MOTHER
And don't forget where you came from, son, don't forget.
End of Scene 2

What is notable about the master scene format is that it is organized so that the reader can visualize the story as easily as possible. There are no camera angles, no detailed technical instructions, only description and dialogue. You should acquaint yourself with the format and use it to develop your own short screenplay.

EXERCISE 17

In a ten-minute writing exercise, write as fast as you can without stopping to think or worry about logic, spelling, or punctuation. Use a timer and try not to look at the timer.

1. Place a picture in front of you. Imagine the picture as a freeze-frame. Imagine that the character of the picture begins an action. Write for ten minutes. Put aside your work without reading it.
2. Do the same with a second picture.
3. Now list ten sounds that are particularly evocative for you.
4. Make a list of five sounds that could establish the feeling-tone of the first picture.
5. Make a list of five sounds that could establish the feeling-tone of the second picture. Note that silence is also "a sound."

9

DRAMATIC STRATEGIES

You have an idea for your story, and the problem before you is to find the drama in your idea and shape it into a story.

Something about the idea, which may have come from any one of the sources mentioned in Chapter 6, has captured your imagination and unlocked an emotional reaction. Whether it touches your unconscious or conscious synapses, the deed is done, and the idea seems to haunt you. It won't go away until you convert it into a script, and from a script into a film that you can share with others. The film gives others an insight into you: it's a gift to them and an invitation to join with you for the length of the film experience. These are the motivations for converting an idea into a dramatic story. We turn now to the means to achieve that transformation.

THE IDEA

At the beginning of the process of developing an idea into a dramatic story, it's important to consider a number of questions whose answers will direct you.

First, does the idea have only the shape of a photograph, or does it have an implied narrative? The observation or photograph of a young girl rushing down the wintry street carrying her winter coat and a knapsack implies that she is going to school. Will the story be shaped around the events of this day at school? Is there something special about this day? Or is it simply an ode to the freedom of being sixteen and having no greater obligation than to join your friends at school?

If the idea or observation does not suggest a direction, it is important to decide what it is about the image that stays with you. Let's decide that it is the latter feeling—that it's great to be young—that appeals so much to you about this image. The basic idea, then, revolved around the joy (and other

qualities) of being young. What other notions or events might support that feeling of being young and enjoying it?

The key at this stage is to let the idea breathe. Respond to it, and *roam* around it. You are looking for a direction. Young girls like to window-shop, and they stop to buy if they have money. They like to meet their friends en route to school and travel together. They like to exchange clothing, as a bonding device that makes them feel closer to each another. They like to assess males they observe and comment about them if with friends. They like to eat muffins and orange juice. Some like to smoke.

At school they might assess their status based on the number of members of the opposite sex who greet them or attend to them. They like to talk in class. They make dates to talk more. They make plans for the weekend. They discuss potential companions and destinations for the weekend. They talk about college. They talk about their siblings and sometimes their parents. When desperate for something to do they will exchange views on their teachers. They do schoolwork. They exercise, eat lunch, and eventually go home.

Narrative design options here include the following: "a day in the life of," life at sixteen, girls and boys, contemporary style, herding, high school style. If the emphasis is on the joy of being sixteen, any of these shaping devices can work. Joy is the overarching attitude you want to be evident in the narrative. You will want to avoid the pain of being sixteen and emphasize the pleasure. In order to dramatize the story, however, you must find a framing device that will tell the story from your chosen point of view.

FRAMING THE STORY

The writer has a number of shapes or forms available to him or her to frame the story. Since this is the first important decision you make in directing the presentation of your idea, you should deliberate carefully about the *frame*. In the longer film, these shapes are referred to as *genres*. This device isn't as useful in the short film: the framing devices of the gangster film, melodrama, film noir, or the horror film are not as helpful in the writing of the short film (although they can be critical in writing a long one). The story forms that are available and useful to the writer of the short film include the docudrama, the "mockumentary," the comedy, the satire, the fable, the morality tale, the journey, and the event.

The Docudrama

If your idea is generated out of the daily news, is about a famous person, or should be related as closely as possible to real life, the *docudrama* could be an important framing device for you.

The docudrama requires a level of veracity that suggests detailed research of your idea. You need recognizable people and events to reinforce and place your story in a category of believability far beyond that of the conventional drama.

In a docudrama the writer often refers to the media—at least television, possibly radio. Just as Orson Welles used radio news techniques to create a panic reaction to his "War of the Worlds" broadcast in 1938, so too will the docudrama writer employ a television news style that should be convincing. You have to observe qualities of the news, reporters, and the types of observations they make on the news, and avoid kinds of observations you don't see on the news. You are trying to use the patina of the evening television news to enhance the believability of your story. It's a good idea to study very good docudramas such as *The War Game*, *All the President's Men*, and David Holzman's *Diary*. Learn from the masters. What you are trying to do is to frame your story as if it really happened, or just as it did happen. In either case, the credibility of your dramatic story will depend on successfully using the frame of the docudrama.

The Mockumentary

Ever since *This Is Spinal Tap*, student films about performance, filmmaking, writing, and music have relied on the hybrid form loosely called the *mockumentary*. This is a form that both evokes realism and pokes fun at it. Not quite as intense as the satire, the mockumentary criticizes gently the subject of the film, which is often the media as it interacts with, and often creates, a star. In this sense, the mockumentary is a self-reflexive and self-critical form, as the "mock" in the word suggests. If your idea centers on the relationship between the public and a character, and if the media can play a role in the story, the mockumentary is an amusing and often insightful form.

In order to use this particular framing device, detailed research into the creation of a music video, a political advertisement, a television show, a rock concert, and so on, is critical. References to production will help create a level of believability.

Beyond the research, the mockumentary also implies a particular structure for the story—the rise and fall of a film or television show, a weekly episode of television, even the day-long production of a soap opera. The pattern of the structure must be quickly understood and accepted by the viewer. One final comment about the mockumentary: this frame affords many opportunities for humor. The more outrageous the humor, the more likely the story will succeed. If your goal is to make a humorous film, the mockumentary is a natural story frame.

The Comedy

The mockumentary is a particular comedic story frame; the writer has other options to choose from. *Comedy* runs the gamut from farce, which is principally visual, to more sophisticated forms, where character and dialogue are

more important. If the idea is character oriented, what are the characteristics that lend themselves to comic opportunity? If they are physical, the comedy is aimed at the character; to put it another way, we laugh at the character. If the characteristics are more behavioral, we have a broader band of comic opportunity. We needn't laugh at the character, but we may laugh *with* the character. How does the source of humor blend with your attitude about the idea? If we laugh at your character, in other words, does it undermine or support your idea?

Similarly, if your idea is situation driven, do you want us to see your character victimized by the situation or victorious over it? In each case, does the approach support or undermine your idea?

Another approach is to examine what humor, rather than a more straightforward approach, will add to the story. The humor, aside from its understandable appeal, should bring other narrative dividends. For example, the fact that the balloon in *The Red Balloon* does the unexpected (it follows the boy and later displays a mind of its own) is humorous, but it also humanizes the balloon. Through humor, the balloon becomes the boy's friend rather than remaining an inanimate object.

Using comedy should help your story. It should make your story seem fresh, and it can, if deployed well, energize your story. Comedy, whether farcical or cerebral, visual or verbal, can help you frame your story in such a way that your idea is strengthened.

The Satire

Satire is a very particular form of comedy. It is more savage than other forms, because the object of the satire, in the mind of the writer, deserves to be ridiculed.

There is a long tradition of satire, from the Greeks through Kurt Vonnegut, Terry Southern, Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, Eric Rohmer, Michael Verhoeven, Earl Morris, and Lizzie Borden. The key decision for the writer considering satire is whether the target of derision merits the treatment. The form works best when the target is important or well known, because the bigger the target, the more likely the target is a candidate for satire. Modest subjects will appear ineffective when presented in a satire.

Satire is a genre of excess—excessive humor and exaggerated character, story, and language. The rules of realism are readily bent in this genre. Examples of subject matter successfully treated in film satires include middle-class values (by Buñuel in *L'Age d'Or* and Lizzie Borden in *Working Girls*), a shameful history and a community's attempt to hide it (Michael Verhoeven's *The Nasty Girl*), and the excessive power of television (Paddy Chayevsky's great script *Network*). Other notable targets are the health care system in the United States (Paddy Chayevsky's script "The Hospital") and in Great Britain (David Mercer's *Britannia Hospital*), and, in one of the greatest film satires, nuclear war (Stanley Kubrick and Terry Southern's *Dr. Strangelove*).

Satire is a very free writing form, but it does involve the constraints of the scale of the subject and of the attendant idea. The larger the subject, the more likely that the frame of satire will be effective.

The Fable

> *Fable*, a term most used in the sense of a short story devised to convey some useful moral lesson, but often carrying with it associations of the marvelous or the mythical, and frequently employing animals as characters. Famous examples include Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.[1]

If your idea is best presented with the elements of moral lessons, the mythical, and animal characters, the fable can transport your idea from the realistic to the fantastic. Although the fable may pose particular filmmaking challenges, it can be done. Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Bear* is a recent example.

Fables require a powerful moral at their center; without it they can seem preachy. If you are going to use the fable to frame your story, consider whether the idea can carry its moral freight. Keeping this requisite in mind may help you freshen up the other narrative properties so that you avoid the pitfalls. If you can avoid them, you may well have a charming and fresh story.

The Morality Tale

The *morality tale* is an allegorical story whose intention, like that of the fable, is to take a position on an issue. The goal of the morality tale is to offer a life lesson to those who would veer in another direction. The key difference between the morality tale and the fable is the use of human beings rather than animals in the story.

If your idea lends itself to allegory and seems to serve as a life lesson for a particular group—adolescents, young women, elderly men—the morality tale could be a very useful device.

As a form, the morality tale seems fresher, more creative, than a more realistic approach. The danger, however, is that your audience may not be receptive to the treatment if it is too simple and is interpreted as being aimed at young children rather than adults. This is the most subtle problem associated with using the morality tale as a framing device.

The morality tale offers the widest possibilities for stories. Your story can be as simple as the tale of a property-tax collector and a property owner, or a script about the origins of war, such as Norman McLaren's great short film *Neighbours*. There are numerous collections of such tales that can illustrate

the form for you. Reading such tales will help you appreciate the shape of this particular form.[2] Elizabethan drama, such as the plays *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, is also a good source for morality tales.

The Journey

The *journey* has a broader shape than the morality tale or the fable, but because it is so often used, we include it as a shaping option.

> The journey is the oldest, truest, most inescapable shape for a story. From the nursery story to biblical narrative to contemporary novel, someone is always setting out from home.[3]

Whether the idea revolves around life as a journey, or a specific journey, the form offers a wide range of opportunities. Also, as a form it is more open ended regarding interpretation than the morality tale, fable, or satire. If you are not entirely sure how you feel about a subject, the journey is a safer form to undertake.

The Event

The *event* is another general shaping form, but it is less open ended than the journey. Using this shape emphasizes a particular happening. It also has implications, particularly for the character: either the character will achieve greatly or fail greatly in the course of the event.

One of the benefits of using the event as a shaping device is that it concentrates the drama of the story, creating a useful intensity and a natural rise to the story. Once you determine how you want the audience to feel after the event, you will have a strong sense about whether the event is the best shaping device for your idea.

VOICE

Once you decide upon the shape that will frame your story, you need to bring to bear the operating principles that will help us move through your story. How we feel about the events of a story and a character is colored by the voice of the writer. If no *voice* is present, the script seems shapeless. The first operating principle to decide on is voice, your attitude toward the idea. How do you want us to feel at the end of your story?

In order to articulate a tone, you need to make a number of choices. How close do you want us to get to the events of your story? If you want to get us deeply involved, choose events that place the character in intense situations, close to the dramatic core of the story. If, on the other hand, you want us to have a more distant relationship with the events, position the character farther from the dramatic core. In fact, if you want to create a sense of detachment, you should employ irony, to distance us from the story. That distance will allow us to reflect upon the character and what is happening to the character. This sense of detachment or irony is particularly useful in the morality tale, in the mockumentary, and in the satire. An ironic tone will give you a more deeply intense approach. Is it useful to you to interpose yourself so definitely into the story?

TONE

The second operating principle, *tone*, is an offshoot of voice. An ironic tone is most related to voice. Irony gives guidance about how we should feel about plot and people. If you are telling a love story from a cynical point of view, your tone will be cynical. On the other hand, if your goal is to describe a positive relationship, a romantic tone may be more appropriate.

The writer creates tone by the type of observation incorporated into the story. If romance is your goal, the beauty of the day can be as useful as the beauty of the date.

Beyond the issue of visual detail, a second element of the tone is the relationship of your main character to the screen story.[4] Is the character in the middle of the story, or positioned as more of an observer? Every decision you make about dialogue, visual detail, and narrative structure will support a particular choice of tone.

CONFLICT AND POLARITIES

The central role of conflict in the development of your story cannot be overemphasized. Throughout your story, the struggle of character against character, character against setting, character against community, and character against society mines the dramatic possibilities. You should maximize those dramatic possibilities in order to tell your story.

This may seem synthetic, mechanical, and forced, but it must be that way. Unlike real life, dramatic life relies on coincidence, intensification, and artifice in order to fulfill the dramatic intentions of the writer. Real life too has its conflicts, but they are not quite as accelerated as dramatic life. A writer must use conflict to advantage in the story.

You should make the most of all the opportunities in terms of conflict the frame you've chosen yields. You should also highlight the opportunities that voice and tone choices offer, as well. Clearly, a more distant voice neutralizes some of the opportunities for conflict. Nevertheless, you should make the most of those that remain.

Use polarities to facilitate conflict. Conflict is amplified by polarities of character, behavior, goals, and situations. It is crucial for you to use as many

polarities as possible; they will make your job as a writer easier. Here are some illustrations of useful polarities.

A *physical* polarity is readily apparent in the blind detective. How is he going to discover the solution to the crime if he can't see? A detective investigates a crime. How can he investigate (see) and solve the crime (interpret) if he is blind? Here the opposites pose more conflicts within the character.

A *behavioral* polarity would be represented by the sadistic minister in Ingmar Bergman's autobiographical screenplay *The Best of Intentions*. The minister is expected to be loving and filled with charitable feeling; instead, he is demanding and cruel when it comes to his own family. We expect a minister who is father to his congregation to be a great father to his family, the ideal. But this minister is so needy that he becomes the opposite of the ideal father.

Other behavioral polarities would include the ignorant professor, the licentious pediatrician, and the meek athlete.

If you add other characters who are opposites to the characters described (for example, the fiercely competitive coach of the meek athlete, the saintly son of the sadistic minister, the brilliant student of the ignorant professor), you create polarities with dramatic possibilities.

This same technique applies to setting as well. Maximizing polarities increases your storytelling options.

CHARACTER

Decisions about character are key in the writing of your screenplay. Not only do we enter the story through the character, we also translate the events of the story through the eyes of the main character.

Consequently, how to position your character in the story is the first decision to be made. The second task is to explore who the character is and how the character can help amplify your idea. The romantic nature of the main character in Robert Enrico's *Incident at Owl Creek* makes his fate all the more tragic. If he were actually a Confederate spy, the story would not have the same resonance. Indeed, if he were a spy, the metaphorical level of the film regarding the tragedy of war would be lost. If he were a spy, the story would be a tale of retribution rather than a humanistic condemnation of war.

The third task is to examine the relationship of the main character to the antagonist. The more powerful this relationship of oppositional characters, the greater the dramatic impact of your story.

Finally, you should examine how the issue of character relates to the question of allegory. Does the character have the capacity to be considered "everyman" or "everywoman"? If the character has this more general quality as well as the other characteristics you have given him, the story is elevated to an allegorical level.

THE DRAMATIC CORE OF THE STORY

You are gripped by your idea, you have found a frame for the story, and you've developed conflict, polarities, and character in the film script. What is the dramatic heart of your story? Until you can answer this question, you won't be able to determine the proportions of scenes to one another. Where should the emphasis be placed? The answer to this question will determine the shape of your story.

In *Incident at Owl Creek*, the core of the story is that the condemned man, although he dreams of freedom and his family, will be executed for the crime of being found near the railroad tracks. His crime, and the punishment for that crime, should inform and shape the whole story. It is the dramatic core of the story,

The dramatic core in Norman McLaren's *Neighbours* is that belligerence, no matter how trivial, is all but impossible to stop once it has begun. There is an escalation to territoriality that goes from possessiveness to competitiveness, to active rivalry, to hostility, and on to murder. Nothing can stop the disagreement until it reaches its logical conclusion: the reciprocal murders of the two neighbors.

There is a drive to the core idea that influences the writing of all scenes. Its energy source is a magnet for the character and his actions. In a sense, the core idea is the engine of the script.

To illustrate the development of the dramatic core, we turn to a treatment by one of our students at New York University, Adisa Lasana Septuri, entitled "The View from Here."[5]

> We are in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, the home of Iron Mike Tyson. A community filled with laughter, pain, and hope. MONTAGE OF NEIGHBORHOOD—young men on the basketball court, girls playing hop-scotch, old men sitting on milk cartons, etc. A thirteen-year-old boy named Derrick is leaving his house carrying a football. He pauses a moment to secure his leg brace, and then hurries off. He bumps into a neighbor; they greet, but Derrick is in too much of a hurry to stay long.
>
> Derrick runs over to a group of kids. They are selecting teammates for a game of touch football. Everyone is picked except Derrick—being left out and unable to play, Derrick sits on his porch watching the game from the sidelines.
>
> Unexpectedly, one of the kids twists his ankle, and Derrick gets his golden opportunity to play—although now the kids won't throw the ball to him. After two unsuccessful plays,

Derrick's team decides to throw him the LONG BOMB. As the quarterback releases the football, it goes high in the sky. Derrick runs the length of the block while the football is going higher and higher. As Derrick crosses the street, a car almost runs him over.

The driver comes to a halt just long enough to look up and see the football flying overhead. Next we see Derrick catching a subway train to Manhattan. When he comes out of the subway exit, he looks up and sees the football soaring way up high. We then see Derrick knock a woman down at a bus stop.

We cut back to Derrick in the neighborhood. The football is coming down, and Derrick dives for it. The football just glides off the tips of his fingers, and rolls to the curb. Derrick's face shows grim disappointment. As the kids all gather around him, the air becomes very tense. After two long seconds the kids laugh, encouraging Derrick to do the same.

FADE TO BLACK

The dramatic core idea of *The View from Here* is that a thirteen-year-old boy wants to belong so much that he can run all over the city trying to catch a football finally thrown to him. His desire to belong is so great that the fantasy that a football could be thrown so far seems suddenly believable. Consequently, this football game is not just a football game. His efforts surpass what is realistic. His desire to belong is so great that we accept a reconfiguration of the meaning of "the long bomb."

PLOT POINTS

It's a good idea to write down a list of plot events that might help your story. At this stage you should be as generous as possible in terms of plot. You will not necessarily keep all these events in your story, but the list will help you look for a logic in the plot to surround the dramatic heart of your story. The list will also help you begin to think about proportion between events. Is one event more important to the plot than is another?

Preference should be given to those events that introduce surprise into the plot. Consideration should also be given to those events that reveal character.

ORGANIZING TO TELL YOUR STORY

In organizing events around a core, it is critical to include a rise in action in your story. This may mean the organization within the natural dimensions of the form. For the journey, for example, this may mean that the journey has a beginning, a middle, and a destination.

The rise in action may also be organized in terms of the character and his or her goal. In this case, the story begins with the articulation of the goal, and it ends when the character either achieves his or her goal or fails to achieve it.

The Beginning

Where and how you begin your story will set the tone for the script. It will also be the invitation to the audience to engage with your story. The more compelling the opening, the more likely it is that we will be engaged quickly with your story. This is all the more true with a short script. The opening should maximize the dramatic possibilities of the story.

Middle

The journey has begun, the event is under way. In the middle of your story, you must concentrate on the mechanics of the struggle, the confusion, the desire, so that we understand how difficult the undertaking is for the main character.

What is notable about the middle of the story is that the character's goal seems more difficult to achieve than it did at the beginning of the story. The journey is now more complicated; the event is not what it seemed. There may now be doubt that the character can achieve his or her goal.

End

The concluding section of the screen story should answer the question, did the character achieve his or her goal? Was it as he or she expected? There also should be a sense that the character has in some way changed or gained understanding because of having undertaken the journey or having experienced the event. What has brought him or her to that understanding is of greater dramatic intensity than the struggle of the middle or the articulation of the goal in the beginning.

Climax

One key event takes the character to the summit, and that event is the climax of the story. The event will involve the antagonist and the resolution of the main character's struggle with the antagonist.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEKING CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

It is very easy for writers to rely on mechanical solutions to narrative problems. Transforming an idea into a script means attending to dramatic principles and forms; however, too often the writer unwittingly falls into the trap of taking the path of least resistance: the mechanically correct rather than the creatively desirable dramatic solution.

In essence, avoiding mechanical solutions means keeping your awareness of, excitement about, and commitment to the original idea in the forefront. Only by finding energetic and interesting solutions to problems encountered in translating your idea into a short film will you end with a story as exciting and as interesting as your original idea.

THE ROLE OF ENERGY

Your dramatic story needs a level of energy in the script that keeps the viewer primed and receptive to the creative solutions you develop. Energy should come from every source—the frame of your story, the nature of your character, the character's goal, the barriers to that goal.

If you have done your job well, you will not have to write dialogue at the level of a scream in order to simulate energy in the screenplay. The development of polarities and the interjection of an element of surprise will provide the story with energy.

THE ROLE OF INSIGHT

Surprise and energy lead to insight. When you and I discover something about a person, a place, a time, something we never knew or had forgotten, we experience an insight. Just as your main character should experience insight about him or herself through experiences in the script, so too should the audience members gain insight about themselves.

All of us want to learn all the time. It's the great payoff from reading or viewing stories. When they are very good, they teach us, as all positive and negative experiences should.

Insights into people, places, and times give us clues to our own lives—what we want and what we don't want from our lives. Insights are the shared moments between writer and viewer, the point at which we are closest. In script writing, they are the most powerful moments in the act of telling a dramatic story.

EXERCISE 18

Identify two ideas for short films that you will work with in this exercise. One idea should be autobiographical. It should be a painful incident from the past. One approach to articulating this idea is to write a letter to a real person who was not involved in the matter.

A second idea should be drawn from a newspaper, also describing an incident that captures your interest. Use the incident to write a letter to a person who was involved in the incident. Write the letter as if the incident happened to you.

Using these two ideas, choose a frame or genre for each story. Once you have decided upon a genre, answer the following questions or complete the tasks below:

1. Do you want an intense or distancing treatment of this story?
2. Name five strategies to intensify your story.
3. Name five strategies to distance us from your story.
4. Identify five potential conflicts in each of your stories.
5. Identify five polarities that you will use in each story,
6. What is the most important idea in your story?
7. How does this idea relate to each of the conflicts in your story?
8. List ten events or plot points in your story.
9. Organize those events along a rising action.
10. Which event best opens your story?
11. Which event best closes your story?
12. What is the climax of your story?
13. Add three surprises suitable to your story.

NOTES

1. Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 335.
2. Two collections of such tales are Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1988) and Bernard Gotfryde's *Anton the Dove Fancier and Other Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1990).
3. Jerome Stern, *Making Shapely Fiction* (New York: Dell, 1991).
4. For an elaborate treatment of this relationship, see K. Dancyger and J. Rush, *Alternative Scriptwriting* (Boston: Focal Press, 1991), 154.
5. Adisa Lasana Septuri, "The View from Here," Graduate Department of Film and Television, New York University, New York, 1990.