences to a paragraph or more of double-spaced, present-tense, moment by moment description:

**Dining Room—Day** Jack walks in and tosses his briefcase on the chair next to the door. He looks around. The room is empty. He calls her name. Gets no answer. He calls it again, louder and louder. Still no answer. As he pads to the kitchen, he sees a note on the table. Picks it up, reads it. The note says that she has left him for good. He drops in the chair, head in hands, and starts to cry.

*In treatment the writer indicates what characters talk about—“he wants her to do this, but she refuses,” for example—but never writes dialogue. Instead, he creates the subtext—the true thoughts and feelings underneath what is said and done. We may think we know what our characters are thinking and feeling, but we don’t know we know until we write it down:*

**Dining Room—Day** The door opens and Jack leans on the jamb, exhausted from a day of failed and frustrating work. He looks
around the room, sees she’s not around, and hopes like hell she’s out. He really doesn’t want to have to deal with her today. To be sure he has the house to himself, he calls her name. Gets no answer. Calls out louder and louder. Still no answer. Good. He’s finally alone. He lifts his briefcase high in the air drops it with a thud onto her precious Chippendale chair next to the door. She hates him for scratching her antiques but today he doesn’t give a damn.

Hungry, he heads for the kitchen, but as he crosses the room he notices a note on the dining-room table. It’s one of those damn, annoying notes that she’s always leaving around, taped to the bathroom mirror or the refrigerator or whatever. Irritated, he picks it up and tears it open. Reading it, he discovers that she’s left him for good. As his legs go weak, he drops into a chair, a knot twisting in his gut. His head falls into his hands and he starts to cry. He’s surprised by his outburst, pleased he can still feel some emotion. But his tears are not grief; they’re the dam breaking with relief that the relationship is finally over.

The forty to sixty scenes of a typical screenplay, treated to a moment by moment description of all action, underlaid with a full subtext of the conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings of all characters, will produce sixty, eight, ninety, or more double-spaced pages. In the studio system from the 1930s to the 1950s when producers ordered treatments from writers, they were often two hundred to three hundred pages long. The strategy of studio writers was to extract the screenplay from a much larger work so nothing would be overlooked or unthought.

The ten- or twelve-page “treatments” that pass around show business today are not treatments but outlines given enough words that a reader can follow the story. A ten-page outline is not nearly enough material for a screenplay. Today’s writers may not return to the vast treatments of the studio system, but when a step-outline is expanded to a treatment of sixty to ninety pages, creative achievement expands correspondingly.

At the treatment stage, we inevitably discover that things we
thought would work a certain way in the step-outline now want to change. Research and imagination never stop, and so the characters and their world are still growing and evolving, leading us to revise any number of scenes. We won’t change the overall design of the story because it worked every time we pitched it. But within that structure scenes may need to be cut, added, or reordered. We rework the treatment until every moment lives vividly, in text and subtext. That done, then and only then does the writer move to the screenplay itself.

SCREENPLAY

Writing a screenplay from a thorough treatment is a joy and often runs at a clip of five to ten pages per day. We now convert treatment description to screen description and add dialogue. And dialogue written at this point is invariably the finest dialogue we’ve ever written. Our characters have had tape over their mouths for so long, they can’t wait to talk, and unlike so many films in which all characters speak with the same vocabulary and style, dialogue written after in-depth preparation creates character-specific voices. They don’t all sound like one another and they don’t all sound like the writer.

At the first draft stage, changes and revisions will still be needed. When characters are allowed to speak, scenes in treatment you thought would work a certain way now want to alter direction. When you find such a fault, it can rarely be fixed with a simple rewrite of dialogue or behavior. Rather, you must go back into the treatment and rework the setups, then perhaps go beyond the faulty scene to redo the payoff. A number of polishes may be necessary until you reach the final draft. You must develop your judgment and taste, a nose for your own bad writing, then call upon a relentless courage to root out weaknesses and turn them into strengths.

If you shortcut the process and rush straight to screenplay from outline, the truth is that your first draft is not a screenplay, it’s a surrogate treatment—a narrow, unexplored, unimprovised, tissue-thin treatment. Event choice and story design must be given free rein to consume your imagination and knowledge. Turning Points
must be imagined, discarded, and reimagined, then played out in text and subtext. Otherwise you have little hope of achieving excellence. Now, how and when do you want to do that? In treatment or screenplay? Either may work, but, more often than not, screenplay is a trap. The wise writer puts off the writing of dialogue for as long as possible because the premature writing of dialogue chokes creativity.

Writing from the outside in—writing dialogue in search of scenes, writing scenes in search of story—is the least creative method. Screenwriters habitually overvalue dialogue because they're the only words we write that actually reach the audience. All else is assumed by the film's images. If we type out dialogue before we know what happens, we inevitably fall in love with our words; we're loath to play with and explore events, to discover how fascinating our characters might become, because it would mean cutting our priceless dialogue. All improvisation ceases and our so-called rewriting is tinkering with speeches.

What's more, the premature writing of dialogue is the slowest way to work. It may send you in circles for years before you finally realize that not all your children are going to walk and talk their way to the screen; not every idea is worth being a motion picture. When do you want to find that out? Two years from now or two months from now? If you write the dialogue first, you'll be blind to this truth and wander forever. If you write from the inside out, you'll realize in the outline stage that you can't get the story to work. Nobody likes it when pitched. In truth, you don't like it. So you toss it in the drawer. Maybe years from now you'll pick it up and solve it, but for now you go on to your next idea.

As I offer this method to you, I'm fully aware that each of us, by trial and error, must find our own method, that indeed some writers short-cut the treatment stage and produce quality screenplays, and that in fact a few have written very well from the outside in. But I'm also left to wonder what brilliance they might have achieved had they taken greater pains. For the inside-out method is a way of working that's both disciplined and free, designed to encourage your finest work.
You have pursued *Story* to its final chapter, and, with this step, taken your career in a direction many writers fear. Some, dreading that awareness of how they do what they do would cripple their spontaneity, never study the craft. Instead, they march along in a lockstep of unconscious habit, thinking it’s instinct. Their dreams of creating unique works of power and wonder are seldom, if ever, realized. They put in long, tough days, for no matter how it’s taken, the writer’s road is never smooth, and because they have a gift, from time to time their efforts draw applause, but in their secret selves they know they’re just taking talent for a walk. Such writers remind me of the protagonist of a fable my father loved to recite:

*High above the forest floor, a millipede strolled along the branch of a tree, her thousand pairs of legs swinging in an easy gait. From the tree top, song birds looked down, fascinated by the synchronization of the millipede’s stride. “That’s an amazing talent,” chirped the songbirds. “You have more limbs than we can count. How do you do it?” And for the first time in her life the millipede thought about this. “Yes,” she wondered, “how do I do what I do?” As she turned to look back, her bristling legs suddenly ran into one another and tangled like vines of ivy. The songbirds laughed as the millipede, in a panic of confusion, twisted herself into a knot and fell to the earth below.*

You too may sense this panic. I know that when confronted with a rush of insights even the most experienced writer can be knocked off stride. Fortunately, my father’s fable had an Act Two:
On the forest floor, the millipede, realizing that only her pride was hurt, slowly, carefully, limb by limb, unraveled herself. With patience and hard work, she studied and flexed and tested her appendages, until she was able to stand and walk. What was once instinct became knowledge. She realized she didn’t have to move at her old, slow, rote pace. She could amble, strut, prance, even run and jump. Then, as never before, she listened to the symphony of the songbirds and let music touch her heart. Now in perfect command of thousands of talented legs, she gathered courage and, with a style of her own, danced and danced a dazzling dance that astonished all the creatures of her world.

Write every day, line by line, page by page, hour by hour. Keep Story at hand. Use what you learn from it as a guide, until command of its principles becomes as natural as the talent you were born with. Do this despite fear. For above all else, beyond imagination and skill, what the world asks of you is courage, courage to risk rejection, ridicule and failure. As you follow the quest for stories told with meaning and beauty, study thoughtfully but write boldly. Then, like the hero of the fable, your dance will dazzle the world.