



## THOUGHTS ABOUT SOME ESSENTIALS OF SCREENWRITING

by Lewis Cole



### Telling a story

A screenplay is a way of telling a story – *one* way (a point that needs to be stressed in today's screenplay saturated culture), not the best, just the one that has currently caught the public fancy, nor a particularly easy, or even natural way of telling a story, in fact, a rather hard one, which again has nothing to do with whether it's a particularly good way of telling a story. I'll explain what I mean. If I said, Tell me a story of what happened to you yesterday, you could, without too much creative stress, come up with at least an acceptable tale of some incident. But if I said, Tell me a joke, not a funny incident, but an actual joke with a set-up and punch-line, that you have invented, you would have a much greater problem. Well, writing a screenplay is similar to creating a joke: you take a lot of incidents and boil them down into a dramatic circumstance, take a lot of perceptions about a person and render them into a vividly portrayed character, and out of the two create a plot filled with choices and consequences.

### The essence of character

In drama, the “character” of characters is a kind of action – we can associate the action with an intensity of feeling, like Medea, say, or Faye Dunaway in *Mommie Dearest*, or attitude, like Hamlet or Woody Allen's character in his movies, or behavior, like Prometheus in Aeschylus or Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*. But the “character” is always insistent – what one commentator on Aristotle calls the “the battling, energetic type...” This is even true of seemingly passive characters. (No character is more passive than Woody Allen in his films;

yet the characters he plays are always going after girls, getting and quitting jobs, quarreling with their friends, etc.) Dramatic characters – and this is especially true about movie characters – all possess a particular power within them; in this way, they’re like heroes with the power of strength, riddle answering, or magic. Characters are like vectors or gestures – they’re creatures of force and momentum who carve out space. The key thing about them is that they do something; they’re butchers, seducers, rebels, they “passeth show”, fly high like the aviator in Renoir’s *Rules of the Game*: we meet him coming into the airport, he gets off the plane, immediately searches for the woman he loves, doesn’t find her and tries to commit suicide by running his car off the road with his best friend in the front passenger’s seat – now that’s a movie character! Their quality is an action, not an attitude. Indeed, this is one of the important differences between rich “characters” and “characterizations.” When you characterize someone you reduce them to a trait and demonstrate that trait over and over again and usually in pretty much the same circumstances – Grace being hysterical or Will being super rational. A “character” on the other hand is a person reduced to an action and the portrayal of that action – the aviator flying high and alone – in many different circumstances. A main thing about drama is that it’s a portrayal of life – human experience – through action: a cliché, of course, to say that, and yet probably the least understood thing about what makes drama, drama.

### **Creating character**

Presenting characters dramatically means a seismic shift in the way you understand and represent human beings; there’s as big a difference between writing a character and understanding a character in life as there is, say, between painting a picture and looking out a window. People don’t often acknowledge this difference because we talk about people all the time, but we don’t paint all the time, and consequently people think, well, writing a character is no different than what I do in countless conversations. But it is different. It’s a discipline of the imagination. For some people it comes naturally – the genius, for instance, of Shakespeare; but for most of us thinking this way is an exercise of the imagination and a hard thing to do.

The nature of that exercise is this. In writing a movie I’m concerned about creating scenes in which something happens. As a writer, my main job is to know one thing: what comes next? And, in order to do this, I need to know two things: what is the circumstance and what does my character do? So the kind of knowledge I need to have about a character is different than the kind of knowledge we usually possess about people in life. In life, we think about

the elements that make up a person, their social and family background, physical being, ideas, tastes, or experiences, and we say, “we know” the person. Yet all this knowledge doesn’t necessarily tell you how that person will act. It’s analytic, not revelatory. The knowledge I need to write a character in a film is revelatory: the quality of their being, their power, and then I need to see how that power emerges in different circumstances: how they will act if they get mugged while walking down the street, or if their boss yells at them, or if they have to make dinner for twelve people. Everyday life knowledge – psychological scars, for instance – might feed our dramatic knowledge: this is why books on writing talk about drawing backgrounds for your character, knowing his/her physical characteristics etc., and you do have to spend a lot of time thinking about character and sifting through the things you either know or create about that person. But in no way can everyday life knowledge take the place of dramatic revelatory knowledge because character is, above all, a rendering – a capturing, a distillation of the myriad mysteries of personality, temperament, and behavior through action in the same way that a painted portrait captures them through color, light, and line.

One paradoxical element of screenplays is that we, the audience, feel we know the characters in powerful, memorable movies intimately – know them better than we know characters in books. (Maybe because we see and hear them move and talk.) This is true about all drama – we have fewer questions about Hamlet when we see the play than when we read the play. When we are watching *Hamlet*, we don’t wonder why Horatio has been in Denmark long enough to make contact with all these soldiers and not meet his bosom buddy Hamlet. But when we read it, we stop and think, Wait a second, something’s wrong: if Horatio has just come from Wittenberg, how come he knows about the ghost and hasn’t yet said hello to Hamlet who has just lost his father? What kind of buddy is he, anyway? This difference in our perception of the character is even stronger in film. Take Terry Malloy, Marlon Brando’s character in *On The Waterfront* (1954). The character is indelibly fixed in the public imagination: the scene in the cab with Rod Steiger, the love scenes with Eva Marie Saint. But what we know factually about Terry Malloy is that he probably grew up in Hoboken, was beaten by nuns in Catholic school, has a brother, was an amateur and then semi-professional fighter, and took a dive. We don’t know his parents – are they dead or alive? – his ex-girlfriends, his jobs: we don’t even know what he’s been doing during the years after he took the dive. The movie begins when he’s asked to set up a guy who gets thrown off a roof. We don’t question why the mob guys are suddenly asking him to do this. The fact is a given. But if we were reading the story as a novel, we’d stop and ask ourselves why are they now involving Terry in this kind of criminal activity and not before? In a novel,

you – the author – would need to provide an answer for this. But in a screenplay you don't because the live force and presentation of character in action, on film, is so strong that it subsumes those kinds of questions.



### **The industrialization of screenwriting**

The screenplay is a literary form, and any literary form - to some extent - is shaped by the market, whether its Shakespeare's plays, Petrarch's sonnets, or the magazine serialized nineteenth-century novel. The screenplay is different from them in at least two ways. First, as an expressive or literary form, the screenplay is an anomaly: it has no literary life in and of itself, its life depends on its being made into a movie; production is so intrinsic to the screenplay it even dictates its form, demanding slug lines, etc. things without which you could never even get a screenplay read because they suggest the physical scope and potential budget of the piece. (The latest instance of the industrialization of screenplays is the current vogue in outlining – always important, of course, Aristotle even mentions using them in the *Poetics*, but, in movies a direct growth of the need to sell a product: the executive wants to make sure he knows what he is getting to cover himself in case anything goes wrong. Outlines have gained popularity with the increasing corporatization of movie studios – twenty years ago you only had “treatments”; now you have treatments, outlines, “beat sheets” – a break down of the story into discrete scenes and actions – and “step treatments”, forms that didn't exist five or ten years ago, but have now become mandatory, like a kind of quality control, a sort of whole cottage industry that the movie business has taken over from television which is even a more industrial, less entrepreneurial and creative process than movies because its determined by precise demographics, each show tailored to an exact audience.)

Second, screenplays are different from other literary industrialized forms because of the sheer *size* of the movie industry. No form has ever commanded as large an audience as movies – the audience is world-wide without sex or age boundaries. There is simply a huge, constant, and growing demand to produce movies. They're like cars or new innovations in computers: you've got to produce new models because otherwise the salesmen won't have anything to put in their showrooms at the beginning of the year. Studios and production companies need to have movies that will attract big stars and play in certain theaters, at certain places. This has created a belief that you can actually turn out screenplays in the same way that you can turn out automobiles. Every now and then and then you get

industrial fads – lately it has been the action movie, the certainty that if the explosion is big and bloody enough fourteen year old boys will keep coming back and pay to see it two, three, and four times. Ten years ago, you had the Disney films when the studio was run by Jeff Katzenberg, who believed he knew the formula for a popular screenplay, a sort of update of fifties comedy that began with *Splash* (1984) and continued with a number of films all structured the same way: a tight opening – ten -minute set up of the character, presenting incident, some odd-ball wacky antagonist – and increasingly slack middle and end. Each was totally by the book and each became increasingly formulaic, predictable, and unwatchable.

### **Writing about screenwriting - Creating heroic action in movies**

Currently a spate of books tell you what a good screenplay is and teach you how to write one – the most the recent one is Robert McKee's *Story* and the most famous one is, of course, Syd Field's; they give you the rules of writing a good screenplay. There are many useful ideas in these books, and some of them, such as Paul Lucy's *Story Sense* and Richard Walters *Screenwriting: The Art, Craft and Business of Film and Television* provide real value.

But the problem with the books is that they help enforce a general attitude towards screenplays that is lethal to the creating of good ones: the idea that writing a screenplay is a “craft” and that you can make a good one by following the rules. Now of course when you're a teacher you stress craft – but you do this to overcome your student's misguided confidence in unbounded inspiration and originality. The fact is that any art, stripped of genius, is craft – craft is the thousands of medieval religious sculptures, paintings, and tapestries, Petrarchian sonnets, and eighteenth century sonatas that we don't remember. Screenplays are as much and as less a “craft” as any of these; we're simply more aware of their “craft” nature because movies themselves these days are such a predominant form of culture. But if you're a true lover of movies, you know that good screenplays, like any other memorable work of the imagination, go beyond “craft” and certainly can't be written simply by the rules because for every rule you come up with, there are going to be ten examples of that rule being broken. (And as a teacher rules are tricky because screenplays aren't math problems and getting people to write by the rules is probably going to have the reverse effect of what you want, which is getting people who are interested in writing films to come up with something original and new.) Let me give an example. One common rule you'll hear over and over is that the protagonist drives the action. Is it true? Not exactly. Take *Oedipus*

Rex. In the middle of the play, Oedipus blames Creon for starting the plague and the action comes to a halt. Enter Jocasta. What's the problem, Oedipus, she asks, and then – really without his prompting – tells him a story that sets the wheels of action in motion again. Similarly, in Pedro Almodovar's unusual film *Live Flesh* the key incident that moves the story along is an accidental encounter between the protagonist and a woman – something which the protagonist doesn't plan and of whose consequences he is completely ignorant – the encounter is going to start off a series of events which lead to the climax.

Why does the protagonist *not* always drive the action? Because *in life* nobody drives the action – there simply ain't anyone like that and if you had somebody constantly moving the story forward, the narrative would become an unreal representation of life and of people in action. In life, we need to be pushed to do things that turn us into heroes. We must face circumstances in which we say, No, I don't want to have anything to do with that, and from which we run and hide, until something pushes us against our will into engaging with the problem. We all know this and consequently the protagonist *driving* the action, relentlessly pushing it forward, would have a devastating effect upon our – the audience's – relationship to the main character: it would take the character out of the realm of our lives, and we would think of the character as a super hero, a supernatural being, rather than an ordinary person like ourselves, who *becomes* a hero, a transformation which is one of the things we want to see in a movie.

Look at *Jaws* (1975) for instance. (Steven Spielberg's films are an interesting case because they start from a realistic base. Then, because of his desire to be as commercial a filmmaker as possible, they always end up with very sentimental resolutions. A friend of mine once said about *Schindler's List*, "Leave it to Hollywood to make a film about the Holocaust in which all the Jews live"). The protagonist in *Jaws* is a small town sheriff. Out of the blue, a terrible thing occurs – a murderous beast begins to kill people and can't be stopped. Now if the sheriff's reaction to that predicament is to kill the shark no matter how big, deadly, or determined the shark, he's no longer sympathetic because we can no longer identify with him: we know we would never do that in life.

So is it a good thing to think about your protagonist driving the action? Sure, because part of a dramatic narrative is a central character who embodies the hopes and the fears of an audience and involves him or herself in a circumstance in which he or she must make choices we normally wouldn't confront in our lives. By asking yourself the question, you will probably end up with a screenplay that has a protagonist *more* rather than *less* passive. But

is it good to follow the *rule* that the protagonist *drives* the action? Not unless you want a screenplay that makes *Mission Impossible-2* look like *Hamlet* in comparison.

### **On dialogue**

In making a story, there are several major elements: the circumstances, the characters, the conflict, the genre, and the action – by which I mean the over-arching sense of *movement* of the story. Dialogue is something else. Dialogue is not a fundamental element of the story. It's merely a way of telling the story, of propelling the story along, a *technical* device, like, say, cross-hatching in drawing.

One common error new screenwriters make is to treat dialogue as conversation. Dialogue is not just people talking. Dialogue is action represented by words. Movies from the thirties have lots of words, but they're not talky: the action is presented and dramatized through the dialogue. As characters talk to one another, their relation to their own circumstances, each other, and the world at large, is changing in some way, they are engaged in “dramatic action”, by which I mean, on the simplest level – and the idea of dramatic action is complex – the movement by characters from one set of circumstances in their lives to another set of circumstances. A terrific instance of this is the opening of *Sweet Smell of Success*. The opening scene is a good fifteen- minute monologue by Tony Curtis. But dramatic tension charges the language; the monologue isn't expositional, but active – the character is thinking out loud, deciding to change his course in life, and, in fact, helps set in motion the events that are the framework for the dramatic action of the film. In the last twenty years there's been a really significant decline in the quality of dialogue because action – not really action, but spectacle and movement – has become so important. You have audiences who are less and less attuned to hearing dialogue. *Quiz Show* is a superbly written screenplay in which the characters reveal themselves and advance the plot through dialogue, and *Quiz Show* was a commercial disaster.



### **Making sense of film**

I like to ask myself one simple question when watching a film: does the story make sense? I don't mean naturalistic, everyday sense, but sense within the rules of the world the movie has established. For example, *North by Northwest* (1959) has a kitschy, silly climax in which Cary Grant, Eve Marie Saint, and the young Martin

Landau run around the top of Mt. Rushmore. But within the absurdity of the circumstances, everything makes sense: yes, Cary Grant would decide he really wants to save Eve Marie Saint, and yes, he would go to the house, and yes, they would run into the woods, etc. Indeed, the only thing that doesn't make sense is that – to the best of my knowledge – the United States Department of Parks doesn't permit private dwellings situated that near to George Washington's nose. So there is elaboration and fantasy but it all makes sense within the world of the story. Now, for something that doesn't make sense, let's take *Arlington Road*, a well-intentioned, Polanski-inspired thriller about a guy who ends up living next door to a right-wing nut who, secretly, is blowing up government buildings. The climax is a neat paranoid conceit: the protagonist thinks he will unmask the nut and actually fulfills the nut's plan to blow up a building. But to get to this point we must believe that the protagonist on a particular day will wake up at five a.m., sneak out of his house, drive to a certain place – without any of this being planned, by the way – go to a public telephone booth, place a call, reach a busy signal, and, at that moment, turn and accidentally see a car pass which he will then follow through a hair-raising city-long chase during which he will attract the police who will follow *him* rather than the bad guys so that all of them will be blown to smithereens and the good guy will be blamed. And without all these coincidences the climax doesn't happen. Now I know in our post-modern, super sophisticated world, there are movie goers, especially young ones, who are so inured to stupid plots that they will say, This doesn't matter, you're being picky, it's a *movie* – a phrase I hate because somehow it implies that since it's a movie which can bring joy and wonder it means that it can also dispense with the simplest demands of originality and common sense. No, I continue to ask myself: well, does that make sense? This is where "craft" comes in – because films that don't make sense by the rules of their own world don't have it. You want the screenwriter and director to do their work and if they're coming up with easy solutions for the problems that they've given themselves in their stories, they haven't been. It's very gratifying when you see a film that does make sense – even one mired in past traditions; *U-571*, the modest submarine movie that came out this year was silly and derivative, but was satisfyingly thorough.

### **Finding the unexpected**

So many screenplays today rely and refer to past screenplays that increasingly when I go into a theater, I just want to be surprised – to see some unexpected plot element. I don't mean a kind of evil that I've never seen before – the competition for gory, frightening things in movies has gotten completely out of hand: in 1948 a bad guy was Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death* throwing an old woman in a wheelchair down the stairs. Now, a bad guy has

to bury someone alive in a coffin filled with clicking, scurrying, flesh eating scarabs. Nor do I mean tortured surprises – *Magnolia* for instance with its frog-raining apocalypse, a surprise, but not the kind of surprise in which you feel startled by the unexpected *rumpedness* of life – somebody from your past suddenly re-appearing, or getting involved in something unknown, or terrible illness. You want the surprises that are true in life and that go against a manufactured and predictable kind of story, surprises that take the story in some uncalculated way. For example, David O. Russell, the director of *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), *Flirting With Disaster* (1996) and *Three Kings* (1999) is a story teller who constantly creates the unexpected with turns in the plot that make the films interesting to watch. Another surprising film is Pedro Almodovar's film, *Live Flesh* (1997), with its extremely complicated human circumstances; the way he tells what happens and the reversals of character are completely believable and surprising at the same time, much less strained than in his previous films.

You want something *new* in the script, something that makes you think you're learning something or seeing something different – a new piece of information, for instance, like in many of the movies we see today from increasingly less remote lands, or *Clueless* with its sixteen year olds walking around high school talking to each other on cell phones, or a revelatory performance like Julianne Moore in *Uncle Vanya on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, who always manages to give a full-bodiedness to delicacy, or a different point of view – the kind of excitement, I think, that many young people see watching *Boys Don't Cry* for instance or *Breaking the Waves*. If you concentrate on these things, you'll come up with stories that are original and have their own structure. They'll have a protagonist, antagonist, a beginning, middle, and end, which is drama's basic structure, and they'll even be in genres, but they will be new.

### **The work of understanding**

One thing that's not talked about enough in both literature and movies is the *activity* of reading or viewing. Often the first 50 pages of a novel challenge the reader; only when you get through the opening, do you enter into the flow of the narrative. Nadine Gordimer is like that, instantly dramatic, but also puzzling with knotted, gnarly language, complicated characters and relationships. There's a reason for this: it takes work to enter someone else's imagination; it's like meeting somebody and getting to know them well – pleasure but also work as you try to figure out what the person thinks, how they act and react, the mystery of them. Nowadays, because many books are written for such a mass audience,

difficulty – the book’s demand on your attention, its engagement of your intellect, judgment, and imagination – is forbidden: editors demand something very easy and accessible (or faddishly obscure.) It’s similar with film. With the worldwide audience, stories on film contain simpler and simpler elements with very recognizable heroes, villains, and problems. The degree of difficulty and therefore, the degree of engagement in the films, has gotten correspondingly less. In older films, or good films now, the filmmaker does make demands upon the audience – it’s the work of watching the film: Why does that relationship make sense, why is this person doing something? If you’re interested in movies going out to a wide audience, those demands probably mitigate against your making those kinds of creative choices. Yet in the long run those creative choices are responsible for works becoming popular. Why is *Oedipus Rex* still read and produced. It’s not because the play is ordained part of the canon, but because at the center of the play lies an endlessly fascinating mystery, which is why does Oedipus destroy himself. This remains a constant puzzle for us, a riddle with no easy solution. But if you were looking at the play from a commercial point of view, you might decide to remove the mystery of why Oedipus proceeds to his own destruction altogether – when that mystery, at the very heart of the play, is what makes it one of the great *commercial* – as well as *artistic* – successes in the western world.

Pictures of Lewis Cole: courtesy of Mediterranean Film Institute