THE STRUCTURE SPECTRUM

THE TERMINOLOGY OF STORY DESIGN

When a character steps into your imagination, he brings an abundance of story possibilities. If you wish, you could start the telling before the character is born, then follow him day after day, decade after decade until dead and gone. A character’s life encompasses hundreds of thousands of living hours, hours both complex and multileveled.

From an instant to eternity, from the intracranial to the intergalactic, the life story of each and every character offers encyclopedic possibilities. The mark of a master is to select only a few moments but give us a lifetime.

Starting at the deepest level, you might set the story within the protagonist’s inner life and tell the whole tale inside his thoughts and feelings, awake or dreaming. Or you could shift up to the level of personal conflict between protagonist and family, friends, lovers. Or expand into social institutions, setting the character at odds with school, career, church, the justice system. Or wider still, you could pit the character against the environment—dangerous city streets, lethal diseases, the car that won’t start, time running out. Or any combination of all these levels.

But this complex expanse of life story must become the story told. To design a feature film, you must reduce the seething mass and rush of
life story to just two little hours, more or less, that somehow express everything you left out. And when a story is well told, isn’t that the effect? When friends come back from a film and you ask them what it was about, have you noticed they often put the story told inside life story?

“Great! About a guy raised on a sharecropper’s farm. As a kid he toiled with his family under the hot sun. He went to school but didn’t do too well because he had to get up at dawn, all that weeding and hoeing. But somebody gave him a guitar and he learned to play, write his own songs . . . finally, fed up with this backbreaking life, he ran away, living hand to mouth playing in honky-tonk bars. Then he met a beautiful gal with a great voice. They fell in love, teamed up, and, bang, their careers skyrocketed. But the trouble was the spotlight was always on her. He wrote their songs, arranged, backed her up, but people only came to see her. Living in her shadow, he turned to drink. Finally she throws him out, and there he is back on the road again, until he hits rock bottom. He wakes up in a cheap motel in a dusty Midwest town, middle of nowhere, penniless, friendless, a hopeless drunk, not a dime for the phone and no one to call if he had one.”

In other words, TENDER MERCIES told from birth. But nothing of the above is in the film. TENDER MERCIES begins the morning Robert Duvall’s Mac Sledge wakes up at rock bottom. The next two hours cover the next year in Sledge’s life. Yet, in and between scenes, we come to know all of his past, everything of significance that happens to Sledge in that year, until the last image gives us a vision of his future. A man’s life, virtually from birth to death, is captured between the FADE IN and FADE OUT of Horton Foote’s Oscar-winning screenplay.

**Structure**

From the vast flux of life story the writer must make choices. Fictional worlds are not daydreams but sweatshops where we labor in search of material to tailor a film. Yet when asked “What do you choose?” no two writers agree. Some look for character, others for action or strife, perhaps mood, images, dialogue. But no one element, in and of itself, will build a story. A film isn’t just moments of conflict or activity, per-
sonality or emotionality, witty talk or symbols. What the writer seeks are events, for an event contains all the above and more.

**STRUCTURE** is a selection of events from the characters’ life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life.

An event is caused by or affects people, thus delineating characters; it takes place in a setting, generating image, action, and dialogue; it draws energy from conflict producing emotion in characters and audience alike. But event choices cannot be displayed randomly or indifferently; they must be composed, and “to compose” in story means much the same thing it does in music. What to include? To exclude? To put before and after what?

To answer these questions you must know your purpose. Events composed to do what? One purpose may be to express your feelings, but this becomes self-indulgence if it doesn’t result in arousing emotions in the audience. A second purpose may be to express ideas, but this risks solipsism if the audience cannot follow. So the design of events needs a dual strategy.

**Event**

“Event” means change. If the streets outside your window are dry, but after a nap you see they’re wet, you assume an event has taken place, called rain. The world’s changed from dry to wet. You cannot, however, build a film out of nothing but changes in weather—although there are those who have tried. *Story Events* are meaningful, not trivial. To make change meaningful it must, to begin with, happen to a character. If you see someone drenched in a downpour, this has somewhat more meaning than a damp street.

A **story event** creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a **value**.
To make change meaningful you must express it, and the audience must react to it, in terms of a value. By values I don’t mean virtues or the narrow, moralizing “family values” use of the word. Rather, Story Values refers to the broadest sense of the idea. Values are the soul of storytelling. Ultimately ours is the art of expressing to the world a perception of values.

**STORY VALUES** are the universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive, from one moment to the next.

For example: alive/dead (positive/negative) is a story value, as are love/hate, freedom/slavery, truth/lie, courage/cowardice, loyalty/betrayal, wisdom/stupidity, strength/weakness, excitement/boredom and so on. All such binary qualities of experience that can reverse their charge at any moment are Story Values. They may be moral, good/evil; ethical, right/wrong; or simply charged with value. Hope/despair is neither moral nor ethical, but we certainly know when we are at one end of the experience or the other.

Imagine that outside your window is 1980s East Africa, a realm of drought. Now we have a value at stake: survival, life/death. We begin at the negative: This terrible famine is taking lives by the thousands. If then it should rain, a monsoon that brings the earth back to green, animals to pasture, and people to survival, this rain would be deeply meaningful because it switches the value from negative to positive, from death to life.

However, as powerful as this event would be, it still does not qualify as a Story Event because it happened by coincidence. Rain finally fell in East Africa. Although there’s a place for coincidence in storytelling, a story cannot be built out of nothing but accidental events, no matter how charged with value.

**A Story Event creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value and ACHIEVED THROUGH CONFLICT.**
Again, a world of drought. Into it comes a man who imagines himself a "rainmaker." This character has deep inner conflict between his passionate belief that he can bring rain, although he has never been able to do it, and his terrible fear that he's a fool or mad. He meets a woman, falls in love, then suffers as she tries to believe in him, but turns away, convinced he's a charlatan or worse. He has a strong conflict with society—some follow him as if he's a messiah; others want to stone him out of town. Lastly, he faces implacable conflict with the physical world—the hot winds, empty skies, parched earth. If this man can struggle through all his inner and personal conflicts, against social and environmental forces and finally coax rain out of a cloudless sky, that storm would be majestic and sublimely meaningful—for it is change motivated through conflict. What I have described is THE RAINMAKER, adapted to the screen by Richard Nash from his own play.

**Scene**

For a typical film, the writer will choose forty to sixty Story Events or, as they’re commonly known, scenes. A novelist may want more than sixty, a playwright rarely as many as forty.

A SCENE is an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character’s life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance. Ideally, every scene is a STORY EVENT.

Look closely at each scene you’ve written and ask: What value is at stake in my character’s life at this moment? Love? Truth? What? How is that value charged at the top of the scene? Positive? Negative? Some of both? Make a note. Next turn to the close of the scene and ask, Where is this value now? Positive? Negative? Both? Make a note and compare. If the answer you write down at the end of the scene is the same note you made at the opening, you now have another important question to ask: Why is this scene in my script?
If the value-charged condition of the character's life stays unchanged from one end of a scene to the other, nothing meaningful happens. The scene has activity—talking about this, doing that—but nothing changes in value. It is a nonevent.

Why then is the scene in the story? The answer is almost certain to be "exposition." It's there to convey information about characters, world, or history to the eavesdropping audience. If exposition is a scene's sole justification, a disciplined writer will trash it and weave its information into the film elsewhere.

No scene that doesn't turn. This is our ideal. We work to round every scene from beginning to end by turning a value at stake in a character's life from the positive to the negative or the negative to the positive. Adherence to this principle may be difficult, but it's by no means impossible.

DIE HARD, THE FUGITIVE, and STRAW DOGS clearly meet this test, but the ideal is also kept in subtler, though no less rigorous ways, in REMAINS OF THE DAY and THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST. The difference is that Action genres turn on public values such as freedom/slavery or justice/injustice; the Education genre turns on interior values such as self-awareness/self-deception or life as meaningful/meaningless. Regardless of genre, the principle is universal: If a scene is not a true event, cut it.

For example:

Chris and Andy are in love and live together. They wake up one morning and start to squabble. Their spat builds in the kitchen as they hurry to make breakfast. In the garage, the fight becomes nastier as they climb into their car to drive to work together. Finally words explode into violence on the highway. Andy wrenches the car to the shoulder and jumps out, ending their relationship. This series of actions and locations creates a scene: It takes the couple from the positive (in love and together) to the negative (in hate and apart).

The four shifts of place—bedroom to kitchen to garage to highway—are camera setups but not true scenes. Although they intensify behavior and make the critical moment credible, they do
not change the values at stake. As the argument moves through the morning, the couple is still together and presumably in love. But when the action reaches its Turning Point—a slamming car door and Andy’s declaration, “It’s over!”—life turns upside down for the lovers, activity changes to action, and the sketch becomes a complete scene, a Story Event.

Generally the test of whether a series of activities constitutes a true scene is this: Could it have been written “in one,” in a unity of time and place? In this case the answer is yes. Their argument could begin in a bedroom, build in the bedroom, and end the relationship in the bedroom. Countless relationships have ended in bedrooms. Or the kitchen. Or the garage. Or not on the highway but in the office elevator. A playwright might write the scene “in one” because the staging limitations of the theatre often force us to keep the unities of time and place; the novelist or screenwriter, on the other hand, might travel the scene, parsing it out in time and space to establish future locations, Chris’s taste in furniture, Andy’s driving habits—for any number of reasons. This scene could even cross-cut with another scene, perhaps involving another couple. The variations are endless, but in all cases this is a single Story Event, the “lovers break up” scene.

**Beat**

Inside the scene is the smallest element of structure, the *Beat*. (Not to be confused with [beat], an indication within a column of dialogue meaning “short pause”.)

A BEAT is an exchange of behavior in action/reaction.  
Beat by Beat these changing behaviors shape the turning of a scene.

Taking a closer look at the “lovers break up” scene: As the alarm goes off, Chris teases Andy and he reacts in kind. As they dress, teasing turns to sarcasm and they throw insults back and forth. Now in the kitchen Chris threatens Andy with: “If I left you, baby, you’d be so miserable . . .” but he calls her bluff with “That’s
a misery I'd love." In the garage Chris, afraid she's losing him, 
beugs Andy to stay, but he laughs and ridicules her plea. Finally, in 
the speeding car, Chris doubles her fist and punches Andy. A fight, 
a squeal of brakes. Andy jumps out with a bloody nose, slams the 
doors and shouts, "It's over," leaving her in shock.

This scene is built around six beats, six distinctively different 
behaviors, six clear changes of action/reaction: teasing each other, fol-
lowed by a give-and-take of insults, then threatening and daring each 
other, next pleading and ridiculing, and finally exchanges of violence 
that lead to the last Beat and Turning Point: Andy's decision and 
action that ends the relationship, and Chris's dumbfounded surprise.

**Sequence**

Beats build scenes. Scenes then build the next largest movement of 
story design, the *Sequence*. Every true scene turns the value-charged 
condition of the character's life, but from event to event the degree 
of change can differ greatly. Scenes cause relatively minor yet signif-
icant change. The capping scene of a sequence, however, delivers a 
more powerful, determinant change.

*A SEQUENCE is a series of scenes—generally two to 
five—that culminates with greater impact than any pre-
vious scene.*

For example, this three-scene sequence:

**Setup:** A young business woman who's had a notable 
career in the Midwest has been approached by headhunters 
and interviewed for a position with a New York corpora-
tion. If she wins this post, it'll be a huge step up in her 
career. She wants the job very much but hasn't won it yet 
(negative). She is one of six finalists. The corporate heads 
realize that this position has a vital public dimension to it, 
so they want to see these applicants on their feet in an 
informal setting before making the final decision. They 
invite all six to a party on Manhattan's East Side.
Scene One: A West Side Hotel where our protagonist prepares for the evening. The value at stake is self-confidence/self-doubt. She’ll need all her confidence to pull off this evening successfully, but she’s filled with doubts (negative). Fear knots her middle as she paces the room, telling herself she was a fool to come East, these New Yorkers will eat her alive. She flings clothes out of her suitcase, trying on this, trying on that, but each outfit looks worse than the one before. Her hair is an uncombable tangle of frizz. As she grapples with her clothes and hair, she decides to pack it in and save herself the humiliation.

Suddenly, the phone rings. It’s her mother, calling to lace a good-luck toast with guilt trips about loneliness and her fear of abandonment. Barbara hangs up, realizing that the piranhas of Manhattan are no match for the great white shark at home. She needs this job! She then amazes herself with a combination of clothes and accessories she’s never tried before. Her hair falls magically into place. She plants herself in front of the mirror, looking great, eyes bright, glowing with confidence (positive).

Scene Two: Under the hotel marquee. Thunder, lightning, pelting rain. Because Barbara’s from Terre Haute, she didn’t know to tip the doorman five bucks when she registered, so he won’t go out into the storm to find a cab for a stiff. Besides, when it rains in New York there are no cabs. So she studies her visitors’ map, pondering what to do. She realizes if she tries to run from the West Eighties over to Central Park West, then all the way down CPW to Fifty-ninth Street, across Central Park South to Park Avenue, and up into the East Eighties, she’ll never get to the party on time. So she decides to do what they warn never, ever to do—to run through Central Park at night. This scene takes on a new value: life/death.

She covers her hair with a newspaper and darts into the night, daring death (negative). A lightning flash and, bang, she’s surrounded by that gang that is always out there, rain
or shine, waiting for the fools who run through the park at night. But she didn’t take karate classes for nothing. She kick-fights her way through the gang, breaking jaws, scattering teeth on the concrete, until she stumbles out of the park, alive (positive).

**Scene Three: Mirrored lobby—Park Avenue apartment building.** The value at stake now switches to social success/social failure. She’s survived. But then she looks in the mirror and sees a drowned rat: newspaper shredded in her hair; blood all over her clothes—the gang’s blood—but blood nonetheless. Her self-confidence plummets past doubt and fear until she bows in personal defeat (negative), crushed by her social disaster (negative).

Taxis pull up with the other applicants. All found cabs; all get out looking New York chic. They take pity on the poor loser from the Midwest and usher her into an elevator.

In the penthouse they towel off her hair and find mismatched clothes for her to wear, and because she looks like this, the spotlight’s on her all night. Because she knows she has lost anyway, she relaxes into her natural self and from deep within comes a chutzpah she never knew she had; she not only tells them about her battle in the park but makes jokes about it. Mouths go slack with awe or wide with laughter. At end of the evening, all the executives know exactly who they want for the job: Anyone who can go through that terror in the park and display this kind of cool is clearly the person for them. The evening ends on her personal and social triumphs as she is given the job (doubly positive).

Each scene turns on its own value or values. Scene One: self-doubt to self-confidence. Scene Two: death to life; self-confidence to defeat. Scene Three: social disaster to social triumph. But the three scenes become a sequence of another, greater value that overrides and subordinates the others, and that is *THE JOB*. At the beginning of the sequence she has *NO JOB*. The third scene becomes a Sequence Climax because here social success wins her
THE JOB. From her point of view THE JOB is a value of such magnitude she risked her life for it.

It’s useful to title each sequence to make clear to yourself why it’s in the film. The story purpose of this “getting the job” sequence is to take her from NO JOB to JOB. It could have been accomplished in a single scene with a personnel officer. But to say more than “she’s qualified,” we might create a full sequence that not only gets her the job but dramatizes her inner character and relationship to her mother, along with insights into New York City and the corporation.

**Act**

Scenes turn in minor but significant ways; a series of scenes builds a sequence that turns in a moderate, more impactful way; a series of sequences builds the next largest structure, the Act, a movement that turns on a major reversal in the value-charged condition of the character’s life. The difference between a basic scene, a scene that climaxes a sequence, and a scene that climaxes an act is the degree of change, or, more precisely, the degree of impact that change has, for better or worse, on the character—on the character’s inner life, personal relationships, fortunes in the world, or some combination of all these.

An ACT is a series of sequences that peaks in a climactic scene which causes a major reversal of values, more powerful in its impact than any previous sequence or scene.

**Story**

A series of acts builds the largest structure of all: the Story. A story is simply one huge master event. When you look at the value-charged situation in the life of the character at the beginning of the story, then compare it to the value-charge at the end of the story, you should see the arc of the film, the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end. This final condition, this end change, must be absolute and irreversible.
Change caused by a scene could be reversed: The lovers in the previous sketch could get back together; people fall in and out and back in love again every day. A sequence could be reversed: The Midwest businesswoman could win her job only to discover that she reports to a boss she hates and wishes she were back in Terre Haute. An act climax could be reversed: A character could die, as in the Act Two climax of E.T., and then come back to life. Why not? In a modern hospital, reviving the dead is commonplace. So, scene by sequence by act, the writer creates minor, moderate, and major change, but conceivably, each of those changes could be reversed. This is not, however, the case in the climax of the last act.

**STORY CLIMAX:** A story is a series of acts that build to a last act climax or story climax which brings about absolute and irreversible change.

If you make the smallest element do its job, the deep purpose of the telling will be served. Let every phrase of dialogue or line of description either turn behavior and action or set up the conditions for change. Make your beats build scenes, scenes build sequences, sequences build acts, acts build story to its climax.

The scenes that turn the life of the Terre Haute protagonist from self-doubt to self-confidence, from danger to survival, from social disaster to success combine into a sequence that takes her from NO JOB to JOB. To arc the telling to a Story Climax, perhaps this opening sequence sets up a series of sequences that takes her from NO JOB to PRESIDENT OF THE CORPORATION at the Act One climax. This Act One climax sets up an Act Two in which internecine corporate wars lead to her betrayal by friends and associates. At the Act Two climax she's fired by the board of directors and out on the street. This major reversal sends her to a rival corporation where, armed with business secrets gleaned while she was president, she quickly reaches the top again so she can enjoy destroying her previous employers. These acts arc her from the hardworking, optimistic, and honest young professional who opens the film to the ruthless, cynical, and corrupt veteran of corporate wars who ends the film—absolute, irreversible change.
THE STORY TRIANGLE

In some literary circles “plot” has become a dirty word, tarred with a connotation of hack commercialism. The loss is ours, for plot is an accurate term that names the internally consistent, interrelated pattern of events that move through time to shape and design a story. While no fine film was ever written without flashes of fortuitous inspiration, a screenplay is not an accident. Material that pops up willy-nilly cannot remain willy-nilly. The writer redrafts inspiration again and again, making it look as if an instinctive spontaneity created the film, yet knowing how much effort and unnaturalness went into making it look natural and effortless.

To PLOT means to navigate through the dangerous terrain of story and when confronted by a dozen branching possibilities to choose the correct path. Plot is the writer’s choice of events and their design in time.

Again, what to include? Exclude? Put before and after what? Event choices must be made; the writer chooses either well or ill; the result is plot.

When TENDER MERCIES premiered, some reviewers described it as “plotless,” then praised it for that. TENDER MERCIES not only has a plot, it is exquisitely plotted through some of the most difficult film terrain of all: a story in which the arc of the film takes place within the mind of the protagonist. Here the protagonist experiences a deep and irreversible revolution in his attitude toward life and/or toward himself.

For the novelist such stories are natural and facile. In either third-person or first-person, the novelist can directly invade thought and feeling to dramatize the tale entirely on the landscape of the protagonist’s inner life. For the screenwriter such stories are by far the most fragile and difficult. We cannot drive a camera lens through an actor’s forehead and photograph his thoughts, although there are those who would try. Somehow we must lead the audience to interpret the inner life from outer behavior without loading
the soundtrack with expository narration or stuffing the mouths of characters with self-explanatory dialogue. As John Carpenter said, “Movies are about making mental things physical.”

To begin the great sweep of change within his protagonist, Horton Foote opens TENDER MERCIES with Sledge drowning in the meaninglessness of his life. He is committing slow suicide with alcohol because he no longer believes in anything—neither family, nor work, nor this world, nor the hereafter. As Foote progresses the film, he avoids the cliché of finding meaning in one overwhelming experience of great romance, brilliant success, or religious inspiration. Instead he shows us a man weaving together a simple yet meaningful life from the many delicate threads of love, music, and spirit. At last Sledge undergoes a quiet transformation and finds a life worth living.

We can only imagine the sweat and pains Horton Foote invested in plotting this precarious film. A single misstep—one missing scene, one superfluous scene, a slight misordering of incident—and like a castle of cards, the riveting inner journey of Mac Sledge collapses into portraiture. Plot, therefore, doesn’t mean ham-handed twists and turns, or high-pressure suspense and shocking surprise. Rather, events must be selected and their patterning displayed through time. In this sense of composition or design, all stories are plotted.

Archplot, Miniplot, Antiplot

Although the variations of event design are innumerable, they are not without limits. The far corners of the art create a triangle of formal possibilities that maps the universe of stories. Within this triangle is the totality of writers’ cosmologies, all their multitudinous visions of reality and how life is lived within it. To understand your place in this universe, study the coordinates of this map, compare them to your work-in-progress, and let them guide you to that point you share with other writers of a similar vision.

At the top of the story triangle are the principles that constitute Classical Design. These principles are “classical” in the truest sense:
timeless and transcultural, fundamental to every earthly society, civilized and primitive, reaching back through millennia of oral storytelling into the shadows of time. When the epic Gilgamesh was carved in cuneiform on twelve clay tablets 4,000 years ago, converting story to the written word for the first time, the principles of Classical Design were already fully and beautifully in place.

CLASSICAL DESIGN means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change.

This collection of timeless principles I call the Archplot: Arch (pronounced “ark” as in archangel) in the dictionary sense of “eminently above others of the same kind.”
The Archplot, however, is not the limit of storytelling shapes. In the left corner, I place all examples of minimalism. As the word suggests, minimalism means that the writer begins with the elements of Classical Design but then reduces them—shrinking or compressing, trimming or truncating the prominent features of the Archplot. I call this set of minimalist variations Miniplot. Miniplot does not mean no plot, for its story must be as beautifully executed as an Archplot. Rather, minimalism strives for simplicity and economy while retaining enough of the classical that the film will still satisfy the audience, sending them out of the cinema thinking, "What a good story!"

In the right corner is Antiplot, the cinema counterpart to the antinovel or Nouveau Roman and Theatre of the Absurd. This set of antistructure variations doesn’t reduce the Classical but reverses it, contradicting traditional forms to exploit, perhaps ridicule the very idea of formal principles. The Antiplot-maker is rarely interested in understatement or quiet austerity; rather, to make clear his "revolutionary" ambitions. His films tend toward extravagance and self-conscious overstatement.

The Archplot is the meat, potatoes, pasta, rice, and couscous of world cinema. For the past one hundred years it has informed the vast majority of films that have found an international audience. If we skim through the decades—THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY (USA/1904), THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII (Italy/1913), THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (Germany/1920), GREED (USA/1924), THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN (USSR/1925), M (Germany/1931), TOP HAT (USA/1935), LA GRANDE ILLUSION (France/1937), BRINGING UP BABY (USA/1938), CITIZEN KANE (USA/1941), BRIEF ENCOUNTER (UK/1945), THE SEVEN SAMURAI (Japan/1954), MARTY (USA/1955), THE SEVENTH SEAL (Sweden/1957), THE HUSTLER (USA/1961), 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (USA/1968), THE GODFATHER, PART II (USA/1974), DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS (Brazil/1978), A FISH CALLED WANDA (UK/1988), BIG (USA/1988), JU DOU (China/1990), THELMA & LOUISE (USA/1991), FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL (UK/1994), SHINE (Australia/1996)—we glimpse the staggering variety of story embraced within the Archplot.
Miniplot, though less various, is equally international: NANOOK OF THE NORTH (USA/1922), LA PASSION DE JEANNE D'ARC (France/1928), ZERO DE CONDUITE (France/1933), PAISAN (Italy/1946), WILD STRAWBERRIES (Sweden/1957), THE MUSIC ROOM (India/1964), THE RED DESERT (Italy/1964), FIVE EASY PIECES (USA/1970), CLAIRE'S KNEE (France/1970), IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES (Japan/1976), TENDER MERCIES (USA/1983), PARIS, TEXAS (West Germany/France/1984), THE SACRIFICE (Sweden/France/1986), PELLE THE CONQUEROR (Denmark/1987), STOLEN CHILDREN (Italy/1992), A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT (USA/1993), TO LIVE (China/1994), and SHALL WE DANCE (Japan/1997). Miniplot also embraces narrative documentaries such as WELFARE (USA/1975).


**FORMAL DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE STORY TRIANGLE**

**Closed Versus Open Endings**

The Archplot delivers a closed ending—all questions raised by the story are answered; all emotions evoked are satisfied. The audience
leaves with a rounded, closed experience—nothing in doubt, nothing unsated.

Miniplot, on the other hand, often leaves the ending somewhat open. Most of the questions raised by the telling are answered, but an unanswered question or two may trail out of the film, leaving the audience to supply it subsequent to the viewing. Most of the emotion evoked by the film will be satisfied, but an emotional residue may be left for the audience to satisfy. Although Miniplot may end on a question mark of thought and feeling, “open” doesn’t mean the film quits in the middle, leaving everything hanging. The question must be answerable, the emotion resolvable. All that has gone before leads to clear and limited alternatives that make a degree of closure possible.

A Story Climax of absolute, irreversible change that answers all questions raised by the telling and satisfies all audience emotion is a CLOSED ENDING.

A Story Climax that leaves a question or two unanswered and some emotion unfulfilled is an OPEN ENDING.

At the climax of PARIS, TEXAS father and son are reconciled; their future is set and our hope for their happiness satisfied. But the husband/wife, mother/son relationships are left unresolved. The questions “Will this family have a future together? If so, what kind of future will it be?” are open. The answers will be found in the privacy of postfilm thoughts: If you want this family to get together, but your heart tells you they aren’t going to make it, it’s a sad evening. If you can convince yourself that they will live happily ever after, you walk out pleased. The minimalist storyteller deliberately gives this last critical bit of work to the audience.

External Versus Internal Conflict

The Archplot puts emphasis on external conflict. Although characters often have strong inner conflicts, the emphasis falls on their
struggles with personal relationships, with social institutions, or with forces in the physical world. In Miniplot, to the contrary, the protagonist may have strong external conflicts with family, society, and environment, but emphasis will fall on the battles within his own thoughts and feelings, conscious or unconscious.

Compare the journeys of the protagonists in THE ROAD WARRIOR and THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST. In the former, Mel Gibson's Mad Max undergoes an inner transformation from self-sufficient loner to self-sacrificing hero, but the emphasis of the story falls on the survival of the clan. In the latter, the life of William Hurt's travel writer changes as he remarries and becomes the much-needed father to a lonely boy, but the emphasis of the film falls on the resurrection of this man's spirit. His transformation from a man suffering a paralysis of emotions to a man free to love and feel is the film's dominant arc of change.

**Single Versus Multiple Protagonists**

The classically told story usually places a single protagonist—man, woman, or child—at the heart of the telling. One major story dominates screentime and its protagonist is the star role. However, if the writer splinters the film into a number of relatively small, subplot-sized stories, each with a separate protagonist, the result minimalizes the roller-coaster dynamic of the Archplot and creates the Multiplot variation of Miniplot that's grown in popularity since the 1980s.

In THE FUGITIVE's highly charged Archplot the camera never loses sight of Harrison Ford's protagonist: no glances sideways, not even a hint of a subplot. PARENTHOOD, on the other hand, is a tempered weave of no fewer than six tales of six protagonists. As in an Archplot, the conflicts of these six characters are predominantly external; none of them undergoes the deep suffering and inner change of THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST. But because these family battles draw our feelings in so many directions and because each story receives a brief fifteen or twenty minutes of screentime, their multiple design softens the telling.
The Multiplot dates from INTOLERANCE (USA/1916), GRAND HOTEL (USA/1932), THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY (Sweden/1961), and SHIP OF FOOLS (USA/1965) to its common use today—SHORT CUTS, PULP FICTION, DO THE RIGHT THING, and EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN.

**Active Versus Passive Protagonist**

The single protagonist of an Archplot tends to be active and dynamic, willfully pursuing desire through ever-escalating conflict and change. The protagonist of a Miniplot design, although not inert, is relatively reactive and passive. Generally this passivity is compensated for either by giving the protagonist a powerful inner struggle as in THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST or by surrounding him with dramatic events as in the Multiplot design of PELLE THE CONQUEROR.

**An ACTIVE PROTAGONIST, in the pursuit of desire, takes action in direct conflict with the people and the world around him.**

**A PASSIVE PROTAGONIST is outwardly inactive while pursuing desire inwardly, in conflict with aspects of his or her own nature.**

The title character of PELLE THE CONQUEROR is an adolescent under the control of the adult world and therefore has little choice but to be reactive. Writer Bille August, however, takes advantage of Pelle's alienation to make him the passive observer of tragic stories around him: Illicit lovers commit infanticide, a woman castrates her husband for adultery, the leader of a workers' revolt is bludgeoned into a cretin. Because August controls the telling from the child's point of view, these violent events are kept offscreen or at a distance, so that we rarely see the cause, only the aftermath. The design softens or minimalizes what could have been melodramatic, even distasteful.
Linear Versus Nonlinear Time

An Archplot begins at a certain point in time, moves elliptically through more or less continuous time, and ends at a later date. If flashbacks are used, they are handled so that the audience can place the story's events in their temporal order. An antiplot, on the other hand, is often disjunctive, scrambling or fragmenting time to make it difficult, if not impossible, to sort what happened into any linear sequence. Godard once remarked that in his aesthetic a film must have a beginning, middle, and end . . . but not necessarily in that order.

A story with or without flashbacks and arranged into a temporal order of events that the audience can follow is told in LINEAR TIME.

A story that either skips helter-skelter through time or so blurs temporal continuity that the audience cannot sort out what happens before and after what is told is NONLINEAR TIME.

In the aptly titled Antiplot BAD TIMING a psychoanalyst (Art Garfunkel) meets a woman (Theresa Russell) while vacationing in Austria. The first third of the film contains scenes that seem to come from the early going of the affair, but between them flash-forwards leap to scenes from the relationship's middle and late stages. The center third of the film is spattered with scenes that we assume are from their middle period, but interspersed with flashbacks to the beginning and flash-forwards to the end. The last third is dominated by scenes that seem to come from the couple's final days but are spliced with flashbacks to middle and beginning. The film ends on an act of necrophilia.

BAD TIMING is a contemporary reworking of the ancient idea of "character as destiny"—the notion that your fate equals who you are, that the final consequences of your life will be determined by the unique nature of your character and nothing else—not family,
society, environment, or chance. By tossing time like a salad, BAD TIMING’s antistructure design disconnects the characters from the world around them. What difference does it make whether they went to Salzburg one weekend or Vienna the next; whether they had lunch here or dinner there; quarreled over this or that or didn’t? What matters is the poisonous alchemy of their personalities. The moment this couple met they stepped on a bullet train to their grotesque fate.

Causality Versus Coincidence

The Archplot stresses how things happen in the world, how a cause creates an effect, how this effect becomes a cause that triggers yet another effect. Classical story design charts the vast interconnectedness of life from the obvious to the impenetrable, from the intimate to the epic, from individual identity to the international infosphere. It lays bare the network of chain-linked causalities that, when understood, gives life meaning. The Antiplot, on the other hand, often substitutes coincidence for causality, putting emphasis on the random collisions of things in the universe that break the chains of causality and lead to fragmentation, meaninglessness, and absurdity.

**CAUSALITY** drives a story in which motivated actions cause effects that in turn become the causes of yet other effects, thereby interlinking the various levels of conflict in a chain reaction of episodes to the Story Climax, expressing the interconnectedness of reality.

**COINCIDENCE** drives a fictional world in which unmotivated actions trigger events that do not cause further effects, and therefore fragment the story into divergent episodes and an open ending, expressing the disconnectedness of existence.

In **AFTER HOURS** a young man (Griffin Dunne) makes a date with a woman he meets by chance in a Manhattan coffee shop. On
the trip to her Soho apartment his last twenty bucks is blown out the taxi window. He then seems to find his money stapled to a bizarre statue-in-progress in her loft. His date suddenly commits a well-planned suicide. Trapped in Soho without money for the subway, he’s mistaken for a burglar and hunted by a vigilante mob. Lunatic characters and an overflowing toilet block his escape, until he’s hidden inside a statue, stolen by real burglars, and finally falls out of their getaway truck, smack onto the steps of the building where he works, right on time for his day at the word processor. He’s a pool ball on the table of God, randomly bouncing around until he drops into a pocket.

**Consistent Versus Inconsistent Realities**

Story is a metaphor for life. It takes us beyond the factual to the essential. Therefore, it’s a mistake to apply a one-for-one standard from reality to story. The worlds we create obey their own internal rules of causality. An Archplot unfolds within a consistent reality . . . but reality, in this case, doesn’t mean actuality. Even the most naturalistic, “life as lived” Miniplot is an abstracted and rarefied existence. Each fictional reality uniquely establishes how things happen within it. In an Archplot these rules cannot be broken—even if they are bizarre.

**CONSISTENT REALITIES** are fictional settings that establish modes of interaction between characters and their world that are kept consistently throughout the telling to create meaning.

Virtually all works in the *Fantasy* genre, for example, are Archplots in which whimsical rules of “reality” are strictly obeyed. Suppose that in WHO FRAMED ROGER RABBIT a human character were to chase Roger, a cartoon character, toward a locked door. Suddenly Roger flattens into two dimensions, slides under the sill, and escapes. The human slams into the door. Fine. But now this becomes a story rule: No human can catch Roger because he can
switch to two dimensions and escape. Should the writer want Roger caught in a future scene, he would have to devise a non-human agent or go back to rewrite the previous chase. Having created story rules of causality, the writer of an Archplot must work within his self-created discipline. Consistent Reality, therefore, means an internally consistent world, true to itself.

**INCONSISTENT REALITIES** are settings that mix modes of interaction so that the story’s episodes jump inconsistently from one “reality” to another to create a sense of absurdity.

In an Antiplot, however, the only rule is to break rules: In Jean-Luc Godard’s WEEKEND a Parisian couple decides to murder an elderly aunt for her insurance money. On the way to the aunt’s country home an accident, more hallucinatory than real, destroys their red sports car. Later, as the couple trudges on foot down a lovely shaded lane, Emily Brontë suddenly appears, plucked out of nineteenth-century England and dropped onto a twentieth-century French path, reading her novel *Wuthering Heights*. The Parisians hate Emily on sight, whip out a Zippo lighter, set her crinoline skirts on fire, burn her to a crisp . . . and walk on.

A slap in the face for classical literature? Perhaps, but it doesn’t happen again. This isn’t a time-travel movie. Nobody else shows up out of the past or future; just Emily; just once. A rule made to be broken.

The desire to turn the Archplot on its head began early in this century. Writers such as August Strindberg, Ernst Toller, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and William S. Burroughs felt the need to sever the links between the artist and external reality, and with it, between the artist and the greater part of the audience. Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Stream of Consciousness, Theatre of the Absurd, the antinovel, and cinematic antistructure may differ in technique but share the same result: a retreat inside the artist’s private world to which the audience is admitted at the artist’s discretion. These are worlds in which not only are events
atemporal, coincidental, fragmented, and chaotic, but characters do not operate within a recognizable psychology. Neither sane nor insane, they are either deliberately inconsistent or overtly symbolic.

Films in this mode are not metaphors for "life as lived," but for "life as thought about." They reflect not reality, but the solipsism of the filmmaker, and in doing so, stretch the limits of story design toward didactic and ideational structures. However, the inconsistent reality of an Antitplot such as WEEKEND has a unity of sorts. When done well, it's felt to be an expression of the subjective state of mind of the filmmaker. This sense of a single perception, no matter how incoherent, holds the work together for audiences willing to venture into its distortions.

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**Diagram:**

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ARCHPLOT

M
BIG
MARTY
TOP HAT

CHINATOWN
THE HUSTLER
MEN IN BLACK

THELMA & LOUISE
DR. STRANGELOVE

THE SEVEN SAMURAI
A FISH CALLED WANDA

BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK
THE BAD & THE BEAUTIFUL

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

NASHVILLE
THE CRYING GAME

3 WOMEN
BLOW UP
PARIS, TEXAS
WINTER LIGHT
TENDER MERCIES
IL DESERTO ROSSO
FIVE EASY PIECES

THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST
IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES

WHEN HARRY MET SALLY

BARTON FINK

8½
WEEKEND
BAD TIMING
WAYNE'S WORLD

CHUNGKING EXPRESS
A ZED AND TWO Noughts
MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON

THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

MINI PLOT

ANTIT PLOT
```
The seven formal contradictions and contrasts listed above are not hard and fast. There are unlimited shades and degrees of openness/closedness, passivity/activity, consistent/inconsistent reality, and the like. All storytelling possibilities are distributed inside the story design triangle, but very few films are of such purity of form that they settle at its extreme corners. Each side of the triangle is a spectrum of structural choices, and writers slide their stories along these lines, blending or borrowing from each extreme.

THE FABULOUS BAKER BOYS and THE CRYING GAME fall halfway between Archplot and Miniplot. Each tells the tale of a rather passive isolate; each leaves its ending open as the future of the subplot’s love story goes unanswered. Neither is as classically designed as CHINATOWN or THE SEVEN SAMURAI, nor as minimalistic as FIVE EASY PIECES or THE SCENT OF GREEN PAPAYA.

Multiplot films are also less than classical and more than minimal. The works of Robert Altman, a master of this form, span a spectrum of possibilities. A Multiplot work may be “hard,” tending toward Archplot, as individual stories turn frequently with strong external consequences (NASHVILLE), or “soft,” leaning toward Miniplot, as plot lines slow their pace and action becomes internalized (3 WOMEN).

A film could be quasi-Antiplot. When, for example, Nora Ephron and Rob Reiner inserted scenes of Mockumentary into WHEN HARRY MET SALLY, his film’s overall “reality” came into question. The documentary-styled interviews of older couples looking back on how they met are in fact delightfully scripted scenes with actors working in a documentary style. These false realities sandwiched inside an otherwise conventional love story pushed the film toward the inconsistent reality of antistructure and self-reflexive satire.

A film like BARTON FINK sits at the center, drawing qualities from each of the three extremes. It begins as the story of a young New York playwright (single protagonist) who’s trying to make his mark in Hollywood (active conflict with external forces)—Archplot. But Fink (John Turturro) becomes more and more reclusive and suffers a severe writer’s block (inner conflict)—Miniplot. When
that progresses into hallucination, we grow less and less sure of what’s real, what’s fantasy (inconsistent realities), until nothing can be trusted (fractured temporal and causal order)—*Antiplot*. The ending is rather open, with Fink staring out to sea, but it’s fairly certain he’ll never write in that town again.

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<th>MINI PLOT</th>
<th>CHANGE</th>
<th>ANTI PLOT</th>
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**Change Versus Stasis**

Above the line drawn between Miniplot and Antiplot are stories in which life clearly changes. At the limits of Miniplot, however, change may be virtually invisible because it occurs at the deepest level of inner conflict: HUSBANDS. Change at the limits of Antiplot may explode into a cosmic joke: MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL. But in both cases stories arc and life changes for better or worse.

Below this line stories remain in stasis and do not arc. The value-charged condition of the character’s life at the end of the
film is virtually identical to that at the opening. Story dissolves into portraiture, either a portrait of verisimilitude or one of absurdity. I term these films Nonplots. Although they inform us, touch us, and have their own rhetorical or formal structures, they do not tell story. Therefore, they fall outside the story triangle and into a realm that would include everything that could be loosely called "narrative."

In slice-of-life works such as UMBERTO D, FACES, and NAKED, we discover protagonists leading lonely, troubled lives. They’re tested by even more suffering, but by the film’s end they seem resigned to the pain of life, even ready for more. In SHORT CUTS, individual lives are altered within its many story lines, but a soulless malaise bookends the film and permeates everything, until murder and suicide seem a natural part of the landscape. Although nothing changes within the universe of a Nonplot, we gain a sobering insight and hopefully something changes within us.

Antistructured Nonplots also trace a circular pattern but turn it with absurdity and satire done in an supra-unnaturalistic style. MASCULINE FEMININE (France/1966), THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE (France/1972), and PHANTOM OF LIBERTY (France/1974) string together scenes that ridicule bourgeois antics, sexual and political, but the blind fools of the opening scenes are just as blind and foolish when the closing titles roll.

THE POLITICS OF STORY DESIGN

In an ideal world art and politics would never touch. In reality they can’t keep their hands off each other. So as in all things, politics lurks inside the story triangle: the politics of taste, the politics of festivals and awards, and, most important, the politics of artistic versus commercial success. And as in all things political, the distortion of truth is greatest at the extremes. Each of us has a natural address somewhere on the story triangle. The danger is that for reasons more ideological than personal, you may feel compelled to leave home and work in a distant corner, trapping yourself into designing stories you
don't in your heart believe. But if you take an honest look at film's often specious polemics, you won't lose your way.

Over the years the primary political issue in cinema has been "Hollywood film" versus "art film." Although the terms seem dated, their partisans are very contemporary and vocal. Traditionally, their arguments have been framed in terms of big budget versus low budget, special effects versus painterly composition, the star system versus ensemble acting, private finance versus government support, and auteurs versus guns-for-hire. But hiding inside these debates are two diametrically opposed visions of life. The crucial frontier stretches across the bottom of story triangle: stasis versus change, a philosophical contradiction with profound implications for the writer. Let's begin by defining terms:

The concept "Hollywood film" does not include REVERSAL OF FORTUNE, Q & A, DRUGSTORE COWBOY, POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE, SALVADOR, RUNNING ON EMPTY, BLUE VELVET, BOB ROBERTS, JFK, DANGEROUS LIAISONS, THE FISHER KING, DO THE RIGHT THING, OR EVERYBODY SAYS I LOVE YOU. These films, and many more like them, are acclaimed international successes produced by Hollywood studios. THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST made more than $250 million worldwide, surpassing most Action films, but doesn't fall within the definition. The political meaning of "Hollywood film" is narrowed to thirty or forty special effects-dominated flicks and an equal number of farces and romances that Hollywood makes each year—far less than half of the town's output.

"Art film," in the broadest sense, means non-Hollywood, more specifically foreign film, even more specifically European film. Each year western Europe produces over four hundred films, generally more than Hollywood. "Art film," however, doesn't refer to the large number of European productions that are blood-spattered action, hard-core pornography, or slapstick farce. In the language of cafe criticism "art film" (a silly phrase—imagine "art novel" or "art theatre") is restricted to that trickle of excellent films, like BABETTE'S FEAST, IL POSTINO, or MAN BITES DOG, that manage to cross the Atlantic.
These terms were coined in the wars of cultural politics and point to vastly different, if not contradictory, views of reality. Hollywood filmmakers tend to be overly (some would say foolishly) optimistic about the capacity of life to change—especially for the better. Consequently, to express this vision they rely on the Archplot and an inordinately high percentage of positive endings. Non-Hollywood filmmakers tend to be overly (some would say chicerly) pessimistic about change, professing that the more life changes, the more it stays the same, or, worse, that change brings suffering. Consequently, to express the futility, meaninglessness, or destructiveness of change, they tend to make static, Nonplot portraiture or extreme Miniplots and Antiplots with negative endings.

These are tendencies, of course, with exceptions on both sides of the Atlantic, but the dichotomy is real and deeper than the seas that separate the Old World from the New. Americans are escapees from prisons of stagnant culture and rigid class who crave change. We change and change again, trying to find what, if anything, works. After weaving the trillion-dollar safety net of the Great Society, we’re now shredding it. The Old World, on the other hand, has learned through centuries of hard experience to fear such change, that social transformations inevitably bring war, famine, chaos.

The result is our polarized attitude toward story: The ingenious optimism of Hollywood (not naive about change but about its insistence on positive change) versus the equally ingenious pessimism of the art film (not naive about the human condition but about its insistence that it will never be other than negative or static). Too often Hollywood films force an up-ending for reasons more commercial than truthful; too often non-Hollywood films cling to the dark side for reasons more fashionable than truthful. The truth, as always, sits somewhere in the middle.

The art film’s focus on inner conflict draws the interest of those with advanced degrees, because the inner world is where the highly educated spend a large amount of time. Minimalists, however, often overestimate the appetite of even the most self-absorbed minds for a diet of nothing but inner conflict. Worse, they also
overestimate their talent to express the unseeable on screen. By the same token, Hollywood’s action filmmakers underestimate the interest of their audience in character, thought, and feeling, and, worse, overestimate their ability to avoid Action genre clichés.

Because story in Hollywood film is often forced and clichéd, directors must compensate with something else to hold the audience’s attention, resorting to transformation effects and cacophonous derring-do: THE FIFTH ELEMENT. In the same vein, because story is often thin or absent in the art film, again, directors must compensate. In this case, with one of two possibilities: information or sensory stimulation. Either dialogue-heavy scenes of political argument, philosophical musing, and characters’ self-conscious descriptions of their emotions; or lush production design and photography or musical scores to pleasure the audience’s senses: THE ENGLISH PATIENT.

The sad truth of the political wars of contemporary cinema is that the excesses of both “art film” and “Hollywood film” are the mirror images of each other. The telling is forced to become a dazzling surface of spectacle and sound to distract the audience from the vacancy and falsity of the story . . . and in both boredom follows as night the day.

Behind the political squabbling over finance, distribution, and awards lies a deep cultural divide, reflected in the opposing worldviews of Archplot versus Miniplot and Antiplot. From story to story the writer may move anywhere within the triangle, but most of us feel more at home in one place or another. You must make your own “political” choices and decide where you reside. As you do, let me offer these points for you to weigh:

The Writer Must Earn His Living Writing

Writing while holding down a forty-hour-a-week job is possible. Thousands have done it. But in time, exhaustion sets in, concentration wanders, creativity crumbles, and you’re tempted to quit. Before you do, you must find a way to earn your living from your writing. A talented writer’s survival in the real world of film and
television, theatre, and publishing begins with his recognition of this fact: As story design moves away from the Archplot and down the triangle toward the far reaches of Miniplot, Antiplot, and Nonplot, the audience shrinks.

This atrophy has nothing to do with quality or a lack of it. All three corners of the story triangle gleam with masterworks that the world treasures, pieces of perfection for our imperfect world. Rather, the audience shrinks for this reason: Most human beings believe that life brings closed experiences of absolute, irreversible change; that their greatest sources of conflict are external to themselves; that they are the single and active protagonists of their own existence; that their existence operates through continuous time within a consistent, causally interconnected reality; and that inside this reality events happen for explainable and meaningful reasons. Since our first ancestor stared into a fire of his own making and thought the thought, “I am,” this is how human beings have seen the world and themselves in it. Classical design is a mirror of the human mind.

Classical design is a model of memory and anticipation. When we think back to the past, do we piece events together antistructured? Minimalistically? No. We collect and shape memories around an Archplot to bring the past back vividly. When we daydream about the future, what we dread or pray will happen, is our vision minimalistic? Antistructured? No, we mold our fantasies and hopes into an Archplot. Classical design displays the temporal, spatial, and causal patterns of human perception, outside which the mind rebels.

Classical design is not a Western view of life. For thousands of years, from the Levant to Java to Japan, the storytellers of Asia have framed their works within the Archplot, spinning yarns of high adventure and great passion. As the rise of Asian film has shown, Eastern screenwriters draw on the same principles of classical design used in the West, enriching their tellings with a unique wit and irony. The Archplot is neither ancient nor modern, Western nor Eastern; it is human.

When the audience senses that a story is drifting too close to fic-
tional realities it finds tedious or meaningless, it feels alienated and turns away. This is true of intelligent, sensitive people of all incomes and backgrounds. The vast majority of human beings cannot endorse the inconsistent realities of Antiplot, the internalized passivity of Miniplot, and the static circularity of Nonplot as metaphors for life as they live it. As story reaches the bottom of the triangle the audience has shrunk to those loyal, cinephile intellectuals who like to have their realities twisted once in a while. This is an enthusiastic, challenging audience . . . but a very small audience.

If the audience shrinks, the budget must shrink. This is the law. In 1961 Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD and throughout the seventies and eighties he wrote brilliant Antiplot puzzle pieces—films more about the art of writing than about the act of living. I once asked him how, despite the anticommmercial bent of his films, he did it. He said he’d never spent more than $750,000 to make a film and never would. His audience was faithful but meager. At an ultra-low budget his investors doubled their money and kept him in the director’s chair. But at $2 million they would lose their shirts and he his seat. Robbe-Grillet was both visionary and pragmatic.

If, like Robbe-Grillet, you wish to write Miniplot or Antiplot, and can find a non-Hollywood producer to work at low budget, and are happy with relatively little money for yourself, good. Do it. But when you write for Hollywood, a low-budget script is no asset. Seasoned professionals who read your minimalist or antistructured piece may applaud your handling of image, but decline to be involved because experience has taught them that if the story is inconsequential, so is the audience.

Even modest Hollywood budgets run into the tens of millions of dollars, and each film must find an audience large enough to repay its cost at a profit greater than the same money would have earned in a secured investment. Why should investors place millions at enormous jeopardy when they can put it into real estate and at least have a building when they’re done, not something that’s shown in a couple of film festivals, shoved into a refrigerated vault, and forgotten? If a Hollywood studio is going to take this wild ride with
you, you must write a film that has at least a chance of recouping its huge risk. In other words, a film that leans toward the Archplot.

**The Writer Must Master Classical Form**

By instinct or study, fine writers recognize that minimalism and antistructure are not independent forms but reactions to the Classical. Miniplot and Antiplot were born out of the Archplot—one shrinks it, the other contradicts it. The avant-garde exists to oppose the popular and commercial, until it too becomes popular and commercial, then it turns to attack itself. If Nonplot "art films" went hot and were raking in money, the avant-garde would revolt, denounce Hollywood for selling out to portraiture, and seize the Classical for its own.

These cycles between formality/freedom, symmetry/asymmetry are as old as Attic theatre. The history of art is a history of revivals: Establishment icons are shattered by an avant-garde that in time becomes the new establishment to be attacked by a new avant-garde that uses its grandfather's forms of weapons. Rock 'n' roll, which was named after black slang for sex, began as an avant-garde movement against the white-bread sounds of the postwar era. Now it's the definition of musical aristocracy and even used as church music.

The serious use of Antiplot devices not only has gone out of fashion but has become a joke. A vein of dark satire has always run through antistructure works, from UN CHIEN ANDALOU to WEEKEND, but now direct address to camera, inconsistent realities, and alternative endings are the staples of film farce. Antiplot gags that began with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby's THE ROAD TO MOROCCO have been worked into the likes of BLAZING SADDLES, the PYTHON films, and WAYNE'S WORLD. Story techniques that once struck us as dangerous and revolutionary now seem toothless but charming.

Respecting these cycles, great storytellers have always known that, regardless of background or education, everyone, consciously or instinctively, enters the story ritual with Classical anticipation. Therefore, to make Miniplot and Antiplot work the writer must
play with or against this expectancy. Only by carefully and creatively shattering or bending the Classical form can the artist lead the audience to perceive the inner life hidden in a Miniplot or to accept the chilling absurdity of an Antiplot. But how can a writer creatively reduce or reverse that which he does not understand?

Writers who found success in the deep corners of the story triangle knew that the starting point of understanding was at the top and began their careers in the Classical. Bergman wrote and directed love stories and social and historical dramas for twenty years before he dared venture into the minimalism of THE SILENCE or the antistructure of PERSONA. Fellini made I VITIONI and LA STRADA before he risked the Miniplot of AMARCORD or the Antiplot of 8½. Godard made BREATHLESS before WEEKEND. Robert Altman perfected his story talents in the TV series Bonanza and Alfred Hitchcock Presents. First, the masters mastered the Archplot.

I sympathize with the youthful desire to make a first screenplay read like PERSONA. But the dream of joining the avant-garde must wait while, like the artists before you, you too gain mastery of Classical form. Don't kid yourself into thinking that you understand Archplot because you've seen the movies. You'll know you understand it when you can do it. The writer works at his skills until knowledge shifts from the left side of the brain to the right, until intellectual awareness becomes living craft.

The Writer Must Believe in What He Writes

Stanislavski asked his actors: Are you in love with the art in yourself or yourself in the art? You too must examine your motives for wanting to write the way you write. Why do your screenplays find their way to one corner of the triangle or the other? What is your vision?

Each tale you create says to the audience: "I believe life is like this." Every moment must be filled with your passionate conviction or we smell a phony. If you write minimalism, do you believe in the meanings of this form? Has experience convinced you that life
brings little or no change? If your ambition is anticlassicism, are you convinced of the random meaninglessness of life? If your answer is a passionate yes, then write your Miniplot or Antiplot and do everything possible to see it made.

For the vast majority, however, the honest answer to these questions is no. Yet antistructure and, in particular, minimalism still attract young writers like a Pied Piper. Why? I suspect that for many it isn't the intrinsic meanings of such forms that draw their interest. Rather, it's what these forms represent extrinsically. In other words, politics. It isn't what Antiplot and Miniplot are, it's what they're not: They're not Hollywood.

The young are taught that Hollywood and art are antithetical. The novice, therefore, wanting to be recognized as an artist, falls into the trap of writing a screenplay not for what it is, but for what it's not. He avoids closure, active characters, chronology, and causality to avoid the taint of commercialism. As a result, pretentiousness poisons his work.

A story is the embodiment of our ideas and passions in Edmund Husserl's phrase, "an objective correlative" for the feelings and insights we wish to instill in the audience. When you work with one eye on your script and the other on Hollywood, making eccentric choices to avoid the taint of commercialism, you produce the literary equivalent of a temper tantrum. Like a child living in the shadow of a powerful father, you break Hollywood's "rules" because it makes you feel free. But angry contradiction of the patriarch is not creativity; it's delinquency calling for attention. Difference for the sake of difference is as empty an achievement as slavishly following the commercial imperative. Write only what you believe.