

Write
Screenplays
That Sell
The *Ackerman* Way
Revelations of a Remarkable Teacher

Hal Ackerman



Copyright © 2003 by Hal Ackerman

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means: electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or in any fashion whatsoever, without the prior written permission of the Publisher.

Published by
Tallfellow® Press, Inc.
1180 S. Beverly Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90035
www.Tallfellow.com

ISBN: 1-931290-52-0

Printed in USA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue by Pamela Gray	ix
Prologue by Sacha Gervasi	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
Part One Before You Can Be a Screenwriter	1
Chapter 1: Can Writing Be Taught?	3
Chapter 2: A Word or Two About the Writer's Life and the Industry We Love	9
Chapter 3: Why We Don't Write	17
Chapter 4: Why We Write	21
Chapter 5: What a Screenplay Isn't	27
Chapter 6: What a Screenplay Is	39
Chapter 7: What Story Isn't	51
Chapter 8: What Story Is	63
Part Two The Big Picture: Story Structure	73
Chapter 9: Act One	75
Chapter 10: Acts Two and Three	101
Chapter 11: Snowplow, Scene Cards and Scenograms	117
Part Three The Small Picture: Scene Writing	141
Chapter 12: Dancing the Wadoogie	143
Chapter 13: The Components of Scene Writing	169
Chapter 14: Tricks, Techniques and Stunning Acts of Legerdemain	199
Part Four "The Rees": Research and Rewriting	225
Chapter 15: Research	227
Chapter 16: Rewriting	230
Part Five Afterthoughts and Additions	241
Chapter 17: On Writing the Short Film	243
Chapter 18: Living Your Writing Life	247
Epilogue	253
Appendix A: Web Sites for Research	255
Appendix B: Eavesdropper Journal Scenes	259
Appendix C: Ages of Writers When They Won Their Academy Awards	265

CHAPTER 2

A Word or Two About the Writer's Life and the Industry We Love

Screenwriting is unique in the arts. It is the only medium where the writer's original material is looked upon as a mere suggestion. The spurious notion that film is a "director's medium" is so widely accepted that it is barely questioned. How that has come to be true is a study in successful marketing and brainwashing. There certainly is not the slightest bit of creative logic behind it. Leonard Bernstein did not rewrite Beethoven. He played all the notes. He did not say, "Does it have to be a hymn? Does it have to be to joy?"

Any argument put forward justifying the auteur myth breaks down when we look at television. Television is no different than cinema in any meaningful way except that the screens are smaller (and even that distinction is disappearing as TV screens get bigger and movie screens shrink). Television is now known as a writer's medium.

Stay for the final credits of any film. The last item onscreen will read: "For purposes of copyright, the author of this screenplay is..." and the next word will not be the screenwriter's name. It will be the name

of the film company. Once a film is made, we do not own the copyright. This business practice allows film companies to hire and fire us at will, and makes every screenwriter a whore, however high priced.

By contrast, the Dramatists Guild's Minimum Basic Agreement—the document that exists between producing entities and playwrights—forbids any changes from being made to the writer's text without consent and prohibits shared writing credit being claimed by anyone making solicited or unsolicited contributions.

So why aren't we all writing plays?

Look at next weekend's movie box-office grosses. The nationwide audience on the first weekend for any reasonably successful film exceeds the total number of people who saw all of Shakespeare's plays during his lifetime. The situation is even worse for writers of prose fiction. As in any field, there are a few superstars making strabucks, but brilliant writers who publish stories in literary journals in order to make a modest living need merely to write and sell ten short stories every day.

The film business dangles that big, bright shining bauble, the possibility of riches and fame, in front of us. With possibility comes hope, and with hope, delusion. Let's say it once. Financial success and popular recognition will *never* be mathematically probable. Enough new screenplays are registered at the Writers Guild by January 19 of any given year to satisfy the full slate of films that will be made and released that year.

For those of you who haven't fainted yet, the employment situation is not quite as bleak as that. For better or for worse (you decide), nearly every film employs the services, and sometimes the very highly priced services, of a large number of writers, some of whom are credited onscreen and others who are not.

The January 19 statistic also does not take into account all the many, many, many, many original screenplays purchased or optioned each

year but not made, nor all the assigned (and often highly paid) adaptations of existing works of fiction, nonfiction and theater that are commissioned but not made. Purchasers do not like to advertise how many failed ventures they invest money and time in, but the ratio of films made to projects receiving any financial development is, conservatively, 1 to 1,000.

It also does not include that great Golden Goose, television. Scores of writers are employed through network and cable, long-form and short-form, fiction- and reality-based writing for television. Thousands more are re-compensated in the form of royalties and residuals.

There are livings to be made.

How does your work get the best shot it can possibly get? How can you make your work good enough to get into the ballgame, to get the encouragement or attention that might lead to its getting bought, which may lead to its getting made, or to your getting hired to write something on assignment?

How can you get good enough? How can you be a better writer three months from now than you are right now? And how can you be a better writer three months after that?

You're standing on a ladder. Your ability is on one rung and your aspirations to how well you would like to write are several rungs higher. Each script you write with full commitment will allow you to climb a rung or two. But that very act will also raise the level of your aspirations. There will always be a disparity between how good you are and how good you can imagine yourself being. Your aspirations will nearly always be out of the reach of your ability to attain them, but this is the irritation in the oyster that creates the pearl.

A classic *Honeymooners* episode called "Young Man with a Horn" has Ralph Kramden struggling through the entire show to hit a high note on his cornet. But it keeps eluding him as the cornet squeaks

horribly, making his eyes bulge and his face turn red. At the climax of the story, he picks up the instrument for one last try. And this time, waveringly for a moment, he reaches the note. And the triumphant last line is, “Well, that’s a piece of it, Alice.”

All that work for just a piece of it. Is it worth it? Prudent friends or family members might think not. The only relevant question is: Do you? Are you willing to pay the price? Make no mistake; there will be a price to pay. It will be a long road (one hopes) whose ultimate destination at this moment is unknown. There will be more moments of frustration than of celebration. If getting just “a piece of it” is all you can hope for, will that be reward enough for you?

What you can’t know until you have experienced it is how good it feels. Hitting a piece of that note. Writing one true line. A scene that takes an unexpected, unplanned turn into a depth you’ve never explored. There are few areas of human endeavor that reach down into our deepest souls. Love. War. Art. Athletics. War is too dangerous, so let’s cut that out, and love comes only to the lucky. That leaves athletics and art, and brings us back to the notion of the writers gym.

Would you decide one day to build a house by hand, possessing only the lumber and tools you happen to be shouldering at that moment? Or, mesmerized by the beauty of a figure skater, would you buy a costume and a pair of blades and think you could compete in the Olympics? Skaters, gymnasts, concert pianists—all of them put in their twelve-hour days and six-day weeks tooling the machinery of their bodies into implements of their craft. Should a writer do any less?

Let’s not kid ourselves. We are competing in the screenwriting Olympiad. Buying this book is like buying a membership in that writers gym. It contains instructions for using the apparatus that will hone and strengthen and develop all the specific muscle groups of screenwriting: **story structure (The Big Picture)**, **scene writing (The Small Picture)**, **narrative and descriptive writing and dialogue**. In addition, there are discussions of the Short Film, research, rewrites, and living the writer’s life.

You don't lose weight by purchasing a membership or buying cool-looking workout clothes. *Looking* at those machines will not take any inches off your flabby waist or add a centimeter to your spindly triceps. You've got to work them. You've got to show up every day and get sweaty. This book is not an electric stimulator that gives your abs the equivalent workout of a thousand crunches. It is not a miracle diet that promises results without exercise or restraint. **Writing is harder than it looks.**

Do you remember the fable about the shoemaker who set all his leather out on his workbench at night, and returned in the morning to find all the shoes and boots mended by elves? I have tried that. I have stacked all my rough notes alongside my computer screen and gone to sleep in hopes that the following morning I would find that the elves had turned them into five brilliant pages.

But no. The sad and lovely truth, my friends, is this: WE ARE THE ELVES.

WHY YOU NEED THIS BOOK

The phrase "Wow, wouldn't that be a great idea for a screenplay" has propelled many writers to jump into a script with no more forethought than what a pair of teenagers gives to raising a child as they tear each other's clothes off. Procreators and writers both trust that the purity of their spontaneous eruption will contain within its nucleus all the nourishment and guidance needed for a healthy outcome. Judging by the vast numbers of messed-up kids and crappy screenplays, I'd have to say maybe not.

We all know how to write the English language. We have all been possessed of the brilliant lightbulb of an idea. We believe that these two items in the presence of expensive formatting software are all the materials necessary to produce a good screenplay.

If only there was a recipe! Two pounds thin fillet. Half a cup of grated onions. A teaspoon of salt. Bake in a 350° oven for 27 minutes. But alas, no, that is not the way the creative process works. And therein lies the essential schizophrenia facing the screenwriter in Hollywood. *We* want to make each one by hand. *They* want them manufactured uniformly. With the increasing corporate ownership of film studios, the corporate ethos is being imposed on their movie “product.” Notions of branding, of the niche marketplace, are the concerns imposed on that product, one which the screenwriter still feels is a work of passion.

An executive at McDonald’s once declared that their corporate goal was to make a McDonald’s meal in Austin, Texas, taste exactly the same as anywhere in the world. They have an elaborate 20-step process for making their french fries that begins with the exact size and weight and shape of the potatoes, and those steps are adhered to in every franchise from Boston to Bangkok. Studio executives salivate at the thought of being able to exercise such precise control over the operation, and to be able to perfectly predict the resulting product!

But where in the pantry do you look for a dash of humor, a pinch of compassion, a cup of insight? Where do you read how much to put in when it says “season to taste”? Are the ingredients fresh? How long should it bake?

Writers want to say what’s never been said. Executives want what they’ve already heard. The majority of produced screenplays are the genetically impaired results of the crossbreeding of those two species. Do you doubt it? Open the Sunday entertainment section. Check out the ads for all the movies playing. How many of them would you consider going to? Of those you’ve seen, how many have disappointed you?

For the duration of our time together, we are going to suspend our disbelief about the industry. We are going to believe we are priming ourselves to practice our craft in an industry where crap does not

rule, where quality is not an impediment, and where the joyful pursuit of excellence is a worthy aspiration. I want to feel confident that when you are asked to reach for greatness, you'll be ready.

My own screenwriting guru is Napoleon Bonaparte. When he was asked to define his military strategy, his reply was, "If you wish to take Vienna, *take Vienna!*"

How does that anthem apply on our battlefield? It means don't be timid. Take chances. Spread your wings. Even the smallest film is larger than the largest life. Rip your chest open. A little wider. Reach down inside. A little deeper. Fear not. Take Vienna.

WRITERS GYM EXERCISE

Self-Portrait/Writers Anthem

Visual artists do self-portraits. Writers write about why they write. Why do you write? What are your goals, professionally and personally? Write your anthem. Why *you* write. What do you hope to get from the process, from the result?

If you don't go shopping for it, it won't be in your basket.

CHAPTER 3

Why We Don't Write

IMMUTABLE RULE #1: In order to have written a screenplay, you first must actually **WRITE** a screenplay. All the words. All 110 pages. It's frightening. No wonder every writer does his or her best to avoid it. You know the writer's proverb: "Never put off 'till tomorrow what you can put off to next week." There are countless good reasons for procrastinating. Some are socially meaningful, like feeding the homeless. Washing graffiti off buildings. Working an extra shift.

On the first day of class I pass out index cards and ask my students to write down what they do to procrastinate. Here is a partial list from a recent group:

Research. Clean house. Practice trombone. Surf the Net. Watch TV. Hang out with friends. E-mail. Play video games. See movies. Shop. Make phone calls. Build things. Think about writing. Talk about writing. Network. Give up. Raise children. Read screenplays. Drink. Drive. Draw. Have sex. Chain smoke. Run. Play tennis, handball, racquetball. Work out. Nap. Daydream. Organize closets. Defrost refrigerator. Make lists. Do yoga. Play music. Groom the dog. Fall in love. Fall out of love.

WRITE.

When we scrape just under the surface, we will likely find one dominant reason to procrastinate. We're afraid we're not good enough and that our inadequacies will be exposed. The fear of humiliation, of being judged deficient, can be paralyzing. If we never really take the shot, we can always harbor the belief that we would have been good at it if we'd only had the time. To spin the old adage, "Nothing ventured, nothing lost."

But of course a great deal *is* lost if nothing is ventured.

Start with everything you might have written if you'd taken the chance. If you're like every other writer, a lot of it would have been garbage. Some part of it might not have completely sucked. And maybe one tiny fragment of it might have been halfway decent. Would you not count that as something of value, lost?

But there is more.

Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, said that the greatest feeling is to give everything you have on the field and win. What he is less known for saying is the second part: that the second greatest feeling is to give everything you have on the field and lose. The point here is giving it your all.

Make a point of watching a baby who is learning to stand and walk. Count how many times it falls on its butt. Guess what? So did you. Ultimately, though, it did not stop you. You persevered. Getting up and getting there was a stronger drive than the sum total of everything that deterred you, including the pull of gravity and the weight of derision. No one ever learned to ride a bike, ice skate, rollerblade or surf without wiping out a hundred times.

Sometime during our emotional development, through the combined diligent efforts of parents, teachers and members of the opposite gender, *falling* became synonymous with *failing*. We became self-conscious, susceptible to the judgment of others and to the even harsher preemptive judgment we place on ourselves.

We all know the alphabet; we can all read and make shopping lists and write letters. It seems like a very short hop from there to creative writing, and that, unlike music or portraiture, it should be something we should be capable of doing. But we secretly dread that what we have to say is not profound enough, not funny enough, not original enough, not beautiful enough, not interesting enough, not *enough* to warrant anyone's attention. We fear the double-edged blade of derision and exposure. There are many possible responses to this, and I've ranked them in my own ascending order of preference:

1. Surrender to the fear and never give it a shot.
2. Deaden the fear with massive quantities of drugs and alcohol.
3. Create other reasons to avoid doing your best as a hedge and an excuse.
4. Accept that you might indeed suck. And strive to do your best anyway.

Falling is not failing. It is an unavoidable step in the process. It's the only possible way of ever getting to where you suck less. The sooner you start making the baby mistakes, the sooner you progress to more sophisticated mistakes.

WRITERS GYM EXERCISE

What are the five most common things you do to avoid writing? Write them down. Estimate the amount of time those activities occupy.

Whose disapproval do you most dread? Imagine sending those people to the vacation paradise of their dreams, an all-expense-paid ten-week vacation. For the duration of the next piece you write, they will be having such a good time that they will not be peering over your shoulder, telling you by word or facial expression that what you have done is not good enough.

CHAPTER 14

Tricks, Techniques and Stunning Acts of Legerdemain

In this chapter we look at the more frequently used nonlinear storytelling devices such as Voice Over, Flashback and Flash Forward. We also examine some specialized tricks or techniques that are very helpful additions to your writer's toolbox.

FLASHBACK AND VOICE OVER

New writers often ask: "Is it all right to use Flashbacks?" Or, "Is it okay to have a Voice Over?" The questions really being asked are less about the potency of the technique than whether the technique is currently in vogue. And more profoundly, will their script be consigned to the trash bin for committing the unpardonable sin of being blatantly unhip?

These are valid concerns, as they reflect on the mentality of the movie business (no oxymoron jokes, please). There is no group of people more Pavlovian about following successful trends than executives in the entertainment industry. As the studios and their satellite

production companies become increasingly corporate, fewer “story people” are promoted into the decision-making positions. With notable brilliant exceptions, people with creative titles know less about the creation of the product they manufacture, and a good deal more about marketing it.

The prevailing group sensibility is defined by conventional wisdom, and there are few people in the infrastructure who are sure of their convictions and courageous enough to risk their great jobs by going out on a limb. Witness that for many years certain genres were out. No one would make a Western or a sports movie. Until one became a surprise hit. Then everyone wanted one. Until the market became saturated with crappy versions of the genre. Then, rather than recognize that they have simply made some crappy movies, the “wisdom” once again became that the (fill in the blank) genre was out. And it will be. Until someone else makes a good one (meaning that it makes money!) and it is in again.

The big open secret is that successes are lucky accidents. Nobody really knows what they did right to make something a hit, or what somebody else did wrong to make it a flop. Within that larger context, with an awareness of the need for incumbents to stay on the cutting edge and of their their subsequent disdain for anything that falls behind it, it is no small wonder that a hopeful entry-level writer is concerned that his or her spec script might be tossed aside if it contains an out-of-favor device.

Here’s the healthiest approach I can recommend. Accept as true that you’re never going to be as hip as the people on the inside, so don’t try to be. Use a different strength. Write your screenplay in as fresh and original a way as you can. Sing in your own voice. If you try to sing in somebody else’s voice, you won’t be as good at it as they are, and who will be left to sing in yours? Tell the story that you want to tell using the most effective means at your command. If this means using Voice Overs, Flashbacks, Flash Forwards, not moving directly from left to right but in a nonlinear fashion, then do so.

BUT WITH THIS CAVEAT.

Any time you use such a device, you are calling attention to it as a device, and (1) you had better use it effectively, and (2) it had better be the best way of telling the story. If you know sports, here's an analogy. Would you throw a behind-the-back pass in a situation where you didn't have to? Even if no damage was done, you'd be seen as a show-off. And if perchance that pass was errant and jeopardized your team, you'd be booed. And deservedly so. Your operative question ought not to be, "is it okay to use Flashbacks?" but "*what is the best way to tell this story?*"

Obviously, many films have used Flashbacks with great success. *Ordinary People* (Alvin Sargent, from Judith Guest's novel) comes immediately to mind, as well as *Catch-22* (Buck Henry, from Joseph Heller's novel). In both films, fragments of memory (told through Flashback) gradually become more coherent as the character becomes more in touch with them, and ultimately are the narrative devices that break open the story's mystery. There is a *narrative imperative* to the technique. It is organic to the telling of the story. It is not just cool.

Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond's *Sunset Boulevard* starts at the end, then flashes back to the beginning, and from there proceeds in a straightforward manner (if you call a Voice Over from a dead man straightforward). Many films have used that concept since. A first cousin to it occurs in the very brilliant *American Beauty*. In that film the protagonist (and source of VO narration) is not dead yet, but quite accurately informs us that he soon will be.

Another beautiful example of total Flashback is in Marleen Gorris's *Antonia's Line*. This film won the Oscar for best foreign film a few years ago, and you must see it. The story opens with the narrative voice telling us that this will be Antonia's last day on earth, and then flashes back to the day she returns to her Dutch farming village at the end of World War II. From there it moves forward through three generations of daughters' lives, to the final day of Antonia's.

The structure of *Memento* (and before that, Harold Pinter's play adapted to film, *Betrayal*) is quite ingenious, starting at the end and moving sequentially toward the beginning. There is a sweet meta-physical overlay to *American Beauty* that makes it stylistically organic for Lester to be talking to us before and after his death. The drama of *Memento* is all about the shifting sands of trust and loyalty. Telling the story in reverse enhances the unfolding of those undulations.

Run, Lola, Run used a device I had not seen before—the protagonist colliding with incidental characters, and in doing so knocking fragments of their past and future lives out of them for us to see. Variations of the same device appeared later in *Amelie* and through Voice Over in *Y tu mamá también*.

There are so many films that use Voice Over successfully. In addition to those already mentioned, there is Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, Don Roos's *The Opposite of Sex*, and scads of 1940s film noir detective tales. For every example of these techniques used well, there are many more where they are used badly. Not badly as much as ineffectively, arbitrarily. All right, badly.

FLASHBACKITIS

Every action any character ever takes, every thought or event theoretically has an antecedent memory that may serve as a “flashback landing pad.” Why take one and not another? Why take any at all? Let's discuss the answer the way financial planners talk. What are the upside benefits? What are the downside risks? And most important, what indicators do you look for to know whether you're in profit or loss? What are the symptoms of acute Flashbackitis? When do we go for treatment? When do we consider a radical flashbackectomy?

A typical topical symptom of **UFBS (Unnecessary Flashback Syndrome)** is a certain dizziness that occurs from the whipping back and forth between time zones. Are you (the writer) starting to

consciously look for matching moments between the adulthood and youth of your character? For wrinkles in time? This is an example of style leading content. It will lead you into a very cerebral, symbolic, stylized exercise, and usually away from feeling. You will become so focused on giving full realization to the device that you will succeed in giving *full realization to the device*. That is a very different verb and Writer's Objective than *telling the story*.

There is another, more profoundly weakening effect that Flashback can have. Its surface symptoms are less apparent and less easy to spot. I felt that it seriously afflicted a film as well done as *Lone Star*. In simple terms, the Flashback scenes had all the energy. Nearly all of the most vivid scenes, the moments of highest tension and passion, were in the Flashback scenes. I felt very little dramatic urgency in the present tense.

Whether or not you agree with that particular example, look at your own work. Have your Flashbacks taken over like kudzu vines? Are they sapping vital energy out of the present? Are they tiresome? Are they done for mood? Or for effect? Does it feel like you are slogging through a snowdrift, that there is no tensile strength to the present, that each step is going hip deep into the snow until it finds emotional bedrock, that you are expending great amounts of energy but not getting very far?

Have the courage to ask yourself the hard questions. Why are you flashing back? Is the history you are uncovering necessary to the telling of the story? Is going back there to retrieve it necessary? Is there an organic way it can play out in the present? **Let the style be organic to the story.**

VOICE OVER

The examples of films that demonstrate the ineffective use of Voice Over derive from the same principle. The basic question you must

ask is always the same. *What is the best way to tell this story?* What would using it accomplish for you? Are you using it as an enhancement or as a crutch?

When a Voice Over is working well, it gives the audience access to the inner thoughts of the character or characters. It provides us with “information” that could come only from that source. Remember that “information” does not mean facts and factoids. VO is used most effectively as a road into the character’s psyche.

Audiences can only know what they see and hear, and are thus privy to a character’s inner life except solely as it is revealed through the things they do and say. Thus VO can be a valuable tool, especially if what the character is doing or saying does *not* fully reveal the vital inner truth. When best used, VO provides a different perspective to the character and/or the action.

A chillingly effective use of VO is at the beginning of Kasi Lemmons’ *Eve’s Bayou*. How’s this for a provocative line? “I was eight years old the summer I killed my father.” Would that get you interested in the story? It sets us up to enter a story where we will find an abused child under the sway of a sadistic parent. But instead, we encounter a girl who adores her father. But she has told us she killed him!

VO should be used as counterpoint, not as a caption.

In its most commonly occurring abuses, Voice Over tells us what we are seeing without adding much perspective. If you have a scene where a kid tries to climb a fence and falls into a mud puddle, you don’t need the VO saying “I was a clumsy kid.” Have him say “I always had my own sense of grace.”

We don’t want to become too narratively dependent on the Voice Over. Like Flashbackitis, when too much of the energy is sapped out of the content of the scenes we are watching, they can become dried up, desiccated, brittle and crumbly as a molted insect shell.

Often there is a **specific person to whom the VO is being directed**. It might be in the form of a letter or a confession to someone in the story. It might be a diary or an unseen friend. Or it might be the audience. You as the writer should know exactly who your speaker is addressing. It will determine the manner in which the character speaks. (A letter to a lover will sound different than a letter to a newspaper.) It will determine the level of truth and reliability, the tone, the sense of humor; in short, the very *voice* of the Voice Over. A film in which (for me) Voice Over did not enhance the story was *Age of Innocence*. While much of the VO was taken directly from Edith Wharton's novel, I could never quite identify the narrative voice with a character in the story.

SUBTEXT

Subtext is an ingredient, like teamwork or grace under fire. Writers know it is a great thing to have but are at a loss to know how to find it. Typically, writers try to write it into amazingly significant facial expressions. ("He smiles, knowing that the world will be a better place and that good will triumph.") That's gotta be one hell of a smile.

Creating Subtext takes an understanding that scenes work in sequences. You need to plant in Scene A the seeds for Subtext in Scene B. Remember the scene we had examined from *Sea of Love* where the guy comes running up with his kid in hopes of seeing the Yankees? The first thing Frank Keller asks is to see his *invitation*.

The tension in that scene derives from the scene that preceded it, where the audience learns that the piece of paper Clarence thinks is an invitation is really an *arrest warrant!* Take away Scene A and Scene B would be forced to convey all of what is now contained in the Subtext with significant looks.

Here are two simplistic scene sequences. Version One: Two glasses of beer sit on a coffee table, a man and a woman on either side. A

third man stands by the door. He nods to the woman, and she picks up the glass closest to her. Version Two: Add a previous scene where a poison pill is dropped into one of the glasses of beer. When the man nods to her, we know that he is telling her to drink from the glass without the poison. Or with the poison!

Subtext, like the tango, takes two.

SYMBOLISM

The less you think about Symbolism, the better off you are. Most efforts to be symbolic regrettably succeed. The result is that something in your screenplay is symbolic of something else. And this enhances your work how? (Other than it being something you envision critics raving about or grad students writing about in their dissertations.)

Like Flashbacks and like Voice Overs, self-conscious symbolism and its cousin, Foreshadowing, are devices that we think are necessary because they were taught to us as the essence of literature by people who held only the suitcase handle and never opened it up and sniffed the perfumes and the dirty socks.

Symbolism is derived from the context of the story. Or not at all. The same is true of foreshadowing. It depends on the internal light source and what it is that is casting a shadow. We noted in the previous chapter about the polar opposite meanings of “home” in *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* and *Naked*. In one it symbolizes a return to innocence, refuge, a safe, secure place. In the other it is a yoke, a crushing obligation, an anchor. Did the writer just decide and ordain that these symbolic meanings applied? No, my darlings. It does not work that way. Meaning evolves from the accumulated events of the narrative. You cannot write: *A dove flies into the scene. A symbol of peace.* You CAN write: *A dove flies into the scene.* But you cannot presume that it symbolizes peace.

A symbol does not mean what the writer tells us it means. It means what the story tells us it means.

THE OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

I borrow the term *Objective Correlative* from T. S. Eliot and adapt it to mean an external object that represents a character or a state of mind. Rocky's locker is Rocky's manhood. When it is taken from him, it is like a castration. In *Truly Madly Deeply*, the cello is Jamie. In *About Schmidt* (by Louis Begley and Alexander Payne), when he sees his carefully prepared reports in the garbage, it represents the entirety of his life's work.

PLOTS AND PLANS

Michael Corleone sits in the sedan with rival family leader Solazzo and police captain McClosky. The car turns onto the George Washington Bridge heading for New Jersey. Michael's heart drops into his stomach and so does ours. Why?

Michael gets up from the table in the restaurant and goes to the men's room. He searches behind the toilet for a gun and does not immediately find it. Our hearts drop into our stomachs. Why?

Michael returns from the bathroom and sits down with the men again and resumes talking. Our hearts drop into our stomachs. Why?

Because all these occurrences went directly counter to meticulously plotted **Plans**. After an exhaustive and nearly failed attempt to discover in advance where the meeting would take place, the Corleone family found out it was going to be in a small restaurant in the Bronx. When the car heads for Jersey, Michael is suddenly completely vulnerable.

A gun was to be taped in the bathroom for Michael to use. When it is not there, he is suddenly vulnerable.

He was to come out of the bathroom shooting. With those arrangements carefully driven home, and with Michael's life hanging in the balance, any deviation from that plan causes us great anxiety. The technique works in the same way Subtext works. Set up a plan in Scene A, have it go awry in scenes B, C, D.

There are three ways to handle Plans.

1. Have a plan. Let it go awry.
2. Give the protagonist no plan at all. Everything that occurs is a surprise to the protagonist and the audience. The benefit is that the audience has the same experience as the character—being confronted with circumstances it has to respond to immediately.
3. Have a plan. Let it all work out smoothly. Lovely and nice for the protagonist. Boring for the audience. Remember, we want to keep our character in that **DISCOMFORT ZONE**.

If the story protects the protagonist, the audience won't have to.

HORRIFIC HEROES AND HELLISH HEROINES

The heroine of *The Last Seduction* meticulously and cold-heartedly seduces a young man so he will kill her husband. We root for her to succeed. Do we endorse murder?

We admire and respect and feel ennobled in the presence of Don Corleone. If it was an FBI picture starring Adam Sandler against the Mob, would we root for the Mob?

We are at the very least fascinated by, and perhaps even unconsciously rooting for, the assassin in *Day of the Jackal* (Kenneth Ross's

screenplay based on Frederick Forsyth's novel).

The autobiographical Charles Bukowski character in *Barfly* is a womanizing, fight-provoking, slovenly boozehound. And though we may find him physically repugnant, we are emotionally open to him. How?

The films noted above are among hundreds of other equally good examples of two powerful dramatic techniques. They are *intimacy* and *innocence by disassociation*.

Intimacy

You can't be reminded too many times of the powerful subtextual effect that Intimacy carries. The more time we spend with a character, the more we become invested in that character. So true is this axiom that the decision is often made never to see or hear a character for fear of the audience overly empathizing with that character. The more deeply we are involved in a person's (or character's) life, the more we love the person and forgive or ignore some of the person's acts.

If we were with the parents in *Heavenly Creatures* for the entire movie, and at the end of it these girls came in and killed the mother, we'd have no sympathy at all for them and mourn the victim. But we are in the hearts and minds of the girls throughout. We are traveling on their **emotional current**.

We are brought into the private wishes of Don Corleone for his son. In light of all we see him do for others (which is all we see him do), and in light of the very human thing he wants, we feel intimate with him.

The destructive behavior of the Charles Bukowski character is self destructive. He inflicts more pain on himself than on anyone else. In that behavior, we come to realize that he feels he is unworthy of anything better. That touches a very deep part of him.

There is also the **ordeal/reward** equation. When we endure a character's pain, we take it as our own and wish for relief. We see this syndrome played out in life so often when a killer shows grief and remorse. A smart lawyer will try to personalize the perpetrator, humanize him. As writers we have to be careful.

In *Splash*, the Tom Hanks character has a conversation with a girl who is moving out on him. We never see her or hear her voice. If she were personalized, we would feel too much of her pain of being with a man who cannot say he loves her. And that would go counter to the writer's objective.

The complete opposite approach is taken in *Queen of Hearts*, where the creators want the audience to feel for the victor and the vanquished. Indeed, that dual empathy is almost what the story *is*, since its emotional source resides in the heart of the woman being claimed by both men.

The concept is powerfully illustrated in the Oscar-nominated documentary, *Winged Migration*. This is an amazing film that takes its audience close up into the flights of migratory birds during their epic migrations over thousands of miles. We feel their ordeal, their desire. We see a few of them die. Some are shot. Some are too weak to make the flight. One with a broken wing is devoured by crabs. We feel awful for this bird. But if the documentary *were about the crabs*, we would have experienced the pain of *their* lives, the uncertainty of *their* procreation and birth, the vulnerability of *their* young to some other predator, and celebrated their finding this meal. And perhaps if we had spent the entire film with a hard-scraping Louisiana Delta family, experienced their travails, known their souls, we might have felt relief when, with his last shell, the young son felled a duck and fed his family. This is **EMOTIONAL INTIMACY**.

Innocence by Disassociation

Or, if you want to make a bad person seem nice, make everyone else around him or her worse. It sounds like a joke, but truly you will be surprised at how often that technique is used. Some large examples:

Don Corleone says no to the five families. They want to sell heroin and use his connections to abet the cause. There are four against one. But he stands firm to his principles. Moreover, in contrast to their united front, his own ally, Sonny, speaks out of turn and compromises his bargaining position and his effectiveness as a parent. The don has to apologize for Sonny's breach. He is just "a principled old warrior with old-fashioned values and dreams for his family that we fear won't come true."

In *The Last Seduction*, following a coke deal, the protagonist's husband slaps her hard across the face. Everything she does subsequently (stealing his money, seducing the assassin) is in response. And up to the last minute, she is the wronged party and all her acts are emotionally justified. Also, she is made the underdog. She has to hide from him. He is in search of her. She is (let's say it together) vulnerable.

In *Day of the Jackal*, we first experience the torture of citizens under the brutal authority of the French secret police. So when someone is hired to assassinate French president Charles DeGaulle, we enter the world through the emotional current of the wronged parties. We somehow don't respond morally. Our emotions are engaged, and because of the ordeal/reward principle, we want some abatement to their suffering, and the Jackal is the medium.

Both the Innocence by Disassociation and the Intimacy principles are engaged here. The "enemy" has been made worse, and we are brought into his world. Into his emotional current. At first he is the underdog. Every part of the task that he must successfully perform to get himself and a suitable weapon into place takes great cunning and ingenuity and is played out very intimately. The long-range

objective is broken down into many short-range and specific and necessary objectives. We've already discussed the limitless power that focused Character Objectives exert. We're with him.

Furthermore, the head of the French Secret Service, the force charged with finding the assassin, is a pompous, arrogant goat. We'd want him to fail at finding his nostril with his left index finger. And for half the picture, we are rooting for the assassin. He is not sugar-coated. He is cold and calculating, totally professional. He sleeps with a woman in a chateau and kills her the next morning. And yet...

Then something drastic happens. Command is taken away from the Secret Service jerk and given to a fussy little provincial detective. Our rooting interest changes. Now the Jackal has all the advantages and the inspector is the underdog. We stay intimate in both characters' lives. Our loyalties are remarkably divided throughout.

In *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, this happens in *triplicate*. In the beginning Saito is the "pure evil" enemy. But through the middle and by the end we have experienced his vulnerability, felt the weight on his soul. He has lost face, failed his mission and must die. We also experience a small but poignant glimpse into the heart of Alec Guinness's character, Col. Nicholson. His career has been undistinguished. He has been home with his wife for merely two months out of his 30-year career. He'd like this bridge to stand for centuries as his modest legacy. He fights against his own men to save the bridge!

A gorgeous truth of fiction is that audiences can suspend their moral judgments when fascination is strong and compelling enough. This is why some of the great fictional characters are villains. Which man interested you more in *Silence of the Lambs*: Hannibal the Cannibal, or Clarice Starling's sexist and manipulative (but legally delegated) boss?

Innocence by Disassociation is a bit of a trick. Intimacy is the real art.

Pamela Gray does something difficult and rare in *A Walk on the Moon*. That she pulls it off is part of why I love the script. That she

thinks to try it is part of why I love her. She has three principal characters in a love triangle: a husband, his wife and her lover. **And none of them are villains.** They are all sympathetic characters. The story is set at the Catskill Mountain summer resort that Jewish families inhabit. This is the summer of Woodstock and the summer of the moonwalk. She involves her heroine in an adulterous affair with the traveling blouse man while her husband is back in New York City working. It would have been so easy and easily accepted by an audience to make the husband dorky or abusive or inattentive—a bad husband, a philanderer, a bad father. But she resists that temptation. Played by Liev Schreiber, Marty is a good man. Conventional, yes. (But so is she.) Devoted, sweet, a good father and husband.

The scene between Marty and his wife, Pearl (beautifully played by Diane Lane in a more deeply written role than the similar character in *Unfaithful* which gained her all the attention and an Oscar nomination), on the night before he goes back to town, could easily have made him out to be a lout, someone any wife would be justified in cuckolding. It would have made the writing of Pearl's seduction by the blouse man much easier. But instead, this is the scene:

[NB: The reference to “doing Chuck” comes from a popular song they hear on the radio in which names are rhymed. Their young son, Danny, is dying to “do Chuck” so he can say the deliciously forbidden word. This is used as a unifying device: At the end of the story he gets to do it. This scene is from the shooting script:]

31. INT. BUNGALOW – MARTY AND PEARL'S
BEDROOM – NIGHT

The room is lit only by moonlight, which washes over Pearl, in bra and slip, as she hangs up her dress. The clock RADIO plays Eddie Fisher's “WISH YOU WERE HERE.” Pearl shudders from the cold and closes the window. In the b.g., a toilet flushes. Pearl crosses to the dresser, opens her top drawer, and takes out a nightgown. As she

places the nightgown on the dresser, Marty enters, comes up behind her and kisses her neck.

PEARL

(Playful)

Is this because of me or Mrs. Dymbort?

MARTY

A little of both.

She turns around and hits him.

MARTY (CONT'D)

I'm kidding. I'm kidding.

He takes her in his arms and they kiss.

MARTY (CONT'D)

You're the only girl for me, Pearlie.

They kiss again, passion mounting. Marty guides Pearl towards the bed.

PAMELA'S NOTE: Filmed scene starts here with them already in bed.

PEARL

(Whispering)

You wanna do Chuck a different way?

He looks at her, startled.

MARTY

What kind of different way?

PEARL

I don't know. We'll experiment.

Marty looks uneasy, then starts to undress.

MARTY

Well...O.K.

PEARL

We don't have to.

MARTY

No, it's just... I thought we were doing it pretty good the old way.

PEARL

We were. I just thought it might be fun.

MARTY

(Uncomfortable)

O.K...What did you have in mind?

There's an awkward pause. Suddenly, Marty leaves the room. Pearl stands there, confused. After a moment we hear Marty off-screen.

MARTY (O.S.) (CONT'D)

(John Wayne)

O.K., pretty lady—there's a posse out lookin' for me so I ain't got much time.

Marty steps into the doorway wearing Daniel's little cowboy hat and holding Daniel's holster around the waist of his boxer shorts. Pearl laughs.

MARTY (CONT'D)

Is this different enough?

The holster drops to the floor as Marty lifts Pearl and heaves her clumsily onto the bed.

Pearl is a good wife and mother. But she is watching her 15-year-old daughter (Anna Paquin) come into womanhood. Pearl never had a childhood. She got pregnant at 17. And there is a battle between mother and daughter as to who gets to be the flower child.

Pearl falls under the gentle sway of the blouse man (Viggo Mortensen), and they have an affair that erupts to a climax where she dances bare-breasted at Woodstock, and is seen by her daughter.

In a series of great scenes, Pamela brings this family conflict to a white heat and tears down the family unit she has so exquisitely built. She does it without denigrating any of the characters, without making any of them moustache-twirling villains, without making them gratuitously evil or stupid, shallow or foolish. She digs deep *into* character, not out of it, and finds those ineffable truths that make us human. And in the end, when the family reunites, we believe these ties have been tested to their limits and have somehow held, welded by the torch of something that feels very much like love.

Here is the final scene between Pearl and Walker (the blouse man). He wants her to come to California. Marty, her husband, knows what has happened. They have met. Walker had come to the rescue of their son after the kid had been stung by wasps. He knew what to do and was there to do it. The cards are stacked against Marty. This is the full scene as written, with Pamela's notes indicating the small piece of the scene that was shot.

(137) EXT. – WALKER'S HOUSE – DAY

It's a sunny morning and Walker's working in a vegetable garden on the side of his house, putting the last of the summer harvest into a basket. Pearl approaches, holding his red t-shirt.

PEARL

Hi.

Walker turns and smiles.

WALKER

Hi. How's Daniel?

PEARL

Better. He's O.K.

WALKER

Good.

He wipes his hands on his pants and starts to move towards her to kiss her. Pearl holds out his shirt.

PAMELA'S NOTE: Viggo Mortensen added his character smoking. It showed the character's pain since when he interacts with Pearl earlier he says he quit.

PEARL

I can't go.

Walker is silent. He takes the shirt.

The following two lines were cut from filmed scene.

PEARL (CONT'D)

My family...I just...

PAMELA'S NOTE: Filmed dialogue ends with Walker's next line.

WALKER

I'm in love with you, Pearl.

Next lines of dialogue are all cut from scene.

PEARL

I know.

(A beat)

I love Marty. I love my children. I've hurt them...I need to try to make things work. I want to.

They stand there for a moment. She touches his arm.

PEARL (CONT'D)

What will you do?

WALKER

I think I'm gonna go anyway.

He reaches over and gently touches her cheek.

WALKER (CONT'D)

I'd rather sleep under the stars with you,
Pearl.

Pearl puts her hand over his, closes her eyes for a beat, then opens them.

PEARL

I have to go.

Pearl moves toward him and they embrace for a long time. Walker looks at her, then kisses her. Pearl lets the kiss happen, then breaks the embrace. She starts to walk away, then turns back around.

PEARL (CONT'D)

Walker, do you think I made a fool of myself?

WALKER

How did you feel?

PEARL

I felt beautiful.

He looks at her, confirming her answer. She smiles and walks off.

PAMELA'S NOTE: He embraces (not kisses) her in filmed scene and Pearl runs away. (deleted after dialogue)

COME IN LATE, GET OUT EARLY

These are not only rules governing your hotel stay. You've heard this before.

1. Enter in deep. The best place for most scenes to start is the closest point to the essence of the action.

2. End the scene as soon as the objective is either accomplished or terminally thwarted. Don't make it an "oh, and while we're talking, there's something else I want to discuss."

CURRENCY AND CALL WAITING

These are two extremely helpful techniques for getting those things that are very clear in your head down onto the page. It is most important for an audience to know what is important to a character. But how do we bring the audience into that state of knowingness? The most obvious way is to have the character announce the information. Stand him on a chair, have him make a solemn pledge that (fill in the blank) is the absolute most important thing in life to him. That ought to do it, right?

If only.

"What are words?" Falstaff asks in his soliloquy on courage. Then he belches. "Air." And it is true. How many times have you heard people swear this is the last drink they'll ever have, the last cigarette they'll ever smoke, the last time they will go back to that relationship? In your experience, have those vows often proved to be reliable indicators of behavior?

Words can be taken back, ignored, never meant, too hard to live up to, equivocated, modified, reinterpreted, forgotten, discounted, denied. Whereas actions have weight. They have **consequence**. Words are air, actions are bricks. When domino #2 falls against domino #3, it knocks #3 into #4 and #4 into #5. When domino #2 says I'm going to fall against you so you may as well knock #3 over, nothing changes.

If you are a character and you pay \$300 for that puppy, that rose, that ticket, that pencil, that bag of white powder, that loaf of bread, that kiss, the audience knows exactly what its *cost* is to you. And if we also saw how you came to have that \$300, then we would know

more. Did you win \$10 million in the lottery? Did you work three weeks in a car wash? Did you sell your car for it, or your house? Did you steal it? At what risk and from whom? And at what cost? Then we would know its *value*. Its worth. To you.

Taking this knowledge and working backward into our screenplay, we want our audience to know (translation: *experience*) a truth about our character. An effective means of dramatizing it is to place an object of unknown value alongside something of known value and have the character need to choose one or the other.

A weekend with a lover or studying for the bar exam. What about a planned weekend with a lover or helping a friend? Lover or work? Money or life? (Remember Jack Benny's famous line when he is being held up at gunpoint and the gunman demands, "Your money or your life." After a long, long pause he replies, "I'm thinking.") The entire premise of the film *Indecent Proposal* is built on this device. Would a husband take a million dollars to let another man sleep with his wife?

(A more daring premise might have been Redford offering 10 million if the *husband* would sleep with him, but anyway—)

Who we are is revealed in what we do and in the value we place on the things in our world; what we are willing to give up to attain them. A vital skill in dramatic technique is to bring those qualities to your characters' lives. Never forget the basic rules of scene writing. Create a *situation*, a circumstance where a character has to make a difficult choice. And remember, this does not mean a character has to sit and *deliberate*. A choice can be presented and acted upon in a moment. A chase scene. A baby in the road. Swerve and you go off the road. Go straight and you hit it. Your protagonist hasn't eaten in two days and finds a wallet with 30 dollars in singles. Eat or return it?

This is a specific and practical application of one of the basic Golden Principles: Event is the building block of action. Screenwriting is a verb-dominated craft. Outer life events are

designed to reveal the inner life of the character. **This continually moving intersection of plot and character is called the story.**

Call waiting is an effective strategy of establishing currency. You're on the phone. Another call comes in. Who do you stay on with and who do you call back? The choice you make is an irrefutable statement of which call is more important to you at that moment.

The "call waiting" scenes in your screenplay by no means have to be *phone calls*.

- Your character has a date with one guy, but then her real heartthrob calls and says yes. Whom does she go with?
- The job interview and the kid's championship game are at the same time. Which does he attend?
- At a dinner party, two people vie for your attention. Which one gets it? The boss or your kid? Too easy a choice? How about overbearing boss or injured kid? Or understanding boss or spoiled kid?

It's a great device that can be used unobtrusively between and among principal characters, or with a minor character for just a line.

DIRECTION IN DIALOGUE

Instead of writing character behavior into narrative action or parentheticals where we will be scolded for directing on the page, do what Shakespeare did. Have another character in the scene refer to that behavior. "Wow, you eat fast!" Or "Take your arm off my shoulder." Or "Why are you huffing and puffing? We only walked a block." There's a scene in *Tootsie* where Dustin Hoffman is walking Teri Garr home after a party. She says she had a good time but is having an emotional breakdown. He asks, "Why are you crying?"

It's a nice exercise for keeping your characters emotionally rooted in the moment and observant of their surroundings.

WRITERS GYM EXERCISE

Character Autobiography

Write the full name of your character down the left side of a page, one letter on each line. On each line, write a true statement about the character (or from his or her voice), beginning the first word of each line with each letter of the character's name. So, for a character named Holmeyer:

He lives with a rabbit
Open hearted
Loves bridges
Means well
Ebbs when he should flow
Yearns for love
Even tempered
Runs from life

Try it with all your main characters. Try it with your own name, too.

Genres

Two cars, a sports car and an SUV, arrive at the same parking spot. Write the scene or sequence of scenes in

- A romantic comedy
- An action/adventure
- A film noir mystery
- Science fiction

You may change the vehicles and characters, inhabiting them as you please. Now go write your script.

Here is **another great use for scene cards**. You have built them into ten-page columns, the blue card at the bottom being your payoff scene, your fence-post

scene, your Scenogram Box Scene. You can write in 10-page blocks. Everything that precedes that event is somehow tied to it, relates to it, builds toward it, is subservient to it. You can write each 10-page block as a story unto itself. Doing so will give you a good hard-edged rhythm. Before you start, make sure that within that 10-page block there is at least one significant red card scene, an event that will prohibit the thing that happens in the Box Scene from happening. This guarantees that you will be ingenious enough to devise a scene that supercedes the effect of that red card scene so that the Box Scene can occur as planned.