STRUCTURE AND MEANING

AESTHETIC EMOTION

Aristotle approached the question of story and meaning in this way: Why is it, he asked, when we see a dead body in the street we have one reaction, but when we read of death in Homer, or see it in the theatre, we have another? Because in life idea and emotion come separately. Mind and passions revolve in different spheres of our humanity, rarely coordinated, usually at odds.

In life, if you see a dead body in the street, you’re struck by a rush of adrenaline: “My God, he’s dead!” Perhaps you drive away in fear. Later, in the coolness of time, you may reflect on the meaning of this stranger’s demise, on your own mortality, on life in the shadow of death. This contemplation may change you within so that the next time you are confronted with death, you have a new, perhaps more compassionate reaction. Or, reversing the pattern, you may, in youth, think deeply but not wisely about love, embracing an idealistic vision that trips you into a poignant but very painful romance. This may harden the heart, creating a cynic who in later years finds bitter what the young still think sweet.

Your intellectual life prepares you for emotional experiences that then urge you toward fresh perceptions that in turn remix the chemistry of new encounters. The two realms influence each other, but first one, then the other. In fact, in life, moments that blaze with a fusion of idea and emotion are so rare, when they happen
you think you're having a religious experience. But whereas life separates meaning from emotion, art unites them. Story is an instrument by which you create such epiphanies at will, the phenomenon known as aesthetic emotion.

The source of all art is the human psyche's primal, prelinguistic need for the resolution of stress and discord through beauty and harmony, for the use of creativity to revive a life deadened by routine, for a link to reality through our instinctive, sensory feel for the truth. Like music and dance, painting and sculpture, poetry and song, story is first, last, and always the experience of aesthetic emotion—the simultaneous encounter of thought and feeling.

When an idea wraps itself around an emotional charge, it becomes all the more powerful, all the more profound, all the more memorable. You might forget the day you saw a dead body in the street, but the death of Hamlet haunts you forever. Life on its own, without art to shape it, leaves you in confusion and chaos, but aesthetic emotion harmonizes what you know with what you feel to give you a heightened awareness and a sureness of your place in reality. In short, a story well told gives you the very thing you cannot get from life: meaningful emotional experience. In life, experiences become meaningful with reflection in time. In art, they are meaningful now, at the instant they happen.

In this sense, story is, at heart, nonintellectual. It does not express ideas in the dry, intellectual arguments of an essay. But this is not to say story is anti-intellectual. We pray that the writer has ideas of import and insight. Rather, the exchange between artist and audience expresses idea directly through the senses and perceptions, intuition and emotion. It requires no mediator, no critic to rationalize the transaction, to replace the ineffable and the sentient with explanation and abstraction. Scholarly acumen sharpens taste and judgment, but we must never mistake criticism for art. Intellectual analysis, however heady, will not nourish the soul.

A well-told story neither expresses the clockwork reasonings of a thesis nor vents raging inchoate emotions. It triumphs in the marriage of the rational with the irrational. For a work that's either essentially emotional or essentially intellectual cannot have the validity of
one that calls upon our subtler faculties of sympathy, empathy, premonition, discernment... our innate sensitivity to the truth.

**PREMISE**

Two ideas bracket the creative process: Premise, the idea that inspires the writer’s desire to create a story, and Controlling Idea, the story’s ultimate meaning expressed through the action and aesthetic emotion of the last act’s climax. A Premise, however, unlike a Controlling Idea, is rarely a closed statement. More likely, it’s an open-ended question: What would happen if...? What would happen if a shark swam into a beach resort and devoured a vacationer? JAWS. What would happen if a wife walked out on her husband and child? KRAMER VS. KRAMER. Stanislavski called this the “Magic if...,” the daydreamy hypothetical that floats through the mind, opening the door to the imagination where everything and anything seems possible.

But “What would happen if...” is only one kind of Premise. Writers find inspiration wherever they turn—in a friend’s light-hearted confession of a dark desire, the jibe of a legless beggar, a nightmare or daydream, a newspaper fact, a child’s fantasy. Even the craft itself may inspire. Purely technical exercises, such as linking a smooth transition from one scene to the next or editing dialogue to avoid repetition, may trigger a burst of imagination. Anything may premise the writing, even, for example, a glance out a window.

In 1965 Ingmar Bergman contracted labyrinthitis, a viral infection of the inner ear that keeps its victims in a ceaselessly swirling vertigo, even while sleeping. For weeks Bergman was bedridden, his head in a brace, trying to keep vertigo at bay by staring at a spot his doctor had painted on the ceiling, but with each glance away the room spun like a whirligig. Concentrating on the spot, he began to imagine two faces intermingled. Days later, as he recovered, he glanced through a window and saw a nurse and a patient sitting comparing hands. Those images, the nurse/patient relationship and merging faces, were the genesis for Bergman’s masterpiece PERSONA.

Flashes of inspiration or intuition that seem so random and spontaneous are in fact serendipitous. For what may inspire one
writer will be ignored by another. The Premise awakens what waits within, the visions or convictions nascent in the writer. The sum total of his experience has prepared him for this moment and he reacts to it as only he would. Now the work begins. Along the way he interprets, chooses, and makes judgments. If, to some people, a writer's final statement about life appears dogmatic and opinionated, so be it. Bland and pacifying writers are a bore. We want unfettered souls with the courage to take a point of view, artists whose insights startle and excite.

Finally, it's important to realize that whatever inspires the writing need not stay in the writing. A Premise is not precious. As long as it contributes to the growth of story, keep it, but should the telling take a left turn, abandon the original inspiration to follow the evolving story. The problem is not to start writing, but to keep writing and renewing inspiration. We rarely know where we're going; writing is discovery.

STRUCTURE AS RHETORIC

Make no mistake: While a story's inspiration may be a dream and its final effect aesthetic emotion, a work moves from an open premise to a fulfilling climax only when the writer is possessed by serious thought. For an artist must have not only ideas to express, but ideas to prove. Expressing an idea, in the sense of exposing it, is never enough. The audience must not just understand; it must believe. You want the world to leave your story convinced that yours is a truthful metaphor for life. And the means by which you bring the audience to your point of view resides in the very design you give your telling. As you create your story, you create your proof, idea and structure intertwine in a rhetorical relationship.

STORYTELLING is the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action. A story's event structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea . . . without explanation.
Master storytellers never explain. They do the hard, painfully creative thing—they dramatize. Audiences are rarely interested, and certainly never convinced, when forced to listen to the discussion of ideas. Dialogue, the natural talk of characters pursuing desire, is not a platform for the filmmaker’s philosophy. Explanations of authorial ideas, whether in dialogue or narration, seriously diminish a film’s quality. A great story authenticates its ideas solely within the dynamics of its events; failure to express a view of life through the pure, honest consequences of human choice and action is a creative defeat no amount of clever language can salvage.

To illustrate, consider that prolific genre, Crime. What idea is expressed by virtually all detective fiction? “Crime doesn’t pay.” How do we come to understand that? Hopefully without one character musing to another, “There! What’d I tell ya? Crime doesn’t pay. Nope, it looked like they’d get away with it, but the wheels of justice turned relentlessly . . .” No, we see the idea acted out in front of us: A crime is committed; for a while the criminal goes free; eventually he’s apprehended and punished. In the act of punishment—imprisoning him for life or shooting him dead on the street—an emotionally charged idea runs through the audience. And if we could put words to this idea, they wouldn’t be as polite as “Crime does not pay.” Rather: “They got the bastard!” An electrifying triumph of justice and social revenge.

The kind and quality of aesthetic emotion is relative. The Psycho-Thriller strives for very strong effects; other forms, like the Disillusionment plot or the Love Story, want the softer emotions of perhaps sadness or compassion. But regardless of genre, the principle is universal: the story’s meaning, whether comic or tragic, must be dramatized in an emotionally expressive Story Climax without the aid of explanatory dialogue.

**CONTROLLING IDEA**

*Theme* has become a rather vague term in the writer’s vocabulary. “Poverty,” “war,” and “love,” for example, are not themes; they relate to setting or genre. A true theme is not a word but a sen-
tence—one clear, coherent sentence that expresses a story’s irreducible meaning. I prefer the phrase Controlling Idea, for like theme, it names a story’s root or central idea, but it also implies function. The Controlling Idea shapes the writer’s strategic choices. It’s yet another Creative Discipline to guide your aesthetic choices toward what is appropriate or inappropriate in your story, toward what is expressive of your Controlling Idea and may be kept versus what is irrelevant to it and must be cut.

The Controlling Idea of a completed story must be expressible in a single sentence. After the Premise is first imagined and the work is evolving, explore everything and anything that comes to mind. Ultimately, however, the film must be molded around one idea. This is not to say that a story can be reduced to a rubric. Far more is captured within the web of a story that can ever be stated in words—subtleties, subtexts, conceits, double meanings, richness of all kinds. A story becomes a kind of living philosophy that the audience members grasp as a whole, in a flash, without conscious thought—a perception married to their life experiences. But the irony is this:

The more beautifully you shape your work around one clear idea, the more meanings audiences will discover in your film as they take your idea and follow its implications into every aspect of their lives. Conversely, the more ideas you try to pack into a story, the more they implode upon themselves, until the film collapses into a rubble of tangential notions, saying nothing.

A CONTROLLING IDEA may be expressed in a single sentence describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end.

The Controlling Idea has two components: Value plus Cause. It identifies the positive or negative charge of the story’s critical value at the last act’s climax, and it identifies the chief reason that this value has changed to its final state. The sentence composed from these two elements, Value plus Cause, expresses the core meaning of the story.
Value means the primary value in its positive or negative charge that comes into the world or life of your character as a result of the final action of the story. For example: An up-ending Crime Story (IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT) returns an unjust world (negative) to justice (positive), suggesting a phrase such as "Justice is restored . . ." In a down-ending Political Thriller (MISSING), the military dictatorship commands the story's world at climax, prompting a negative phrase such as "Tyranny prevails . . ." A positive-ending Education Plot (GROUNDHOG DAY) arcs the protagonist from a cynical, self-serving man to someone who's genuinely selfless and loving, leading to "Happiness fills our lives . . ." A negative-ending Love Story (DANGEROUS LIAISONS) turns passion into self-loathing, evoking "Hatred destroys . . ."

Cause refers to the primary reason that the life or world of the protagonist has turned to its positive or negative value. Working back from the ending to the beginning, we trace the chief cause deep within the character, society, or environment that has brought this value into existence. A complex story may contain many forces for change, but generally one cause dominates the others. Therefore, in a Crime Story, neither "Crime doesn't pay . . ." (justice triumphs . . .) nor "Crime pays . . ." (injustice triumphs . . .) could stand as a full Controlling Idea because each gives us only half a meaning—the ending value. A story of substance also expresses why its world or protagonist has ended on its specific value.

If, for example, you were writing for Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry, your full Controlling Idea of Value plus Cause would be: "Justice triumphs because the protagonist is more violent than the criminals." Dirty Harry manages some minor detective work here and there, but his violence is the dominant cause for change. This insight then guides you to what's appropriate and inappropriate. It tells you it would be inappropriate to write a scene in which Dirty Harry comes upon the murder victim, discovers a ski cap left behind by the fleeing killer, takes out a magnifying glass, examines it, and concludes, "Hmm . . . this man's approximately thirty-five years of age; he has reddish hair; and he comes from the coal-
mining regions of Pennsylvania—notice the anthracitic dust.” This is Sherlock Holmes, not Dirty Harry.

If, however, you were writing for Peter Falk’s Columbo, your Controlling Idea would be: “Justice is restored because the protagonist is more clever than the criminal.” The ski cap forensics might be appropriate for Columbo because the dominant cause for change in the Columbo series is Sherlock Holmesian deduction. It would be inappropriate, however, for Columbo to reach under his wrinkled raincoat, come up with a .44 Magnum, and start blowing people away.

To complete the previous examples: IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT—justice is restored because a perceptive black outsider sees the truth of white perversion. GROUNDHOG DAY—happiness fills our lives when we learn to love unconditionally. MISSING—tyranny prevails because it’s supported by a corrupt CIA. DANGEROUS LIAISONS—hatred destroys us when we fear the opposite sex. The Controlling Idea is the purest form of a story’s meaning, the how and why of change, the vision of life the audience members carry away into their lives.

**Meaning and the Creative Process**

How do you find your story’s Controlling Idea? The creative process may begin anywhere. You might be prompted by a Premise, a “What would happen if . . . ,” or a bit of character, or an image. You might start in the middle, the beginning, near the end. As your fictional world and characters grow, events interlink and the story builds. Then comes that crucial moment when you take the leap and create the Story Climax. This climax of the last act is a final action that excites and moves you, that feels complete and satisfying. The Controlling Idea is now at hand.

Looking at your ending, ask: As a result of this climactic action, what value, positively or negatively charged, is brought into the world of my protagonist? Next, tracing backward from this climax, digging to the bedrock, ask: What is the chief cause, force, or means by which this value is brought into his world? The sentence you compose from the answers to those two questions becomes your Controlling Idea.
In other words, the story tells you its meaning: you do not dictate meaning to the story. You do not draw action from idea, rather idea from action. For no matter your inspiration, ultimately the story embeds its Controlling Idea within the final climax, and when this event speaks its meaning, you will experience one of the most powerful moments in the writing life—Self-Recognition: The Story Climax mirrors your inner self, and if your story is from the very best sources within you, more often than not you'll be shocked by what you see reflected in it.

You may think you're a warm, loving human being until you find yourself writing tales of dark, cynical consequence. Or you may think you're a street-wise guy who's been around the block a few times until you find yourself writing warm, compassionate endings. You think you know who you are, but often you're amazed by what's skulking inside in need of expression. In other words, if a plot works out exactly as you first planned, you're not working loosely enough to give room to your imagination and instincts. Your story should surprise you again and again. Beautiful story design is a combination of the subject found, the imagination at work, and the mind loosely but wisely executing the craft.

**Idea Versus Counter-Idea**

Paddy Chayefsky once told me that when he finally discovered his story’s meaning, he’d scratch it out on a scrap of paper and tape it to his typewriter, so that nothing going through the machine wouldn’t in one way or another express his central theme. With a clear statement of Value plus Cause staring him in the eye, he could resist intriguing irrelevancies and concentrate on unifying the telling around the story’s core meaning. By “one way or another,” Chayefsky meant he’d forge the story dynamically, moving it back and forth across the opposing charges of its primary values. His improvisations would be so shaped that sequence after sequence alternately expressed the positive, then negative dimension of his Controlling Idea. In other words, he fashioned his stories by playing Idea against Counter-Idea.
PROGRESSIONS build by moving dynamically between the positive and negative charges of the values at stake in the story.

From the moment of inspiration you reach into your fictional world in search of a design. You have to build a bridge of story from the opening to the ending, a progression of events that spans from Premise to Controlling Idea. These events echo the contradictory voices of one theme. Sequence by sequence, often scene by scene, the positive Idea and its negative Counter-Idea argue, so to speak, back and forth, creating a dramatized dialectical debate. At climax one of these two voices wins and becomes the story's Controlling Idea.

To illustrate with the familiar cadences of the Crime Story: A typical opening sequence expresses the negative Counter-Idea, "Crime pays because the criminals are brilliant and/or ruthless" as it dramatizes a crime so enigmatic (VERTIGO) or committed by such diabolical criminals (DIE HARD) that the audience is stunned: "They're going to get away with it!" But as a veteran detective discovers a clue left by the fleeing killer (THE BIG SLEEP), the next sequence contradicts this fear with the positive Idea, "Crime doesn't pay because the protagonist is even more brilliant and/or ruthless." Then perhaps the cop is misled into suspecting the wrong person (FAREWELL, MY LOVELY): "Crime pays." But soon the protagonist uncovers the real identity of the villain (THE FUGITIVE): "Crime doesn't pay." Next the criminal captures, may even seem to kill, the protagonist (ROBOCOP): "Crime pays." But the cop virtually resurrects from the dead (SUDDEN IMPACT) and goes back on the hunt: "Crime doesn't pay."

The positive and negative assertions of the same idea contest back and forth through the film, building in intensity, until at Crisis they collide head-on in a last impasse. Out of this rises the Story Climax, in which one or the other idea succeeds. This may be the positive Idea: "Justice triumphs because the protagonist is tenaciously resourceful and courageous" (BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK, SPEED, THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS), or the negative Counter-Idea: "Injustice prevails because the antagonist is overwhelmingly ruthless and powerful" (SEVEN, Q & A, CHINATOWN). Which-
ever of the two is dramatized in the final climactic action becomes the Controlling Idea of Value plus Cause, the purest statement of the story's conclusive and decisive meaning.

This rhythm of Idea versus Counter-Idea is fundamental and essential to our art. It pulses at the heart of all fine stories, no matter how internalized the action. What's more, this simple dynamic can become very complex, subtle, and ironic.

In SEA OF LOVE detective Keller (Al Pacino) falls in love with his chief suspect (Ellen Barkin). As a result, each scene that points toward her guilt turns with irony: positive on the value of justice, negative on the value of love. In the maturation plot SHINE, David's (Noah Taylor) musical victories (positive) provoke his father's (Armin Mueller-Stahl) envy and brutal repression (negative), driving the pianist into a pathological immaturity (doubly negative), which makes his final success a triumph of maturity in both art and spirit (doubly positive).

**DIDACTICISM**

A note of caution: In creating the dimensions of your story's "argument," take great care to build the power of both sides. Compose the scenes and sequences that contradict your final statement with as much truth and energy as those that reinforce it. If your film ends on the Counter-Idea, such as "Crime pays because . . . .," then amplify the sequences that lead the audience to feel justice will win out. If your film ends on the Idea, such as "Justice triumphs because . . . .," then enhance the sequences expressing "Crime pays and pays big." In other words, do not slant your "argument."

If, in a morality tale, you were to write your antagonist as an ignorant fool who more or less destroys himself, are we persuaded that good will prevail? But if, like an ancient myth-maker, you were to create an antagonist of virtual omnipotence who reaches the brink of success, you would force yourself to create a protagonist who will rise to the occasion and become even more powerful, more brilliant. In this balanced telling your victory of good over evil now rings with validity.
The danger is this: When your Premise is an idea you feel you must prove to the world, and you design your story as an undeniable certification of that idea, you set yourself on the road to didacticism. In your zeal to persuade, you will stifle the voice of the other side. Misusing and abusing art to preach, your screenplay will become a thesis film, a thinly disguised sermon as you strive in a single stroke to convert the world. Didacticism results from the naive enthusiasm that fiction can be used like a scalpel to cut out the cancers of society.

More often than not, such stories take the form of Social Drama, a lead-handed genre with two defining conventions: Identify a social ill; dramatize its remedy. The writer, for example, may decide that war is the scourge of humanity, and pacifism is the cure. In his zeal to convince us all his good people are very, very good people, and all his bad people are very, very bad people. All the dialogue is “on the nose” laments about the futility and insanity of war, heartfelt declarations that the cause of war is the “establishment.” From outline to last draft, he fills the screen with stomach-turning images, making certain that each and every scene says loud and clear: “War is a scourge, but it can be cured by pacifism . . . war is a scourge cured by pacifism . . . war is a scourge cured by pacifism . . .” until you want to pick up a gun.

But the pacifist pleas of antiwar films (OH! WHAT A LOVELY WAR, APOCALYPSE NOW, GALLIPOLI, HAMBURGER HILL) rarely sensitize us to war. We’re unconvinced because in the rush to prove he has the answer, the writer is blind to a truth we know too well—men love war.

This does not mean that starting with an idea is certain to produce didactic work . . . but that’s the risk. As a story develops, you must willingly entertain opposite, even repugnant ideas. The finest writers have dialectical, flexible minds that easily shift points of view. They see the positive, the negative, and all shades of irony, seeking the truth of these views honestly and convincingly. This omniscience forces them to become even more creative, more imaginative, and more insightful. Ultimately, they express what they deeply believe, but not until they have allowed themselves to weigh each living issue and experience all its possibilities.
Make no mistake, no one can achieve excellence as a writer without being something of a philosopher and holding strong convictions. The trick is not to be a slave to your ideas, but to immerse yourself in life. For the proof of your vision is not how well you can assert your Controlling Idea, but its victory over the enormously powerful forces that you array against it.

Consider the superb balance of three antiwar films directed by Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick and his screenwriters researched and explored the Counter-Idea to look deep within the human psyche itself. Their stories reveal war to be the logical extension of an intrinsic dimension of human nature that loves to fight and kill, chilling us with the realization that what humanity loves to do, it will do—as it has for aeons, through the now and into all foreseeable futures.

In Kubrick’s PATHS OF GLORY the fate of France hangs on winning the war against the Germans at any cost. So when the French army retreats from battle, an outraged general devises an innovative motivational strategy: He orders his artillery to bombard his own troops. In DR. STRANGELOVE the United States and Russia both realize that in nuclear war, not losing is more important than winning, so each concocts a scheme for not losing so effective it incinerates all life on Earth. In FULL METAL JACKET, the Marine Corps faces a tough task: how to persuade human beings to ignore the genetic prohibition against killing their own kind. The simple solution is to brainwash recruits into believing that the enemy is not human; killing a man then becomes easy, even if he’s your drill instructor. Kubrick knew that if he gave the humanity enough ammunition, it would shoot itself.

A great work is a living metaphor that says, “Life is like this.” The classics, down through the ages, give us not solutions but lucidity, not answers but poetic candor; they make inescapably clear the problems all generations must solve to be human.

IDEALIST, PESSIMIST, IRONIST

Writers and the stories they tell can be usefully divided into three grand categories, according to the emotional charge of their Controlling Idea.
Idealistic Controlling Ideas

"Up-ending" stories expressing the optimism, hopes, and dreams of mankind, a positively charged vision of the human spirit; life as we wish it to be. Examples:

"Love fills our lives when we conquer intellectual illusions and follow our instincts": HANNAH AND HER SISTERS. In this
Multiplot story, a collection of New Yorkers are seeking love, but they're unable to find it because they keep thinking, analyzing, trying to decipher the meaning of things: sexual politics, careers, morality or immortality. One by one, however, they cast off their intellectual illusions and listen to their hearts. The moment they do, they all find love. This is one of the most optimistic films Woody Allen has ever made.

"Goodness triumphs when we outwit evil": THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK. The witches ingeniously turn the devil's own dirty tricks against him and find goodness and happiness in the form of three chubby-cheeked babies.

"The courage and genius of humanity will prevail over the hostility of Nature." Survival Films, a subgenre of Action/Adventure, are "up-ending" stories of life-and-death conflict with forces of the environment. At the brink of extinction, the protagonists, through dint of will and resourcefulness, battle the often cruel personality of Mother Nature and endure: THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE, JAWS, QUEST FOR FIRE, ARACHNOPHOBIA, FITZCARRALDO, FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX, ALIVE.

Pessimistic Controlling Ideas

"Down-ending" stories expressing our cynicism, our sense of loss and misfortune, a negatively charged vision of civilization's decline, of humanity's dark dimensions; life as we dread it to be but know it so often is. Examples:

"Passion turns to violence and destroys our lives when we use people as objects of pleasure": DANCE WITH A STRANGER. The lovers in this British work think their problem is a difference of class, but class has been overcome by countless couples. The deep conflict is that their affair is poisoned by desires to possess each other as objects for neurotic gratification, until one seizes the ultimate possession—the life of her lover.

"Evil triumphs because it's part of human nature": CHINATOWN. On a superficial level, CHINATOWN suggests that the rich get away with murder. They do indeed. But more profoundly
the film expresses the ubiquity of evil. In reality, because good and evil are equal parts of human nature, evil vanquishes good as often as good conquers evil. We’re both angel and devil. If our natures leaned just slightly toward one or the other, all social dilemmas would have been solved centuries ago. But we’re so divided, we never know from day to day which we’ll be. One day we build the Cathedral of Notre Dame; the next, Auschwitz.

“The power of nature will have the final say over mankind’s futile efforts.” When the Counter-Idea of survival films becomes the Controlling Idea, we have that rare “down-ending” movie in which again human beings battle a manifestation of nature, but now nature prevails: SCOTT OF THE ANTARCTIC, THE ELEPHANT MAN, EARTHQUAKE, and THE BIRDS, in which nature lets us off with a warning. These films are rare because the pessimistic vision is a hard truth that some people wish to avoid.

Ironic Controlling Ideas

“Up/down-ending” stories expressing our sense of the complex, dual nature of existence, a simultaneously charged positive and negative vision; life at its most complete and realistic.

Here optimism/idealism and pessimism/cynicism merge. Rather than voicing one extreme or the other, the story says both. The Idealistic “Love triumphs when we sacrifice our needs for others.” as in KRAMER VS. KRAMER, melds with the Pessimistic “Love destroys when self-interest rules,” as in THE WAR OF THE ROSES, and results in an ironic Controlling Idea: “Love is both pleasure and pain, a poignant anguish, a tender cruelty we pursue because without it life has no meaning,” as in ANNIE HALL, MANHATTAN, ADDICTED TO LOVE.

What follows are two examples of Controlling Ideas whose ironies have helped define the ethics and attitudes of contemporary American society. First, the positive irony:

The compulsive pursuit of contemporary values—success, fortune, fame, sex, power—will destroy you, but if you
see this truth in time and throw away your obsession, 
you can redeem yourself.

Until the 1970s an “up-ending” could be loosely defined as
“The protagonist gets what he wants.” At climax the protagonist’s 
object of desire became a trophy of sorts, depending on the value at 
stake—the lover of one’s dreams (love), the dead body of the villain 
(justice), a badge of achievement (fortune, victory), public recogni-
tion (power, fame)—and he won it.

In the 1970s, however, Hollywood evolved a highly ironic ver-
sion of the success story, Redemption Plots, in which protagonists 
pursue values that were once esteemed—money, reknown, career, 
love, winning, success—but with a compulsiveness, a blindness 
that carries them to the brink of self-destruction. They stand to lose, 
if not their lives, their humanity. They manage, however, to glimpse 
the ruinous nature of their obsession, stop before they go over the 
edge, then throw away what they once cherished. This pattern gives 
rise to an ending rich in irony: At climax the protagonist sacrifices 
his dream (positive), a value that has become a soul-corrupting fixa-
tion (negative), to gain an honest, sane, balanced life (positive).

THE PAPER CHASE, THE DEER HUNTER, KRAMER VS. 
KRAMER, AN UNMARRIED WOMAN, RO, AND JUSTICE FOR ALL, 
TERMS OF ENDEARMENT, THE ELECTRIC HORSEMAN, GOING 
IN STYLE, QUIZ SHOW, BULLETS OVER BROADWAY, THE 
FISHER KING, GRAND CANYON, RAIN MAN, HANNAH AND 
HER SISTERS, AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN, TOOTSIE, 
REGARDING HENRY, ORDINARY PEOPLE, CLEAN AND SOBER, 
NORTH DALLAS FORTY, OUT OF AFRICA, BABY BOOM, THE 
DOCTOR, SCHINDLER’S LIST, and JERRY MAGUIRE all pivot 
around this irony, each expressing it in a unique and powerful way. As 
these titles indicate, this idea has been a magnet for Oscars.

In terms of technique, the execution of the climactic action in 
these films is fascinating. Historically, a positive ending is a scene 
in which the protagonist takes an action that gets him what he 
wants. Yet in all the works cited above, the protagonist either 
refuses to act on his obsession or throws away what he once
desired. He or she wins by "losing." Like solving the Zen riddle of the sound of one hand clapping, the writer's problem in each case was how to make a nonaction or negative action feel positive.

At the climax of NORTH DALLAS FORTY All-Star wide receiver Phillip Elliot (Nick Nolte) opens his arms and lets the football bounce off his chest, announcing in his gesture that he won't play this childish game anymore.

THE ELECTRIC HORSEMAN ends as the former rodeo star Sonny Steele (Robert Redford), now reduced to peddling breakfast cereal, releases his sponsor's prize stallion into the wild, symbolically freeing himself from his need for fame.

OUT OF AFRICA is the story of a woman living the 1980s ethic of "I am what I own." Karen's (Meryl Streep) first words are: "I had a farm in Africa." She drag her furniture from Denmark to Kenya to build a home and plantation. She so defines herself by her possessions that she calls the laborers "her people" until her lover points out that she doesn't actually own these people. When her husband infects her with syphilis, she doesn't divorce him because her identity is "wife," defined by her possession of a husband. In time, however, she comes to realize you are not what you own; you are your values, talents, what you can do. When her lover is killed, she grieves but is not lost because she is not he. With a shrug, she lets husband, home, everything go, surrendering all she had, but gaining herself.

TERMS OF ENDEARMMENT tells of a very different obsession. Aurora (Shirley MacLaine) lives the Epicurean philosophy that happiness means never suffering, that the secret of life is to avoid all negative emotion. She refuses two renowned sources of misery, career and lovers. She's so afraid of the pain of growing old, she dresses twenty years too young for herself. Her home has the un-lived-in look of a doll's house. The only life she leads is over the telephone vicariously through her daughter. But on her fifty-second birthday she begins to realize that the depth of joy you experience is in direct proportion to the pain you're willing to bear. In the last act she throws away the emptiness of a pain-free life to embrace children, lover, age, and all the pleasure and woe they bring.
Second, the negative irony:

If you cling to your obsession, your ruthless pursuit will achieve your desire, then destroy you.

WALL STREET; CASINO; THE WAR OF THE ROSES; STAR '80; NASHVILLE; NETWORK; THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY?—these films are the Punitive Plot counterpart to the Redemption Plots above. In them the “down-ending” Counter-Idea becomes the Controlling Idea as protagonists remain steadfastly driven by their need to achieve fame or success, and never think to abandon it. At Story Climax the protagonists achieve their desire (positive), only to be destroyed by it (negative). In NIXON the president's (Anthony Hopkins) blind, corrupt trust in his political power destroys him and with him the nation's faith in government. In THE ROSE Rose (Bette Midler) is destroyed by her passion for drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll. In ALL THAT JAZZ Joe Gideon (Roy Scheider) is brought down by his neurotic need for drugs, sex, and musical comedy.

On Irony

The effect of irony on an audience is that wonderful reaction, “Ah, life is just like that.” We recognize that idealism and pessimism are at the extremes of experience, that life is rarely all sunshine and strawberries, nor is it all doom and drek; it is both. From the worst of experiences something positive can be gained; for the richest of experiences a great price must be paid. No matter how we try to plot a straight passage through life, we sail on the tides of irony. Reality is relentlessly ironic, and this is why stories that end in irony tend to last the longest through time, travel the widest in the world, and draw the greatest love and respect from audiences.

This is also why, of the three possible emotional charges at climax, irony is by far the most difficult to write. It demands the deepest wisdom and the highest craft for three reasons.

First, it's tough enough to come up with either a bright, idealistic ending or a sober, pessimistic climax that's satisfying and con-
vincing. But an ironic climax is a single action that makes both a positive and a negative statement. How to do two in one?

Second, how to say both clearly? Irony doesn't mean ambiguity. Ambiguity is a blur; one thing cannot be distinguished from another. But there's nothing ambiguous about irony; it's a clear, double declaration of what's gained and what's lost, side by side. Nor does irony mean coincidence. A true irony is honestly motivated. Stories that end by random chance, doubly charged or not, are meaningless, not ironic.

Third, if at climax the life situation of the protagonist is both positive and negative, how to express it so that the two charges remain separated in the audience's experience and don't cancel each other out, and you end up saying nothing?

MEANING AND SOCIETY

Once you discover your Controlling Idea, respect it. Never allow yourself the luxury of thinking, "It's just entertainment." What, after all, is "entertainment"? Entertainment is the ritual of sitting in the dark, staring at a screen, investing tremendous concentration and energy into what one hopes will be a satisfying, meaningful emotional experience. Any film that hooks, holds, and pays off the story ritual is entertainment. Whether it be THE WIZARD OF OZ (USA/1939) or THE 400 BLOWS (France/1959), LA DOLCE VITA (Italy/1960) or SNOW WHITE AND THE THREE STOOGES (USA/1961), no story is innocent. All coherent tales express an idea veiled inside an emotional spell.

In 388 B.C. Plato urged the city fathers of Athens to exile all poets and storytellers. They are a threat to society, he argued. Writers deal with ideas, but not in the open, rational manner of philosophers. Instead, they conceal their ideas inside the seductive emotions of art. Yet felt ideas, as Plato pointed out, are ideas nonetheless. Every effective story sends a charged idea out to us, in effect compelling the idea into us, so that we must believe. In fact, the persuasive power of a story is so great that we may believe its
meaning even if we find it morally repellent. Storytellers, Plato insisted, are dangerous people. He was right.

Consider DEATH WISH. Its Controlling Idea is “Justice triumphs when citizens take the law into their own hands and kill the people who need killing.” Of all the vile ideas in human history, this is the vilest. Armed with it, the Nazis devastated Europe. Hitler believed he would turn Europe into a paradise once he killed the people who needed killing... and he had his list.

When DEATH WISH opened, newspaper reviewers across the country were morally outraged at the sight of Charles Bronson stalking Manhattan, gunning down people if they happened to look like muggers: “Hollywood thinks this passes for justice?” they ranted. “Whatever became of due process of law?” But in nearly every review I read, at some point the critic noted: “... and yet the audience seemed to enjoy it.” A code for: “... and so did the critic.” Critics never cite the pleasure of the audience unless they share it. In spite of their scandalized sensibilities, the film got to them too.

On the other hand, I wouldn’t want to live in a country where DEATH WISH couldn’t be made. I oppose all censorship. In pursuit of truth, we must willingly suffer the ugliest of lies. We must, as Justice Holmes argued, trust the marketplace of ideas. If everyone is given a voice, even the irrationally radical or cruelly reactionary, humanity will sort through all possibilities and make the right choice. No civilization, including Plato’s, has ever been destroyed because its citizens learned too much truth.

Authoritative personalities, like Plato, fear the threat that comes not from idea, but from emotion. Those in power never want us to feel. Thought can be controlled and manipulated, but emotion is willful and unpredictable. Artists threaten authority by exposing lies and inspiring passion for change. This is why when tyrants seize power, their firing squads aim at the heart of the writer.

Lastly, given story’s power to influence, we need to look at the issue of an artist’s social responsibility. I believe we have no responsibility to cure social ills or renew faith in humanity, to uplift the spirits of society or even express our inner being. We have only one responsibility: to tell the truth. Therefore, study your Story
Climax and extract from it your Controlling Idea. But before you take another step, ask yourself this question: Is this the truth? Do I believe in the meaning of my story? If the answer is no, toss it and start again. If yes, do everything possible to get your work into the world. For although an artist may, in his private life, lie to others, even to himself, when he creates he tells the truth; and in a world of lies and liars, an honest work of art is always an act of social responsibility.