

Theme & Scene: The Magic of Nuts & Bolts Week Three

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.
— William Shakespeare

This week we'll continue to focus on improving our scenes and also look at different kinds of scenes. If you've done the exercises, you realize that it's not that easy to compose tight scenes. When you start working with directors and actors, the material goes through another translation: From page to stage. There can be a leap here. Usually, there's too much text on the page and cuts are made in the material. Other times, there might be a jarring transition from one beat to the next or a beat missing and you'll have to stitch in language to smooth out the transition.

If you haven't done any acting or directing, you may want to think about taking a class in both disciplines. The director's job is to physicalize the text and create a cohesive vision of the story. The actor's job is to move from beat to beat—also making his/her own choices—and breathe life into the material.

Lecture Three: Dialogue & Image Systems

Some people have a natural "ear" for dialogue. They can jot down dialogue on a cocktail napkin and it sparkles. It pops right off the page. My mentor in New York used to say that David Mamet had an ear the size of a cauliflower. Does Mamet write natural dialogue? No. It's highly stylized. But his language is like music. The rhythms are so precise that it takes a certain kind of actor to translate his words to the stage. Some people have to develop their "ear" and learn how to "turn a phrase." It takes time and practice, but you can learn how to write good dialogue.

I always do the first line well, but I have trouble doing the others.
— Molière

Crafting Dialogue

Although dialogue should sound like people "talking," dialogue isn't conversation.

- **Conversation is grease...
...that lubricates social interactions.**

Sometimes it has an agenda, something it doesn't. Sometimes, it's logical, sometimes not. Much of time, it's mundane. As boring as it is to watch people working at the 9-5 jobs, it can be as tedious to listen to strangers talking in everyday life. Most people tend to have the same conversations with the same people about the same thing day after day—i.e., they repeat themselves.

- **Dialogue is fuel...**
...to throw into the fire of a scene.

It's action/reaction—an exchange or transaction. It always has an agenda. Its purpose is either to move the scene forward, reveal character or information, or evoke a mood or attitude. Often it's used as subterfuge for real thoughts and feelings. Sometimes what is left unsaid in a scene is more important than what's said.

Dialogue is important in all mediums, however each medium utilizes dialogue in different proportions. (See table below.) Stage plays are almost all dialogue whereas the focus of film is on visuals. Television is closer to 50-50 which is why many playwrights work in that medium. It's a natural transition from stage.

Medium	Dialogue	Visuals
Radio plays	100%	0%
Stage plays	80-90%	10-20%
Television	50-60%	40-50%
Film	10-20%	80-90%
Silent Film	0%	100%

What is good dialogue?

In film, dialogue tends to be highly naturalistic. In contrast, the dialogue can be highly stylized in theatre. Regardless of the medium, strong material usually has a strong "voice." I've detailed a few traits of good dialogue below, however, I've found that the best way to develop an ear is to read scripts and continually write dialogue until the skill becomes instinct. As well, dialogue is sheer right brain. The minute you overthink it, the dialogue will flatten out.

Purpose

Dialogue has to serve a purpose whether it's to move a scene forward, reveal character or evoke a mood. Hence, every line must be motivated. There's always an agenda behind the words.

- Reveal character
- Move the story forward
- Magnify theme
- Evoke tone or mood

Direction

Dialogue can be used to move a scene in a certain direction. Simply put, Character A says (using so many tactics to get it): I want that. Character B says: "No".... or "Yes, but...." (the terms change) Hence, there is a shift in the direction of the action.

Compression/Economy

The goal in dramatic narrative is to achieve maximum impact with the fewest words. Compared to conversation, dialogue is compressed and economical.

Why? Most people see a film, TV show or play...once. For an hour or two, you've got their attention. You have to make sure that the dialogue is actually heard and understood because the next beat is right around the corner. (Even so, I often hit the "rewind" button on my remote control to catch a line I've missed.)

In Classical Greek Theatre, playwrights employed the art of “stichomythia” or the rapid exchange of short speeches. (See *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus.) Ideas are broken down into brief and simply constructed sentences or even phrases of language. The audience catches on to the meaning over the course of the exchange as opposed to being inundated with language in one speech.

Now you might assume that the rapid development of technology and the maturation of the MTV generation would lead to even speedier and more staccato exchanges in contemporary dramatic narrative. Have you ever seen *THE PHILADELPHIA STORY* (1940)? The dialogue in movies from that era was delivered with the kind of pace and timing that you rarely see in film today.

Remember that directors and actors may pare down your lines in order to:

- Accelerate the pace of the scene (boost the energy)
- Define key moments or turning points
- Refine the timing of exchanges between characters (excess or loose language can significantly slow the action...and “kill a beat”)
- Pinpoint those exchanges where a “look” or a pause works better than language (film/TV - so much is communicated visually on screen that dialogue becomes superfluous)

Evidently, successful scripts use about a quarter of that which is spoken in casual conversation.

Also remember how people speak:

- Rarely talk in complete sentences
- Cut each other off
- Talk over each other
- Talk while not listening to each other

Aaron Sorkin (creator of *WEST WING* and *STUDIO 60*) is superb at turning a phrase. See below:

EXCERPT – WEST WING PILOT

...Josh looks up. Donna’s standing in the doorway with a mug of coffee. Josh stops the tape.

DONNA: You should have worn that tie on television. It bleeds.

JOSH: I don’t think the tie was what got me in trouble.

DONNA: Yeah, but I’ve told you a zillion times.

JOSH: What’s that?

DONNA: It’s coffee.

JOSH: What’s going on, Donna?

DONNA: Nothing’s going—

JOSH: Donna—

DONNA: I brought you some coffee.

JOSH: Close the door.

(Donna closes the inner office door.)

JOSH: Donnatella Moss. When did you start working for me?

DONNA: During the campaign.

JOSH: And how long have you been my assistant?

DONNA: Two and a half years.

JOSH: And when was the last time you brought me a cup of coffee?

(Donna thinks...)

JOSH: It was never, you've never brought me a cup of coffee.

DONNA: If you're gonna made a big deal out of—

JOSH: Donna. If I get fired I get fired.



Director: LOUDER! FASTER! FUNNIER!

Rhythm

There are natural cadences to language. And dialogue, like music, is orchestrated. In particular, the dialogue of plays creates images. It's poetic whether or not it's written in verse or has a defined meter.

Delineate Character

Patterns of speech, vocabulary, syntax, rhythm and choice of subject not only help to define the milieu of your story but also differentiate one character from another.

Dialogue reveals character background (education, ethnicity, nationality, etc.), attitudes and idiosyncrasies. In other words, it **builds character credibility**. Ideally, each character should have his/her own "voice." You should be able to mask your eyes and discern who's talking in dramatic material based on their unique way of speaking. Compare the two examples below:

SCENE EXCERPT 1:

(Note: NOT IN TELEPLAY FORMAT)

MAHAFFEY: My leg! It's broken! Oh fuck, oh fuck, the bone's coming through!

(Tony starts punching him in the face briskly and efficiently.)

TONY: (punching) I'll give you a fuckin' bone. Where's my money?

(The secretary comes up, watches in horror. One of the Lexus' headlights hangs on by its wires and Chris broken-heartedly tries to put it back in.)

MAHAFFEY: I'll get the money!

TONY: (punching but tiring) I know you'll get the—(sees Chris fussing over car) The fuck you doing? Get over here.

(Chris crosses, takes over the physical labour—kicking Mahaffey in chest and stomach while Tony catches his breath and picks up where he left off—)

TONY: I know you'll get the money. What you ought to fuckin' get is a fuckin' cork to put in your mouth.

(US/HMO EMPLOYEES watch from windows.)

TONY: (as he and Chris kick in Mahaffey's ribs) Huh? You tell people I'm nothin' to worry compared to who used to run things?

MAHAFFEY: I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

(Tony heads back to the car. Chris' eyes rest on the eyes of Mahaffey's young, horrified secretary. Chris gets in car.)

MAHAFFEY: (screaming) My leg. Omigod! Fuck!

TONY: (sees US/HMO sign) HMO. What are you fuckin' crying about? At least you're covered.

(From: *THE SOPRANOS, PILOT*)

SCENE EXCERPT 2:

(Note: NOT IN SCREENPLAY FORMAT)

INT. DINING ROOM – EVENING

PHILIP crosses to a sideboard, studies something we don't see under a cloth. DAISY's (his mother) deciding the seating.

PHILIP: Put them next to Virginia. That's what the poor brats want.

DAISY: Well, we can't always have what we want, you know that, Philip... Thank you, Ashton.

ASHFORD: Ashford, madam.

DAISY: Thank you, Ashford. All looks splendid.

(Ashford leaves. The candles blaze on the table, leaving the room quite dark beyond. Silver screams. Twenty place settings. DAISY scans.)

DAISY: You were saying, Philip...

PHILLIP: Mother, there are things you should know.

DAISY: Things?

PHILLIP: About me. (takes out his gold case, lights a cigarette) There's someone I care for very much. In town. Someone I in a way live with, but can't marry.

DAISY: So, marry someone you can. That needn't be affected. I assume she's an understanding sort of person...?

PHILIP: It's a man. [beat turn]

DAISY: What's a man? (She looks at him. He's very straight, serious.) Oh, I see. (A sudden extraordinary cackle.) What, you mean you're a mashed potato? [revelation]

PHILIP: Not exclusively. But yes.

DAISY: I see. So?

PHILIP: It's impossible.

DAISY: No, it isn't. (moves around the table) When I was nineteen and just married, I watched the fourth baronet, your father's father, do it to a sheepdog in the Orangery. [character secret] (deliberate pause) You are the only person I have ever told. (pause) You have only to state your terms.

(From COUNTRY: 'A TORY STORY' by Trevor Griffiths, a teleplay about the English upper class and the passing of the torch)

Specificity – Character, Milieu and Activity

Dialogue should not only capture the specificity of the milieu and character, but also of the activities/work that the characters are engaged in.

For example, in THE COLOR OF MONEY (Woodward, Cruise) about pool sharks, the dialogue reflects an expertise on the game of pool as well as the competitive world of pool. When your dialogue reveals specific knowledge about a particular activity, the audience will sit up...usually because they haven't heard it before. Make sure the "lingo" is authentic.

On the other hand, too much lingo can lose the audience. It's a balance between creating a specific world and ensuring that the audience understands what's being said.

Dialogue Do's

Experienced writers use several devices to pop dialogue. As you immerse yourself in writing, you'll begin to see ways to condense and load language, set up a joke, accelerate pace, etc.

Builds & Climaxes – Big Moments, Big Scenes

In general, dialogue leading up to an explosion of emotion tends to accelerate into very quick exchanges until it bursts. Excess language slows the acceleration.

As well, the more overwhelming the emotion, the less articulate the character becomes. (The age of Shakespeare is long past.) In other words, raw, volcanic or primal emotions are usually expressed with equally primal language. Sometimes the final note is just a sound—a scream, a grunt, a howl.

Excerpt from Streetcar Named Desire, Act III, Scene 4. The rape scene. Note Blanche's language.

BLANCHE

(at phone) Operator, operator! Give me long distance, please—I want to get in touch with Mr. Shep Huntleigh of Dallas. He's so well-known he doesn't require any address. Just ask anybody who—Wait!! No, I couldn't find right now—please understand—I—No! No!—Wait! I can't! I can't!

(Blanche puts down phone, trembling. A man runs in, followed by three thugs who attack him. More police whistles. Men vanish and there is an excited murmur of voices. Wounded man staggers off. BLANCHE, frightened, goes to her trunk, takes up jewel-box and a couple of gowns, goes onto porch where she comes face to face with the muggers just before they go out. She rushes back into the apartment, leaving door open. Goes once more to phone, kneels beside it, clutching her possessions.)

BLANCHE

Operator! Operator! Never mind long distance. Get Western Union. There isn't time to be—Western—Western Union. (pause) Union? Yes! I want to—Take down this message: "In desperate, desperate circumstances! Help me! Caught in a trap! Caught in—(hears sound from bathroom door) Oh!

(Stanley emerges from bathroom. He has put out bathroom light. He is dressed in his red silk pajamas. He grins at BLANCHE, who rises, backs away from phone, etc...)

Note: Blanche is terrified. Her language becomes stilted, jarring, and less articulate.

Wind-ups

Often used in comedy (Jackie Gleason as king of the wind-up), these long speeches are delivered at breakneck pace. The character becomes more wound up like a balloon inflating to a breaking point. The other character in the scene becomes so taxed that he/she inevitably slams the break on the tirade with a pungent one-liner—i.e., a jab that bursts the balloon.

Excerpt from *Plenty* (Scene 7) by David Hare

(Note: Susan and Brock are married.)

SUSAN

Is it getting a little bit chilly in here? October nights. Those poor parachutists. I do know how they feel. Even now. Cities. Fields. Trees. Farms. Dark spaces. Lights. The parachute opens. We descend. (beat) Of course, we were comparatively welcome, not always ecstatic, not the Gaullists, of course, but by and large we did make it our business to land in countries where we were wanted. Certainly the men were. I mean, some of the relationships, I can't tell you. I remember a colleague telling me of the heat, of the smell of a particular young girl, the hot wet smell, he said. Nothing since. Nothing since then. I can't see the Egyptian girls somehow...no. Not in Egypt now. I mean, there were broken hearts when we left. I mean, there are girls today who mourn the Englishmen who died in Dachau, died naked in Dachau, men with whom they had spent a single night. Well. (tears are streaming down her face, she can barely speak) But then...even for myself I do like to make a point of sleeping with men I don't know. I do find once you get to know them you usually don't want to sleep with them anymore...

(Brock gets up and shouts at the top of his voice across the room.)

BROCK

Please can you stop, can you stop fucking talking for five fucking minutes on end?

Questions & Dangers

Questions will provoke a reaction. One of the most famous opening lines is in *Hamlet* when Bernardo asks: "Who's there?" Dangers are unfinished sentences which delay meaning and compel the opposing character to respond. (McKee calls them "suspense sentences"...I just call them danglers...)

EXAMPLE: From *Dalliance* by Tom Stoppard (opening)

(Note: I have spelled out language in red that Stoppard has deftly not written.)

(The reception room of Fritz's flat. There is a table to eat at, and a sideboard, etc. There is a piano. There is a divan. French doors at the back give on to a terrace or garden partly visible to us. There are doors to a kitchen and to a lobby leading to the street. Fritz is discovered practicing marksmanship with a dueling pistol. The Manservant is on hand to bring the paper target back to Fritz for his inspection, and to reload the pistol while Fritz takes a second shot with the second of the pair of Pistols. Fritz aims and fires for the second time. The Manservant brings the target for the second time. It is clear from the way Fritz inspects the target that he is not much of a shot. There does not appear to be a hole in the target at all. Before Fritz shoots again, he steps forward for a shorter range, then shoots. Theodore enters the room from the lobby. He is wearing a coat or cloak. He sees Fritz and calls to him.)

THEODORE

Fritz!

(Fritz turns to him holding the gun.)

THEODORE

Don't shoot!

FRITZ

I don't.

THEODORE

What exactly...? [Dangler...What exactly are you doing with that gun?]

FRITZ

Sport. And what...? [Dangler...What do you want?]

THEODORE

Supper.

FRITZ

I'm afraid I... [Dangler...I can't go]

THEODORE

It's all arranged.

FRITZ

All right. Where are we going? Did you keep the cab?

THEODORE

No.

Questions in dialogue can also be used as hooks or cliffhangers at the ends of scenes (particularly effective in film and TV). The audience holds their breath until they see the answer to the question in the subsequent scene. In the case of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses a question to set up the opening scene about the "ghost."

Shorthand

When people are familiar, they speak in shorthand. There's no need to spell out their intentions in the same way that strangers must communicate new information to each other. Too often a character will voice an intention to another character, and you'll inevitably hear a good actor say: Wouldn't he/she already know that? As the writer, you're walking a tightrope. You need enough language to activate relationships between characters and, at the same time, anchor the audience re what's happening in the scene.

Apparent Repetition

In general, when characters (or the same character) repeat an idea verbatim or in slightly different phrasing in the scene, redundant lines can be cut. However, line repetition can be used to build tension in a scene, establish the vocal rhythms of characters, or indicate a shift in intention or subtext. Mamet and Sorkin use line repetition effectively. As well, a character might tell the same story in different scenes but alter lines in ways that indicate a ruse. (Ex: BIG DADDY's speech in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Tennessee Williams.)

Dialogue Don'ts

Telegraphing

Avoid handholding the audience by pointing out a shift or event that they are already anticipating. For instance, you give away the surprise of a beat turn if the character says: "And you didn't realize that I'm actually..." Or "Look it's a plane!"... when the plane is already flying overhead... unless it's Superman.

Transition Lines

Similarly, transition lines such as "And next we move on to..." Just use a pause which heightens the anticipation and gives the next line more punch.

One-sided Exchange

One character is actually delivering a monologue and the other character is a foil. For example, a character is telling a story and the other character peppers the speech with lines such as: "And then what?"... "Oh, really?"... "And so?"

Redundancy/Repeat Beats

Several sentences are used to convey one idea that can be expressed with a single sentence. Or the same tactic is used in multiple beats. In the former case, you probably have too much subtext on top of the page. In the latter, you're repeating beats. These are typical problems that weigh down a first draft. In revisions, you can push the text down and cut repeat beats.

On-the-nose Dialogue

These are lines where characters are saying exactly what they are thinking and feeling. There are times when on-the-nose dialogue is necessary and appropriate. We'll cover this topic in the next section on the Subtext vs. Text.

There are several other potholes in the use of dialogue. As you grow more experienced as a writer, you'll see them coming from afar.

Subtext versus Text / Indirect Conflict

In life, people often battle over insignificant things when they wish to avoid a confrontation over the real problem. The real issue is too painful, awkward or uncomfortable.

This is known as **indirect conflict**.

For instance, we veil our anger or hurt by acting out in passive-aggressive ways. Instead of complaining about the long hours we have to put into a project at work, we'll commit underhanded acts of sabotage—e.g., not answer the phone when the boss is calling, take extra-long coffee breaks. If we suspect our lover of infidelity, we'll forget to bring our credit card if we're paying for a meal. If we're in pain, we may go on a drunken binge or laugh it off. On the flip side, we'll hide our feelings when we are deeply in love.

Hence, we'll find indirect ways of expressing our feelings without having to stand on a steep ledge.

Hidden thoughts, feelings and intentions are known as subtext.

While it might be difficult to cope with indirect conflict in real life, it's interesting, complex behavior to watch on stage and on screen.

In the plays of Shakespeare, subtext is text. Characters speak what they're thinking and feeling. It's poetic and powerful, but not necessarily realistic. This style of writing changed with the arrival of Harold Pinter.

A British playwright, Pinter pushed the text below the surface of the scene and focused on character behavior to reveal intention. What was actually being said in the scene (the text) reflected the many defenses, ruses and disguises that human beings use in real life to avoid direct conflict.

Harold Pinter delivered a speech entitled 'Writing for the Theatre' at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol (1962).

Pinter observed that, in life, 'the more acute the experience the less articulate its expression'.

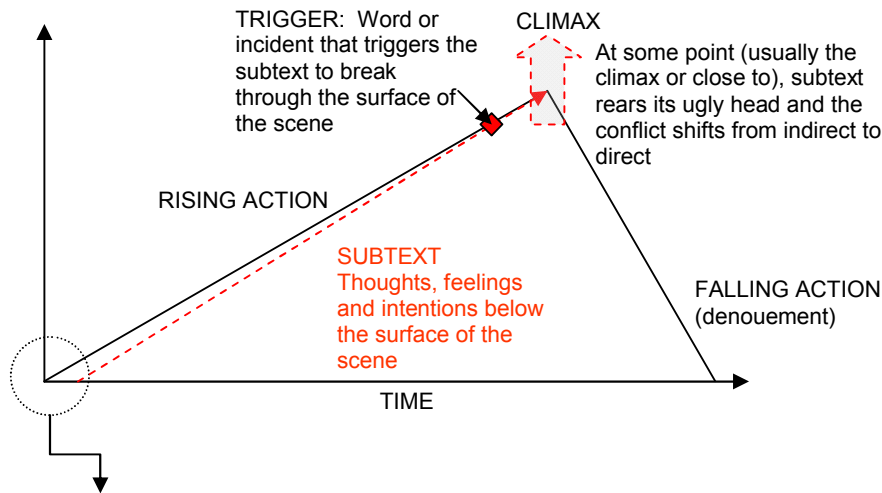
People in real life contemplating suicide may well show very few outward signs of their anguish or their intentions, while a character like Hamlet, in an extremely 'artificial' way, may inform an audience of the pros and cons of suicide in heightened poetic language that is both aesthetically pleasing and highly articulate.



Harold Pinter giving a speech at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962

At some point in the scene, the subtext usually rears its ugly head and breaks through the surface. (See the excerpt from *Betrayal* by Pinter.) As well, a word or incident will trigger the subtext to pop out, thus shifting the conflict from indirect to direct, as shown in the BASIC SCENE DIAGRAM below (we all now know that scene twists and turns like a slippery soap). If the subtext doesn't pop out, the scene remains enigmatic and often incomprehensible to the audience.

SCENE STRUCTURE - SUBTEXT



SET UP GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCES

- Dramatic Situation
- Passover Question
- Character Need

For an example of subtext in film, read *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN*. The opening scenes between Ennis and Jack are loaded. In fact, this is a film that hinges on subtext – i.e., what isn't spoken, what can't be said.

Staged Readings

Round up good actors to do readings of new material. Not only will good actors let you know when a beat is working or not, they will invent moments and interpret your lines in ways that you can't begin to anticipate. So much of what we write is unconscious. In fact, the best writing usually shoots out of the unconscious mind. As well, there is leap from "page to stage." You'll find yourself cutting and smoothing out transitions when working with actors. And always treat them like gems!

Description - Film

How you write visual description of action in a film script is known as the writer's "style."

Unlike plays which pay very little attention to description of visuals (Shakespeare's famous line: "Exit chased by a bear."), **film scripts have to create the experience of watching the film** for the reader.

Moreover, description of action in films changes over time. CUT TOs that William Goldman used in scripts in the 1970s are no longer used in today. According to the current trend, the master style:

- Chunks description into brief paragraphs that indicate camera angle, distance and composition
- Uses terse sentences with active verbs
- Employs character descriptions that are "essence" statements – a brief sentence that captures the essence of the character in a memorable way (as opposed to appearance)
- Leverages minor slug lines or CAPS to focus the eye on critical objects or location changes within the scene
- Provide plenty of white space so that the read is exciting and quick

Eliminate:

- Is / Was / Are – Static or passive sentence structure
- Literary language – Metaphors, similes, etc. unless they are spot-on re helping us visualize or hear what’s going on in the scene
- “We see” and “We hear” – Not being used in scripts these days.
- Camera and Editing directions (PAN, REVEALS, CUT TOs, DISSOLVES, etc.)

To keep abreast of trends, read contemporary scripts.

RECOMMENDATION

An effective exercise to learn how to write visually (other than inking torturous visual exercises) is to follow a film with script in hand. (McKee urges all writers to study film in this manner.) **This exercise—4-6 months on a weekly basis—will give you an invaluable education on film.**

Image Systems - Film

Film is image and sound. To a great extent, the composition of image and sound is the domain of the director. The screenwriter, however, is responsible for creating the world in which your characters live and breathe. In the same way that every line of dialogue must move the story forward, every image and sound is selected to also move the story forward. Think of the work of great painters:



Jackson Pollack



Picasso – Blue Period



Picasso – Cubism

You won’t find a blue-tinted guitar in a Jackson Pollack painting. You won’t find a wild spray of drips in a painting done in the style of cubism. The palette—colors, lines, shapes, etc.--used for each painting is purposefully limited in order to achieve a cohesive vision.

In everyday life, we’re barraged by images and sounds. Most of the time, we barely notice our surroundings. We tune in on only the external information that we need to conduct our lives. In film, images and sounds are not only reduced substantially, but heightened to achieve poetic expression.

Symbols

Definition: Objects, characters, figures, animals, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

Visual images or sounds which deepen the meaning of the story, reflect character or theme, or advance the action are known as symbols.

Character Identity & Values

Examples of symbols in recent films are:

- Golden dome of City Hall in THE DEPARTED (dir. Martin Scorsese)
 - Reflects ambition of Matt Damon's character
- Golden star in NOTES OF A SCANDAL (dir. Richard Eyre)
 - Reflects infantile obsession of Barbara, Judi Dench's character
- Robert Duval's mint julep drink in THANK YOU FOR SMOKING
 - What else would you drink if your breath is tainted with smoke and tar?

For those of you with acting backgrounds, it's the personal prop that you use to reveal character.

Theme

Symbols that reflect the theme of the film go beyond the concerns of individual characters. For example:

- Stag that is shot in THE QUEEN (dir. Stephen Frears)
 - The Queen herself is a symbol of the monarchy. However, since we're watching a film about the Queen, the stag represents the wounded monarch.
- Buck that DeNiro doesn't shoot at the end of DEER HUNTER
 - From killer to saviour, Deniro's transformation...his soul...is not only reflected by his action...but by the deer itself. Turning away from death, he embraces life.

EXCERPT – DEER HUNTER

EXT. MOUNTAINS - FROZEN LAKE - DAY

The wind is blowing in gusts, slanting the snow first one way and then the other. NICK appears in the distance, a black speck in the endless expanse of shifting white. As NICK draws closer we see that he is near exhaustion. His clothes are caked with snow, his breath comes in a shallow gasp and his gait is uneven, favoring one leg.

As NICK APPROACHES CAMERA HE FALTERS AND LIMPS TO A STOP. There are no tracks. There is nothing to go by and he hunkers down in the driving snow. The wind bangs in from one way, then it shifts and bangs in again from another way. Suddenly it stops entirely. In the silence there is a sound -- the click of a hoof on rock. NICK turns. The BUCK is standing on the shoreline, not thirty feet away, looking down at him. NICK pushes himself to his feet, raises his rifle and sights down the barrel.

WE SEE THE BUCK THROUGH NICK'S SIGHTS. IT IS A CLEAR SHOT. NICK'S FINGER IS ON THE TRIGGER. HE HAS ONLY TO SQUEEZE IT. NICK LOWERS HIS RIFLE. THE BUCK SNORTS, TOSSES HIS HORNS AND DISAPPEARS IN THE SLANTING SNOW. NICK STANDS MOTIONLESS, STARING AFTER IT, SO WONDER-STRUCK HE HAS FORGOTTEN TO BREATHE.

NICK (grins): Damn... God damn...

Action

Symbolic objects are planted early in story and return later to be used by the character in an action. For instance, in *LAST TANGO IN PARIS* (dir. Bertolucci), we learn that Jeanne's (Maria Schneider) dead father was in the military. His hat and his gun are shown early in the film. In the final scene:

Paul (Brando) puts on the Colonel's kepi (the French military hat that had belonged to Jeanne's father) and says, "How do you like your hero? Over easy or sunny side up?"

Jeanne (Maria Schneider) then uses her father's gun to kill Paul (who has been, throughout the film, a reenactment of a desperate need for a father who pays attention to her).

Motifs

Definition: The repetition of an element in ways that acquire symbolic meaning and that help to inform, develop and reinforce the film's major themes. A motif can be a technical feature (shot angle, lighting), sound, music, or an object.

Each genre employs different motifs. From revenge motifs in film noir to wilderness motifs in adventure movies, the use of recurring elements unifies the narrative.

Since this isn't a class on genre, I don't have the room to expand on this subject. Pick up *Alternative Screenwriting* by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush or attend Robert McKee's seminar on "Genre." It's essential that screenwriters know the rules of each genre.

Image Systems

Definition: The orchestration of various motifs to illuminate theme, enhance the visual elements of the story, and create a consistent and vivid world for the film.

Images are repeated or echoed in multiple variations.

Often films employ several motifs that weave together, providing parallelisms and contrasts that deepen our understanding of the story. In *NOTES OF A SCANDAL*, there are:

- Sterile school environment of the working class
 - Barren corridors, metal doors, grey skies, shabby classrooms
- Dark, seedy underworld where the Teacher (Blanchett) and the Boy meet and have sex
 - Train tracks, tunnels, gritty paths, dark foggy nights
- Warm, bright world of the Teacher's (Blanchett) home
 - Overstuffed couches, messy lived-in rooms, books willy nilly, etc.
- Shadowy, pristine world of Barbara's (Dench) home
 - Stark rooms (signaling deprivation), ordered bookshelves, dark furniture

How these motifs are arranged and juxtaposed provide us with a layered world. See the image stills from *BLADERUNNER*. A quick scan of the images impacts the eye in a startling way. The visuals have been carefully composed. In sum, an image system boosts the credibility and vividness of the world in the film.

Week Three Assignments

ASSIGNMENT A:

Write a **4-5-page scene** using **ONLY DIALOGUE**. **2-3 characters**. Stitch in a dramatic situation (DS), passover question (PQ), and a deep character need. Leverage setting. Turn the scene.

Build your skills. Next challenge:

- ❖ Use subtextual language.
- ❖ Give your characters a specific activity – pool playing, painting the house, peeling vegetables, etc. (A brilliant scene in the movie, *DIVA*, revolved around a man cutting French bread and explaining his philosophy of life.)

ASSIGNMENT B:

Write a 2-3 page scene using **ONLY VISUALS**. No dialogue. Make sure that you reveal the DS, PQ and character need via a progression of visual images. Use standard screenplay format. Leverage setting and turn the scene.

Build your skills. Next challenge:

- ❖ Reveal subtext via setting, objects, character behaviour and choices.

Subtext: What *seems* is not what *is*.

Example: (NOT IN SCREENPLAY FORMAT)

- Central London. Woman on bus rocking a baby in a blanket.
- Man in back of bus recognizes her – an old flame. His face lights up.
- Bus comes to a standstill on a jam-packed street.
- Day of massive protest. Anti-War protesters swarm around cars, causing the slow-down in traffic.
- Irritated, the woman takes out her cell phone and punches numbers. Hangs up.
- Man stands up, trying to get her attention.
- She jumps out of her seat with the baby.
- She strides up to the front of the bus and yanks the lever to open the doors.
- The young man lurches out of the bus and tries to connect with her.
- Street. He manages to grab the end of her skirt.
- She swivels around and recognizes him. Flustered, she pulls her skirt away from him. Warning: Leave me alone. Or is it? She darts away from him and into the crowd.
- He doesn't give up. Tails her. She turns, glancing at him. Eyes tearing.
- In desperation, she flings the baby at the man. He catches it. A toy. Fake!
- She races away, disappearing into the crowd.
- BOMB BLAST!
- Man is flung backward, clutching the baby doll.

NOTE: Since we are not all using the same hardware or software, please make sure to post your submissions in Rich Text File or PDF.

Good luck!

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