PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATIONS

The second element of the five-part design is Progressive Complications: that great sweeping body of story that spans from Inciting Incident to Crisis/Climax of the final act. To complicate means to make life difficult for characters. To complicate progressively means to generate more and more conflict as they face greater and greater forces of antagonism, creating a succession of events that passes points of no return.

Points of No Return

The Inciting Incident launches the protagonist on a quest for a conscious or unconscious Object of Desire to restore life’s balance. To begin the pursuit of his desire, he takes a minimum, conservative action to provoke a positive response from his reality. But the effect of his action is to arouse forces of antagonism from inner, personal, or social/environmental Levels of Conflict that block his desire, cracking open the Gap between expectation and result.

When the Gap opens, the audience realizes that this is a point of no return. Minimal efforts won’t work. The character can’t restore the balance of life by taking lesser actions. Henceforth, all action like the character’s first effort, actions of minor quality and magnitude, must be eliminated from the story.

Realizing he’s at risk, the protagonist draws upon greater willpower and capacity to struggle through this gap and take a
second, more difficult action. But again the effect is to provoke forces of antagonism, opening a second gap between expectation and result.

The audience now senses that this too is a point of no return. Moderate actions like the second won’t succeed. Therefore, all actions of this magnitude and quality must be eliminated.

At greater risk, the character must adjust to his changed circumstances and take an action that demands even more willpower and personal capacity, expecting or at least hoping for a helpful or manageable reaction from his world. But once more the gap flies open as even more powerful forces of antagonism react to his third action.

Again, the audience recognizes that this is yet another point of no return. The more extreme actions won’t get the character what he wants, so these too are canceled out of consideration.

Progressions build by drawing upon greater and greater capacities from characters, demanding greater and greater willpower from them, putting them at greater and greater risk, constantly passing points of no return in terms of the magnitude or quality of action.

A story must not retreat to actions of lesser quality or magnitude, but move progressively forward to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

How many times have you had this experience? A film begins well, hooking you into the lives of the characters. It builds with strong interest over the first half-hour to a major Turning Point. But then forty or fifty minutes into the film, it starts to drag. Your eyes wander from the screen; you glance at your watch; you wish you’d bought more popcorn; you start paying attention to the anatomy of the person you came with. Perhaps the film gains pace again and finishes well, but for twenty or thirty flabby minutes in the middle you lost interest.

If you look closely at the soft bellies that hang out over the belt of so many films, you’ll discover that this is where the writer’s insight and imagination went limp. He couldn’t build progressions, so in effect he put the story in retrograde. In the middle of Act Two he’s
given his characters lesser actions of the kind they've already done in Act One—not identical actions but actions of a similar size or kind: minimal, conservative, and by now trivial. As we watch, our instincts tell us that these actions didn't get the character what he wanted in Act One, therefore they're not going to get him what he wants in Act Two. The writer is recycling story and we're treading water.

The only way to keep a film's current flowing and rising is research—imagination, memory, fact. Generally, a feature-length Archplot is designed around forty to sixty scenes that conspire into twelve to eighteen sequences that build into three or more acts that top one another continuously to the end of the line. To create forty to sixty scenes and not repeat yourself, you need to invent hundreds. After sketching this mountain of material, tunnel to find those few gems that will build sequences and acts into memorable and moving points of no return. For if you devise only the forty to sixty scenes needed to fill the 120 pages of a screenplay, your work is almost certain to be antiprogressive and repetitious.

The Law of Conflict

When the protagonist steps out of the Inciting Incident, he enters a world governed by the Law of Conflict. To wit: Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict.

Put another way, conflict is to storytelling what sound is to music. Both story and music are temporal arts, and the single most difficult task of the temporal artist is to hook our interest, hold our uninterrupted concentration, then carry us through time without an awareness of the passage of time.

In music, this effect is accomplished through sound. Instruments or voices capture us and move us along, making time vanish. Suppose we were listening to a symphony and the orchestra suddenly fell silent. What would be the effect? First, confusion as we wonder why they've stopped, then very quickly we would hear in our imaginations the sound of a ticking clock. We would become acutely aware of the passage of time, and because time is so subjective, if the orchestra were silent for just three minutes, it would seem like thirty.
The music of story is conflict. As long as conflict engages our thoughts and emotions we travel through the hours unaware of the voyage. Then suddenly the film’s over. We glance at our watches, amazed. But when conflict disappears, so do we. The pictorial interest of eye-pleasing photography or the aural pleasures of a beautiful score may hold us briefly, but if conflict is kept on hold for too long, our eyes leave the screen. And when our eyes leave the screen they take thought and emotion with them.

The Law of Conflict is more than an aesthetic principle; it is the soul of story. Story is metaphor for life, and to be alive is to be in seemingly perpetual conflict. As Jean-Paul Sartre expressed it, the essence of reality is scarcity, a universal and eternal lacking. There isn’t enough of anything in this world to go around. Not enough food, not enough love, not enough justice, and never enough time. Time, as Heidegger observed, is the basic category of existence. We live in its ever-shrinking shadow, and if we are to achieve anything in our brief being that lets us die without feeling we’ve wasted our time, we will have to go into heady conflict with the forces of scarcity that deny our desires.

Writers who cannot grasp the truth of our transitory existence, who have been mislead by the counterfeit comforts of the modern world, who believe that life is easy once you know how to play the game, give conflict a false inflection. Their scripts fail for one of two reasons: either a glut of meaningless and absurdly violent conflict, or a vacancy of meaningful and honestly expressed conflict.

The former are exercises in turbo special effects, written by those who follow textbook imperatives to create conflict, but, because they’re disinterested in or insensitive to the honest struggles of life, devise phony, overwrought excuses for mayhem.

The latter are tedious portraits written in reaction against conflict itself. These writers take the Pollyanna view that life would really be nice... if it weren’t for conflict. Therefore, their films avoid it in favor of low-key depictions to suggest that if we learned to communicate a little better, be a little more charitable, respect the environment, humanity could return to paradise. But if history has taught us anything, it’s that when toxic nightmare is finally cleaned
up, the homeless provided shelter, and the world converted to solar energy, each of us will still be up to our eyebrows in mulch.

Writers at these extremes fail to realize that while the quality of conflict changes as it shifts from level to level, the quantity of conflict in life is constant. Something is always lacking. Like squeezing a balloon, the volume of conflict never changes, it just bulges in another direction. When we remove conflict from one level of life, it amplifies ten times over on another level.

If, for example, we manage to satisfy our external desires and find harmony with the world, in short order serenity turns to boredom. Now Sartre's "scarcity" is the absence of conflict itself. Boredom is the inner conflict we suffer when we lose desire, when we lack a lacking. What's worse, if we were to put on screen the conflictless existence of a character who, day-in, day-out, lives in placid contentment, the boredom in the audience would be palpably painful.

By and large, the struggle for physical survival has been eliminated for the educated classes of the industrialized nations. This security from the outside world gives us time to reflect on the world inside. Once housed, dressed, fed, and medicated, we take a breath and realize how incomplete we are as human beings. We want more than physical comfort, we want, of all things, happiness, and so begin the wars of the inner life.

If, as a writer, however, you find that the conflicts of mind, body, emotions, and soul do not interest you, then look into the Third World and see how the rest of humanity lives. The majority suffer short, painful existences, ridden with disease and hunger, terrorized by tyranny and lawless violence, without hope that life will ever be any different for their children.

If the depth and breadth of conflict in the inner life and the greater world do not move you, let this: death. Death is like a freight train in the future, heading toward us, closing the hours, second by second, between now and then. If we're to live with any sense of satisfaction, we must engage life's forces of antagonism before the train arrives.

An artist intent on creating works of lasting quality comes to realize that life isn't about subtle adjustments to stress, or hyper-
conflicts of master criminals with stolen nuclear devices holding cities for ransom. Life is about the ultimate questions of finding love and self-worth, of bringing serenity to inner chaos, of the titanic social inequities everywhere around us, of time running out. Life is conflict. That is its nature. The writer must decide where and how to orchestrate this struggle.

**Complication Versus Complexity**

To complicate a story the writer builds conflict progressively to the end of the line. Difficult enough. But the task increases geometrically when we take story from mere complication to full complexity.

Conflict may come, as we've seen, from any one, two, or all three of the levels of antagonism. To simply complicate a story means to place all conflict on only one of these three levels.

From the *Horror Film* to *Action/Adventure* to *Farce*, action heroes face conflict only on the extra-personal level. James Bond, for example, has no inner conflicts, nor would we mistake his encounters with women as personal—they're recreational.

**COMPLICATION:**

**CONFLICT AT ONLY ONE LEVEL**

**INNER CONFLICT — Stream of Consciousness**

**PERSONAL CONFLICT — Soap Opera**

**EXTRA-PERSONAL CONFLICT — Action/Adventure, Farce**

Complicated films share two hallmarks. The first is a large cast. If the writer restricts the protagonist to social conflict, he'll need, as the advertising declares, "a cast of thousands." James Bond faces arch-villains along with their minions, assassins, femmes fatale, and armies, plus helper characters and civilians needing rescue—
more and more characters to build more and more powerful conflicts between Bond and society.

Second, a complicated film needs multiple sets and locations. If the writer progresses via physical conflict, he must keep changing the environment. A Bond film might start in a Viennese opera house, then go to the Himalayas, across the Sahara Desert, under the polar ice cap, up to the moon, and down to Broadway, giving Bond more and more opportunities for fascinating feats of derring-do.

Stories that are complicated only on the level of personal conflict are known as *Soap Opera*, an open-ended combination of *Domestic Drama* and *Love Story* in which every character in the story has an intimate relationship with every other character in the story—a multitude of family, friends, and lovers, all needing sets to house them: living rooms, bedrooms, offices, nightclubs, hospitals. *Soap Opera* characters have no inner or extra-personal conflicts. They suffer when they don’t get what they want, but because they’re either good people or bad, they rarely face true inner dilemmas. Society never intervenes in their air-conditioned worlds. If, for example, a murder should bring a detective, a representative of society, into the story, you can be certain that within a week this cop will have an intimate and personal relationship with every other character in the *Soap*.

Stories that are complicated only on the level of inner conflict are not films, plays, or conventional novels. They’re prose works in the *Stream of Consciousness* genre, a verbalization of the inscape of thought and feeling. Again, a large cast. Even though we’re placed inside a single character, that character’s mind is populated with the memories and imaginings of everyone he has ever met or could hope to meet. What’s more, the density of imagery in the *Stream of Consciousness* work, such as *Naked Lunch*, is so intense that locations change, as it were, three or four times in a single sentence. A barrage of places and faces pours through the reader’s imagination, but these works are all on one, albeit richly subjective, level and, therefore, merely complicated.
COMPLEXITY:
CONFLICT AT ALL THREE LEVELS

INNER CONFLICT
PERSONAL CONFLICT
EXTRA-PERSONAL CONFLICT

To achieve complexity the writer brings his characters into conflict on all three levels of life, often simultaneously. For example, the deceptively simple but complex writing of one of the most memorable events in any film for the last two decades: the French toast scene from KRAMER VS. KRAMER. This famous scene turns on a complex of three values: self-confidence, a child’s trust and esteem for his father, and domestic survival. As the scene begins, all three are at the positive charge.

In the film’s first moments Kramer discovers his wife has left him and his son. He’s torn with an inner conflict that takes the form of doubts and fears that he’s in over his head versus a male arrogance telling him whatever women do is easy. As he opens the scene, however, he’s confident.

Kramer has personal conflict. His son is hysterical, afraid he’ll starve without his mother to feed him. Kramer tries to calm his son, telling him not to worry, Mom will be back, but meantime it’ll be fun, like camping out. The child dries his eyes, trusting his father’s promises.

Finally, Kramer has extra-personal conflict. The kitchen is an alien world, but he strolls into it as if he were a French chef.

Perching his son on a stool, Kramer asks what he wants for breakfast and the kid says, “French toast.” Kramer takes a breath, pulls out a frying pan, pours in some grease, puts the pan on the stove, and turns the flame to high while he looks for ingredients. He knows French toast involves eggs, so he searches the refrigerator and finds some, but doesn’t know into what to break them. He rummages in the cupboard and comes down with a coffee mug that reads “Teddy.”

The son sees the handwriting on the wall and warns Kramer that he’s seen his mother do this and she doesn’t use a mug. Kramer tells
him it’ll work. He cracks the eggs. Some actually gets into the mug, the rest makes a gooey mess . . . and the child starts to cry.

The grease starts to spatter in the frying pan and Kramer panics. It doesn’t occur to him to turn off the gas; instead, he engages in a race against time. He bangs more eggs into the mug, rushes back to the refrigerator, grabs a quart of milk, and slops it up and over the brim of the mug. He finds a butter knife to break up the yolks, making an even gooier mess. The child can see he is not going to eat this morning and cries his eyes out. The grease is now smoking in the pan.

Kramer, desperate, angry, losing the fight to control his fears, grabs a slice of Wonder Bread, stares at it, and realizes it won’t fit in the mug. He folds it in half and stuffs it in, coming up with a dripping handful of soggy bread, yolk, and milk that he flings at the griddle, spattering and burning him and the child. He snatches the pan from the stove, scalding his hand, clutches his son’s arm, and pushes him through the door, saying, “We’ll go to a restaurant.”

Kramer’s male arrogance is overwhelmed by his fears, his self-confidence turning positive to negative. He’s humiliated in front of his frightened child, whose trust and esteem turn positive to negative. He’s defeated by a seemingly animated kitchen, as blow by blow, eggs, grease, bread, milk, and pan send him stumbling out the door, turning domestic survival from positive to negative. With very little dialogue and the simple activity of a man trying to make breakfast for his son, the scene becomes one of the most memorable in film—a three-minute drama of a man in simultaneous conflict with the complexities of life.

Unless it’s your ambition to write in the Action genres, Soap Opera, or Stream of Consciousness prose, my advice to most writers is to design relatively simple but complex stories. “Relatively simple” doesn’t mean simplistic. It means beautifully turned and told stories restrained by these two principles: Do not proliferate characters; do not multiply locations. Rather than hopscotching through time, space, and people, discipline yourself to a reasonably contained cast and world, while you concentrate on creating a rich complexity.
Act Design

As a symphony unfolds in three, four, or more movements, so story is told in movements called acts—the macro-structure of story.

Beats, changing patterns of human behavior, build scenes. Ideally, every scene becomes a Turning Point in which the values at stake swing from the positive to the negative or the negative to the positive, creating significant but minor change in their lives. A series of scenes build a sequence that culminates in a scene that has a moderate impact on the characters, turning or changing values for better or worse to a greater degree than any scene. A series of sequences builds an act that climaxes in a scene that creates a major reversal in the characters’ lives, greater than any sequence accomplished.

In the Poetics, Aristotle deduces that there is a relationship between the size of the story—how long it takes to read or perform—and the number of major Turning Points necessary to tell it: the longer the work, the more major reversals. In other words, in his polite way, Aristotle is pleading, “Please don’t bore us. Don’t make us sit for hours on those hard marble seats listening to choral chants and laments while nothing actually happens.”

Following Aristotle’s principle: A story can be told in one act—a series of scenes that shape a few sequences that build up to one major reversal, ending the story. But if so, it must be brief. This is the prose short story, the one-act play, or the student or experimental film of perhaps five to twenty minutes.

A story can be told in two acts: two major reversals and it’s over. But again it must be relatively brief: the sitcom, the novella, or hour-length plays such as Anthony Shaffer’s Black Comedy and August Strindberg’s Miss Julie.

But when a story reaches a certain magnitude—the feature film, an hour-long TV episode, the full-length play, the novel—three acts is the minimum. Not because of an artificial convention, but to serve a profound purpose.

As audience we embrace the story artist and say: “I’d like a poetic experience in breadth and depth to the limits of life. But I’m a reasonable person. If I give you only a few minutes to read or witness your
work, it would be unfair of me to demand that you to take me to the limit. Instead I’d like a moment of pleasure, an insight or two, no more than that. But if I give you important hours of my life, I expect you to be an artist of power who can reach the boundaries of experience.”

In our effort to satisfy the audience’s need, to tell stories that touch the innermost and outermost sources of life, two major reversals are never enough. No matter the setting or scope of the telling, no matter how international and epic or intimate and interior, three major reversals are the necessary minimum for a full-length work of narrative art to reach the end of the line.

Consider these rhythms: Things were bad, then they were good—end of story. Or things were good, then they were bad—end of story. Or things were bad, then they were very bad—end of story. Or things were good, then they were very good—end of story. In all four cases we feel something’s lacking. We know that the second event, whether positively or negatively charged, is neither the end nor the limit. Even if the second event kills the cast: Things were good (or bad), then everyone died—end of story—it’s not enough. “Okay, they’re all dead. Now what?” we’re wondering. The third turn is missing and we know we haven’t touched the limit until at least one more major reversal occurs. Therefore, the three-act story rhythm was the foundation of story art for centuries before Aristotle noted it.

But it’s only a foundation, not a formula, so I’ll begin with it, then delineate some of its infinite variations. The proportions I’ll use are the rhythms of the feature film, but in principle they apply equally to the play and novel. Again, I caution that these are approximations, not formulas.

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**INCITING INCIDENT**

Central Plot:

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<th>Act I</th>
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The first act, the opening movement, typically consumes about 25 percent of the telling, the Act One Climax occurring between twenty and thirty minutes into a 120-minute film. The last act wants to be the shortest of all. In the ideal last act we want to give the audience a sense of acceleration, a swiftly rising action to Climax. If the writer tries to stretch out the last act, the pace of acceleration is almost certain to slow in mid-movement. So last acts are generally brief, twenty minutes or less.

Let’s say a 120-minute film places its Central Plot’s Inciting Incident in the first minute, the Act One Climax at the thirty-minute point, has an eighteen-minute Act Three, and a two-minute Resolution to FADE OUT. This rhythm creates an Act Two that’s seventy minutes long. If an otherwise well-told story bogs down, that’s where it’ll happen—as the writer sloshes through the swamps of the long second act. There are two possible solutions: Add subplots or more acts.

Subplots have their own act structure, although usually brief. Between the central plot’s three-act design above, let’s weave three subplots: a one-act Subplot A with an Inciting Incident twenty-five minutes into the film, climaxing and ending at sixty minutes; a
two-act Subplot B with an Inciting Incident at the fifteen-minute point, an Act One Climax at forty-five minutes, ending with an Act Two Climax at seventy-five minutes; a three-act Subplot C is with its Inciting Incident happening inside the Inciting Incident of the Central Plot (lovers meet, for example, and start a subplot in the same scene cops discover the crime that launches the central plot), an Act One Climax at fifty minutes, an Act Two Climax at ninety minutes, and a third act climaxing inside the Central Plot's last Climax (the lovers decide to marry in the same scene that they apprehend the criminal).

Although the Central Plot and three subplots may have up to four different protagonists, an audience could empathize with all of them, and each subplot raises its own Major Dramatic Question. So the interest and emotions of the audience are hooked, held, and amplified by four stories. What's more, the three subplots have five major reversals that fall between the Central Plot's Act One and Act Two climaxes — more than enough storytelling to keep the overall film progressing, deepen the involvement of the audience, and tighten the soft belly of the Central Plot's second act.

On the other hand, not every film needs or wants a subplot: THE FUGITIVE. How then does the writer solve the problem of the long second act? By creating more acts. The three-act design is the minimum. If the writer builds progressions to a major reversal at the halfway point, he breaks the story into four movements with no act more than thirty or forty minutes long. David's collapse after performing Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in SHINE is a superb example. In Hollywood this technique is known as the Mid-Act Climax, a term that sounds like sexual dysfunction, but means a major reversal in the middle of Act Two, expanding the design from three acts to an Ibsen-like rhythm of four acts, accelerating the mid-film pace.

A film could have a Shakespearean rhythm of five acts: FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL. Or more. RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK is in seven acts; THE COOK, THE THIEF, HIS WIFE & HER LOVER in eight. These films turn a major reversal every fif-
teen or twenty minutes, decisively solving the long second act problem. But the five- to eight-act design is the exception, for the cure of one problem is the cause of others.

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<th>SHINE: INCITING INCIDENT</th>
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<td>Act III</td>
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FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL:

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<th>INCITING INCIDENT</th>
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THE COOK, THE THIEF, HIS WIFE & HER LOVER:

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<th>INCITING INCIDENT</th>
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First, the multiplication of act climaxes invites clichés.

Generally, a three-act story requires four memorable scenes: the Inciting Incident that opens the telling, and an Act One, Act Two, and Act Three Climax. In the Inciting Incident of KRAMER VS. KRAMER Mrs. Kramer walks out on her husband and her son. Act One Climax: She returns, demanding custody of the child. Act Two Climax: The court awards custody of the son to his mother. Act Three Climax: Like her ex-husband, she realizes that they must act selflessly for the best interest of the child they love and returns the boy to Kramer. Four powerful turning points spanned with excellent scenes and sequences.
When the writer multiplies acts, he's forcing the invention of five, perhaps six, seven, eight, nine, or more brilliant scenes. This becomes a creative task beyond his reach, so he resorts to the clichés that infest so many action films.

**Second, the multiplication of acts reduces the impact of climaxes and results in repetitiousness.**

Even if the writer feels he's up to creating a major reversal every fifteen minutes, turning act climaxes on scenes of life and death, life and death, life and death, life and death, life and death, seven or eight times over, boredom sets in. Before too long the audience is yawning: "That's not a major turn. That's his day. Every fifteen minutes somebody tries to kill the guy."

What is major is relative to what is moderate and minor. If every scene screams to be heard, we go deaf. When too many scenes strive to be powerhouse climaxes, what should be major becomes minor, repetitious, running downhill to a halt. This is why a three-act Central Plot with subplots has become a kind of standard. It fits the creative powers of most writers, provides complexity, and avoids repetition.

**Design Variations**

First, stories vary according to the number of major reversals in the telling: from the one- or two-act design of Miniplots, LEAVING LAS VEGAS, through the three- or four-acts plus subplots of most Archplots, THE VERDICT, to the seven or eight acts of many action genres, SPEED, to the helter-skelter patterns of Antiplots, THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE, and beyond to Multiplot films that have no Central Plot, THE JOY LUCK CLUB, but may contain a dozen or more major Turning Points over their various story lines.

Second, the shapes of stories vary according to the placement of the Inciting Incident. Conventionally, the Inciting Incident occurs very early in the telling and progressions build to a major
reversal at the Act One Climax twenty or thirty minutes later. This pattern requires the writer to place two major scenes in the first quarter of the film. However, the Inciting Incident may enter as late as twenty, thirty, or more minutes into the telling. ROCKY, for example, has a very late-arriving Central Plot Inciting Incident. The effect of this is that the Inciting Incident becomes, in effect, the first act Climax and serves two purposes.

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<th>ROCKY:</th>
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<td>Adrian’s Subplot:</td>
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<td>Inciting Incident</td>
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This, however, cannot be done for the convenience of the writer. The only reason to delay the entrance of the Central Plot is the audience’s need to know the protagonist at length so it can fully react to the Inciting Incident. If this is necessary, then a setup subplot must open the telling. ROCKY has one, the Adrian/Rocky Love Story; CASABLANCA uses five with Laszlo, Ugarte, Yvonne, and the Bulgarian wife as single protagonists and refugees as the plural protagonist. Story must be told to hold the audience while it waits for a late-arriving Central Plot to ripen.

Suppose, however, the ripe moment is reached somewhere between the first and thirtieth minute. Does a film then need a setup subplot to carry the opening? Maybe . . . maybe not. The Inciting Incident of THE WIZARD OF OZ occurs at the fifteen-minute mark when a cyclone carries Dorothy (Judy Garland) to Munchkinland. There’s no subplot to set this up, rather we’re held by dramatized exposition of her longing to go “somewhere over the rainbow.” In ADAM’S RIB the Inciting Incident also arrives fifteen minutes into the film, as district attorney Adam Bonner (Spencer Tracy) and his defense attorney wife Amanda (Katharine Hepburn)
discover themselves on opposing sides of a trial. In this case, the film opens with a setup subplot as defendant (Judy Holliday) discovers her husband's philandering and shoots him. This hooks and carries us to the Central Plot's Inciting Incident.

With an Inciting Incident at the fifteen-minute point, does the writer need a major reversal at the thirty-minute point? Maybe ... maybe not. In THE WIZARD OF OZ Dorothy is threatened by the Wicked Witch of the West, given the red slippers, and sent on her quest along the yellow brick road fifteen minutes after the Inciting Incident. In ADAM’S RIB the next major reversal of the Central Plot happens forty minutes after the Inciting Incident when Amanda wins a key point in court. However, a relationship subplot complicates this stretch as a composer (David Wayne), to Adam's great annoyance, flirts openly with Amanda.

The rhythm of act movements is established by the location of the Central Plot's Inciting Incident. Act structure, therefore, varies enormously. The number and placement of the major reversals for both main plot and subplots are choices made in the creative play between artist and material, depending on quality and number of protagonists, sources of antagonism, genre, and, ultimately, the personality and worldview of the writer.

**False Ending**

Occasionally, especially in Action genres, at the Penultimate Act Climax or within the last act's movement, the writer creates a False Ending: a scene so seemingly complete we think for a moment the story is over. E.T. is dead—end of movie, we think. In ALIEN Ripley blows up her spaceship and escapes, we think. In ALIENS she blows up an entire planet and escapes, we hope. In BRAZIL Jonathan (Sam Lowry) rescues Kim (Jill Layton) from a tyrannical regime, the lovers embrace, happy ending... or is it?

TERMINATOR devised a double False Ending: Reese (Michael Biehn) and Sarah (Linda Hamilton) blow up the Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) with a tankard of gasoline, its flesh burning away. The lovers celebrate. But then the chrome inner
version of this half-man/half-robot rises out of the flames. Reese sacrifices his life to put a pipe bomb in the belly of the Terminator and blow it in half. But then the creature’s torso revives and crawls claw over claw toward the wounded heroine until Sarah finally destroys him.

False Endings may even find their way into *Art Films*. Near the climax of *JESUS OF MONTREAL* Daniel (Lothaire Bluteau), an actor playing Christ in a Passion Play, is bludgeoned by his falling crucifix. Other actors rush him unconscious to the emergency room, but he awakes, resurrected, we pray.

Hitchcock loved False Endings, placing them unconventionally early for shock effect. The “suicide” of Madeleine (Kim Novak) is the Mid-Act Climax of *VERTIGO* before she reappears as Judy. The shower murder of Marion (Janet Leigh) marks the Act One Climax of *PSYCHO*, suddenly shifting genres from *Caper* to *Psycho-Thriller* and switching protagonists from Marion to a plural protagonist of the dead woman’s sister, lover, and a private eye.

For most films, however, the False Ending is inappropriate. Instead, the Penultimate Act Climax should intensify the Major Dramatic Question: “Now what’s going to happen?”

**Act Rhythm**

Repetitiousness is the enemy of rhythm. The dynamics of story depend on the alternation of its value-charges. For example, the two most powerful scenes in a story are the last two act climaxes. Onscreen they’re often only ten or fifteen minutes apart. Therefore, they cannot repeat the same charge. If the protagonist achieves his Object of Desire, making the last act’s Story Climax positive, then the Penultimate Act Climax must be negative. You cannot set up an up-ending with an up-ending: “Things were wonderful . . . then they got even better!” Conversely, if the protagonist fails to achieve his desire, the Climax of the Penultimate Act cannot be negative. You cannot set up a down-ending with a down-ending: “Things were terrible . . . then they got even worse.” When emotional experience repeats, the power of the second event is cut in half. And if
the power of the Story Climax is halved, the power of the film is halved.

On the other hand, a story may climax in irony, an ending that's both positive and negative. What then must be the emotional charge of the Penultimate Climax? The answer's found in close study of the Story Climax, for although irony is somewhat positive, somewhat negative, it should never be balanced. If it is, the positive and negative values cancel each other out and the story ends in bland neutrality.

For example, Othello finally achieves his desire: a wife who loves him and has never betrayed him with another man—positive. However, when he discovers this, it's too late because he's just murdered her—an overall negative irony. Mrs. Soffel goes to prison for the rest of her life—negative. But she goes into jail with her head up because she's achieved her desire, the transcendent romantic experience—an overall positive irony. With careful thought and feeling the writer studies his irony to make certain it leans one way or the other, and then designs a Penultimate Climax to contradict its overall emotional charge.

Working back from the Penultimate Climax to the opening scene, previous act climaxes are further apart, often with subplot and sequence climaxes coming into emotional play between them, creating a unique rhythm of positive and negative turnings. Consequently, although we know that the Ultimate and Penultimate Climaxes must contradict each other, from story to story there is no way to predict the charges of the other act climaxes. Each film finds its own rhythm and all variations are possible.

Subplots and Multiple Plots

A subplot receives less emphasis and screentime than a Central Plot, but often it's the invention of a subplot that lifts a troubled screenplay to a film worth making. WITNESS, for example, without its Love Story subplot of big-city cop and Amish widow would be a less than compelling Thriller. Multiplot films, on the other hand, never develop a Central Plot; rather they weave
together a number of stories of subplot size. Between the Central Plot and its subplots or between the various plot lines of a Multiplot, four possible relationships come into play.

A subplot may be used to contradict the Controlling Idea of the Central Plot and thus enrich the film with irony.

Suppose you were writing a happy-ending Love Story with the Controlling Idea "Love triumphs because the lovers sacrifice their needs for each other." You believe in your characters, their passion and self-sacrifice, yet you feel the story's becoming too sweet, too pat. To balance the telling, you might then create a subplot of two other characters whose love ends tragically because they betray each other out of emotional greed. This down-ending subplot contradicts the up-ending Central Plot, making the film's overall meaning more complex and ironic: "Love cuts two ways: we possess it when we give it freedom, but destroy it with possessiveness."

Subplots may be used to resonate the Controlling Idea of the Central Plot and enrich the film with variations on a theme.

If a subplot expresses the same Controlling Idea as the main plot, but in a different, perhaps unusual way, it creates a variation that strengthens and reinforces the theme. All the many love stories in A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, for example, end happily—but some sweetly, some farcically, some sublimely.

The principle of thematic contradiction and variation is the genesis of Multiplot films. A Multiplot has no Central Plot Spine to structurally unify the telling. Instead, a number of plot lines either cross-cut, as in SHORT CUTS, or connect via a motif such as the twenty-dollar bill that passes from story to story in TWENTY BUCKS or the series of swimming pools that link the tales in THE SWIMMER—a collection of "ribs" but no individual plot line
strong enough to carry from first scene to last. What then holds the film together? An idea.

PARENTHOOD plays variations on the notion that in the game of parenthood you cannot win. Steve Martin plays the world's most attentive father whose child still ends up in therapy. Jason Robards plays the world's most neglectful father whose kid comes back late in life needing him, then betraying him. Dianne Wiest portrays a mother who tries to make all the safe life decisions for her child, but the child knows better than she does. All parents can do is love their children, support them, pick them up when they fall. But there's no such thing as winning this game.

DINER resonates with the idea that men cannot communicate with women. Fenwick (Kevin Bacon) cannot bring himself to speak to a woman. Boogie (Mickey Rourke) talks nonstop to women, but only to get them into bed. Eddie (Steve Guttenberg) won't marry his fiancée until she can pass a test in football trivia. When Billy (Timothy Daly) faces his emotional issues with the woman he loves, he lets his guard down and talks honestly with her. Once able to communicate with a woman, he leaves his friends—a resolution that contradicts all others to add a layer of irony.

The Multiplot frames an image of a particular society, but, unlike the static Nonplot, it weaves small stories around an idea, so that these group photos vibrate with energy. DO THE RIGHT THING depicts the universality of big-city racism; SHORT CUTS landscapes the soullessness of the American middle class; EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN paints a triptych of the father/daughter relationship. Multiplot gives the writer the best of both worlds: a portrait that captures the essence of a culture or community along with ample narrative drive to compel interest.

When the Central Plot's Inciting Incident must be delayed, a setup subplot may be needed to open the storytelling.

A late-arriving Central Plot—ROCKY, CHINATOWN, CASABLANCA—leaves a story vacuum for the first thirty minutes that
must be filled by subplots to engage the audience's interest and acquaint it with the protagonist and his world in order to evoke a full reaction to its Inciting Incident. A setup subplot dramatizes the Central Plot's exposition so that it's absorbed in a fluid, indirect manner.

A subplot may be used to complicate the Central Plot.

This fourth relationship is the most important: use of the subplot as an additional source of antagonism. For example, the Love Story typically found inside Crime Stories: In SEA OF LOVE Frank Keller (Al Pacino) falls in love with Helen (Ellen Barkin). While hunting down her psychotic ex-husband, he risks his life to protect the woman he loves. In BLACK WIDOW a federal agent (Debra Winger) becomes infatuated with the killer herself (Theresa Russell). In THE VERDICT, a Courtroom Drama, Frank (Paul Newman) falls in love with Laura (Charlotte Rampling), a spy from the opposing law firm. These subplots add dimension to characters, create comic or romantic relief from the tensions or violence of the Central Plot, but their primary purpose is to make life more difficult for the protagonist.

The balance of emphasis between the Central Plot and subplot has to be carefully controlled, or the writer risks losing focus on the primary story. A setup subplot is particularly dangerous in that it may mislead the audience as to genre. The opening Love Story of ROCKY, for example, was carefully handled so that we knew we were heading for the Sports Genre.

Additionally, if the protagonists of the Central Plot and subplot are not the same character, care must be taken not to draw too much empathy to the subplot's protagonist. CASABLANCA, for example, has a Political Drama subplot involving the fate of Victor Laszlo (Paul Heinreid) and a Thriller subplot centered on Ugarte (Peter Lorre), but both were deemphasized to keep the emotional spotlight on the Central Plot's Love Story of Rick (Humphrey Bogart) and Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman). To deemphasize a subplot, some of its elements—Inciting Incident, act climaxes, Crisis, Climax, or Resolution—may be kept offscreen.
If, on the other hand, as you develop your screenplay, your subplot seems to demand greater focus and empathy, then reconsider the overall design and turn your subplot into the Central Plot.

If a subplot doesn’t thematically contradict or resonate the Controlling Idea of the main plot, if it doesn’t set up the introduction of the main plot’s Inciting Incident, or complicate the action on the main plot, if it merely runs alongside, it will split the story down the middle and destroy its effect. The audience understands the principle of aesthetic unity. It knows that every story element is there because of the relationship it strikes to every other element. This relationship, structural or thematic, holds the work together. If the audience can’t find it, it’ll disengage from the story and consciously try to force a unity. When this fails, it sits in confusion.

In the screen adaptation of the best-selling Psycho-Thriller THE FIRST DEADLY SIN, the Central Plot takes a police lieutenant (Frank Sinatra) on the hunt for a serial killer. In a subplot, his wife (Faye Dunaway) is in intensive care with only weeks to live. The detective hunts for the killer, then commiserates with his dying wife; he hunts the killer, then reads to his wife; he hunts for the killer some more, then visits her in the hospital again. Before long this alternating story design ignited a burning curiosity in the audience: When will the killer come to the hospital? But he never does. Instead, the wife dies, the cop catches the killer, plot and subplot never connect, and the audience is left in disgruntled confusion.

In Lawrence Sanders’ novel, however, this design succeeds with powerful effect because on the page main plot and subplot complicate each other in the mind of the protagonist: the cop’s fierce preoccupation with a psychotic killer conflicts with a desperate desire to give his wife the comfort she needs, while at the same time his dread of losing her and the pain of watching the woman he loves suffer contradicts his need for clear, rational deduction in pursuit of a ruthless but brilliant lunatic. A novelist can enter a character’s mind and in first- or third-person delineate inner conflict directly in prose description. The screenwriter cannot.

The screenwriting is the art of making the mental physical. We create visual correlatives for inner conflict—not dialogue or narra-
tion to describe ideas and emotions, but images of character choice and action to indirectly and ineffably express the thoughts and feelings within. Therefore, the interior life a novel must be reinvented for the screen.

In adapting Manuel Puig’s novel KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN, screenwriter Leonard Schrader was faced with a similar structural problem. Once again, main plot and subplot complicate one another only within the mind of the protagonist. The subplot, in fact, is Luis’ (William Hurt) fantasies of the Spider Woman (Sonia Braga), a character he idolizes, drawn from films he vaguely remembers and greatly embellishes. Schrader visualizes Luis’ dreams and desires by turning his fantasy into a film-within-the-film.

Still, these two plots cannot causally interact because they’re on different planes of reality. They are connected, however, by making the subplot’s story mirror the Central Plot. This gives Luis the chance to act out his fantasy in reality. At that moment the two plots collide in Luis’ psyche and the audience imagines the emotional battle raging within: Will Luis do in life what the Spider Woman did in his dreams? Will he too betray the man he loves? What’s more, the two plotlines ironize the Controlling Idea of Love Through Self-sacrifice and give the film an added thematic unity.

There’s yet another revealing exception in the design of KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN. In principle, the Central Plot’s Inciting Incident must be onscreen. But here the Inciting Incident is not revealed until the Mid-Act Climax. In the Backstory Luis, a homosexual convict imprisoned in a fascist dictatorship, is called into the warden’s office and made this offer: A leftist revolutionary, Valentin (Raul Julia), will be put in his cell. If Luis spies on him and gets valuable information, the warden will give Luis his freedom. The audience, unaware of this deal, waits through the first hour of the film to finally discover this Central Plot when Luis visits the warden asking for medicine and camomile tea for the ailing Valentin.

For many this film began so tediously they nearly walked out. So why not open conventionally with the Inciting Incident, as does the novel, and start the story with a strong hook? Because, if
Schrader had placed the scene in which Luis agrees to spy on a freedom fighter at the opening of the film, the audience would have instantly hated the protagonist. With a choice of a fast opening versus empathy for the protagonist, the screenwriter violated the design of the novel. While the novelist used inner narration to gain empathy, the screenwriter knew that he would first have to convince the audience that Luis loved Valentin before revealing Luis’ pact with the fascists. The right choice. Without empathy the film would be a hollow exercise in exotic photography.

Faced with irreconcilable choices, such as pace versus empathy, the wise writer redesigns the story to preserve what’s vital. You’re free to break or bend convention, but for one reason only: to put something more important in its place.