curb.

2. A nine-year-old girl lives with her bossy older brother and quarrelsome parents in a small suburban house. She stubbornly refuses to be drawn into the family's mealtime squabbles, hurrying away from the table as soon as she can to gaze out the window at the house next door, where a lively, cheerful family is having its dinner. Although the house is some distance away and she can't follow much of what is going on, she watches happily. Then one day, hunting for something in a closet, she comes upon a pair of powerful field glasses and makes off with them.

This assignment may take several days and a number of drafts to complete. Because every assignment and exercise in this book is intended to lead to your writing an original screenplay, it will be worth your while to keep your notes, as well as any completed work, in a special folder.

NOTES

1. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1927), 86.
2. Paul Zweig, *The Adventurer* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 84, 85.
3. Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. Francis Fergusson, trans. and introduction by S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961).
4. Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 15.
5. Italo Calvino and Patrick Creagh, trans., *The Uses of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986), 18.

FILMS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER

Annie Hall, directed by Woody Allen, 1977.
Champion, directed by Jeffrey D. Brown, 1978.
Chinatown, directed by Roman Polanski, 1974.
Gare du Nord, directed by Jean Rouch, from *Six in Paris*, 1965.
Going to Work in the Morning from Brooklyn, directed by Phillip Messina, 1967.
Grease Monkey, directed by Laurie Craig, 1982.
The Maltese Falcon, directed by John Huston, 1941.
Modern Times, directed by Charles Chaplin, 1936.
Sleeping Beauties, directed by Karyn Kusuma, 1991.
Unforgiven, directed by Clint Eastwood, 1993.

TELLING A STORY IN IMAGES

The cinema is still a form of graphic art. Through its mediation, I write in pictures. . . . I show what others tell. In Orphée, *for example, I do not narrate the passing through mirrors; I show it, and in some manner, I prove it.*

JEAN COCTEAU[1]

Perhaps no aspect of film and video is more powerful in terms of narrative than the appearance of reality. Images on the screen have a validity, a weight, of their own, in a way that words do not. What follows is an excerpt from the scene in *Orpheus* to which Cocteau refers. In the screenplay, based on the myth, the poet Orpheus has lost his wife to Death. Heurtebise is the chauffeur of the Princess of Death. The film takes place in 1950, the year in which it was made.

Note that the format is not proper screenplay format, which you will find in the Appendix, but a compressed version favored by book publishers.

The Princess' gloves are on Orpheus' bed.

HEURTEBISE
(removing the gloves)
Someone has left their gloves behind.

ORPHEUS
Gloves?

HEURTEBISE
Put them on . . . come on, come on. . . . Put them on.

In the following scene is shown through reversed film.)

HEURTEBISE
(standing by the mirror)
With those gloves you'll go through the mirror as though it were water!

ORPHEUS
Prove it to me.

HEURTEBISE
Try it. I'll come with you. Look at the time.

The clock shows just a second before six o'clock. Orpheus prepares to go through the mirror. His hands are at his side.

HEURTEBISE
Your hands first!
(Orpheus walks forward, his gloved hands extended toward the mirror. His hands touch reflected hands in the mirror.)
Are you afraid?

ORPHEUS
No, but this mirror is just a mirror and I see an unhappy man in it.

HEURTEBISE
It's not a question of understanding; it's a question of believing.

Orpheus walks through the mirror with his hands in front of him. The mirror shows the beginning of the Zone. Then the mirror reflects the room once more.[2]

When Orpheus returns with his wife Eurydice, after a series of adventures in the Zone, the clock is just striking six. The scene is a brilliant example of how to write scripts that create magical effects by the simplest means. Cocteau the director had to shoot his films on extremely low budgets, so Cocteau the scriptwriter saw to it that his screenplays did not call for complicated special effects.

An image in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*, as breathtaking today as in 1945 when the film was first released, is described in the screenplay very

wicked older sisters are hanging sheets in the yard, one of many household tasks that used to be left to poor Beauty.

The merchant and Beauty walk across the yard. Beauty looks like a princess. . . . Her only piece of jewelry is a magnificent pearl necklace with a diamond clasp. The two sisters stare at her in disbelief.

FELICIE
(staring greedily at Beauty's necklace)
What a magnificent necklace!

BEAUTY
(removing it and offering it to her)
Take it, Felicie, it will look even better on you.

Felicie grabs it eagerly. It turns into a bunch of dirty twisted rags.

MERCHANT
My God!

ADELAIDE
Put it down!

FELICIE
How disgusting!

She drops it. As it touches the ground it turns back into pearls. The merchant picks up the necklace and puts it on Beauty.[3]

The metamorphosis of jewels into rags was accomplished by the very precise filming and splicing together of two different close shots. In the first shot, Beauty hands the pearl necklace to her eager sister. In the second, she hands Felicie the necklace of dried rags at the same pace, with an identical gesture. The transformation of one necklace into the other was effected by splicing the first half of the first shot onto the second half of the second one at the instant Felicie touches the jeweled necklace. Even today audiences, sophisticated in the ways of special effects, give a gasp of delighted surprise at the results: Cocteau indeed "proves" to us the reality of the world that his characters inhabit.

Writing a screenplay means writing for a medium that uses moving images to convey meaning. These images and the way in which they are put together are the "language" of film; to write an effective short script, you

considering material for your short screenplay, to ask yourself early in the process the most important question of all: will this story lend itself to being told primarily in images?

THREE VISUAL OPENINGS

What follows are detailed accounts of the openings of three short films regarded as classics. Each uses little or no dialogue and no voice-over, although their sound tracks play important roles in establishing mood and tone. Note that these are not excerpts from the screenplays but simply descriptions of scenes from the finished films. In *Incident at Owl Creek* (Robert Enrico, 1962), the following sign is prominently placed on a burnt tree trunk:

ORDER
ANY CIVILIAN
CAUGHT INTERFERING WITH
THE RAILROAD BRIDGES
TUNNELS OR TRAINS WILL BE
SUMMARILY HANGED
THE 4TH OF APRIL, 1862

There is a long roll of drums, the hoot of an owl, a bugle call. Below, in the distance, we glimpse a wooden bridge, where a Union officer is bawling orders. We hear the sound of marching feet and get a look at a sentinel high above, a rifle at his side. A line of Union riflemen marches across the bridge and comes to attention before the officer. A brutal-looking sergeant carries a length of rope toward a man in civilian clothes who stands at the edge of the bridge, hands and feet bound. In his mid-thirties, he is dressed in the fine chambray shirt and brocaded vest of a Southern gentleman. His broad, pleasant face is beaded with sweat.

The sergeant painstakingly ties the rope into a noose, knots it securely, and tightens the knot.

The officer watches impassively as the prisoner is pushed onto a plank extending out over the wide river rushing below. The man gasps as the noose is dropped loosely over his head. He looks wildly about, sees the sentinel above and the riflemen all around him.

In less than five minutes, through a series of powerful visual and aural images, we have been enabled not only to grasp the main character's terrible predicament but to identify with him completely in the desperate struggle to escape that follows.

In *Two Men and a Wardrobe* (Roman Polanski, 1957), we see a wide expanse of sea and sky, from which two figures wade slowly toward us to the accompaniment of lively "silent-screen" music. Between them is what appears

[illegible] wardrobe, and that the figures are two slight young men.

The youths come up onto the sand, gently set down the wardrobe, and begin to hop about in a comical fashion to shake the water out of their ears. Although they are dressed in identical cotton pants and tee shirts, one is dark haired and bareheaded, the other fair haired and wearing a workman's flat cap. He takes this off, wrings it out well, replaces it at a dashing angle, and checks his reflection in the mirror of the wardrobe.

The music shifts into a waltz. The two bow to one another and begin to waltz across the sand with exaggerated grace. After a few turns, they stop and begin to warm up as if preparing to exercise: the dark youth does a somersault or two and the fair one some sketchy calisthenics. Then, in perfect unison, they stop, lift up the wardrobe, and begin to stagger up the beach.

The music quickens and becomes discordant as the two men carry the wardrobe along a street, where cars and pedestrians rush by. When a crowded trolley appears, they try and fail to board it with the wardrobe, as passengers jeer and push at them.

Next we see a bird in a big cage set down on a quiet side street. A pretty young woman gazing down at it looks up to see the two youths approaching with their wardrobe. They all exchange smiles, and she sets off up the street, leaving the caged bird behind. The men put down the wardrobe, exchange a glance, and hurry after her. We watch at a distance as they bow, courteously shake hands with her, then turn back to retrieve the wardrobe. She looks after them a moment and continues walking away.

We see them at a distance, trudging by a bridge with their wardrobe. Two men on the bridge laugh at the sight; one keeps his arm about his companion's shoulder as he deftly lifts a wallet from his back pocket. The camera moves down to disclose a ravine below the bridge, where one man is battering another's head with a large rock.

Because the two protagonists treat the wardrobe so matter-of-factly throughout, we accept it as a given in this opening sequence of Roman Polanski's absurdist fable. Charmed by their liveliness and childlike ways, we quickly come to care about what happens to them in their quest for food and lodging in a savage and indifferent city. As in our previous example, our empathy with the protagonists has been accomplished in a remarkably short time through the use of images alone.

In *The Red Balloon* (Albert Lamorisse, 1956), we see a cobblestoned plaza surrounded by tall, gabled houses, in which a little boy of about five appears, carrying an adult-sized briefcase. He stops to pat a large cat, and something high on a lamppost catches his attention. He climbs up and untangles the long string of a red balloon caught at the top.

We follow as he runs down a stone stairway, walks through the town with briefcase and balloon, tries to board a bus, and is rejected. Finally he arrives at the big double doors of his school and gives the balloon to a

A few seconds later (in what is called a "time lapse"), he tumbles outside along with a shouting mass of other boys and grabs his waiting balloon by its cord. It is raining, and he shelters the balloon under the umbrellas of various passersby. He runs up the stone steps, across the square and—still holding the balloon—into a house, where a woman stands waiting at an upstairs window. A moment later the window is opened, and the balloon is thrust outside, where it hovers uncertainly. In another moment the little boy reaches out to pull it back inside. One more moment goes by, and he puts it back outside.

There is a dissolve (indicating another time lapse), and the little boy emerges on the street, looking about for his friend. The balloon descends, keeping its string just out of reach like a playful dog. The boy tries to catch hold of it again and again, then finally gives up and moves off down the street as the balloon follows along behind.

Like the wardrobe in the Polanski film, the personified balloon in Lamorisse's contemporary fairy tale is presented in a logical and convincing manner. Unlike the wardrobe, however, the balloon is an object with the distinct attributes of a character, much like one of the magical animals who befriend the heroes of fairy tales. In a very short time, using visuals alone to establish the situation, this short film "proves" to us, in Cocteau's use of the word, how a spirited, lonely little boy and the playful balloon he rescues go about becoming friends in a provincial world that does not look with kindness on little boys or balloons.

WHAT THE IMAGES TELL US ABOUT CHARACTER

Analyze and imitate; no other school is necessary.
RAYMOND CHANDLER *on screenwriting*[4]

We learn from the cut and quality of his clothes that the condemned man in *Incident at Owl Creek* is not only a civilian but a Southern gentleman; we learn again from clothing that the two youths in *Two Men and a Wardrobe* are probably workmen; from the well-fitting dark suit he wears and the big leather briefcase he carries, we surmise that the child in *The Red Balloon* is from an upper-middle-class family and that he is expected to behave like a miniature adult.

In *Incident at Owl Creek*, the face of the main character is the only pleasant one in the sequence—the sergeant looks brutal, and the officer and soldiers are as impassive as puppets. We can see that the captive is desperate but brave: although there are beads of sweat on his face, he doesn't break down or plead with his captors. The involuntary gasp he gives when the noose is dropped over his head and his wild look around to see if there might be any

In *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, both the look of the two main characters—amiable and slightly goofy—and their innocent exuberance on the beach quickly endear them to us. They treat one another and the young woman they meet with old-fashioned courtesy, and the wardrobe they have to lug about with respectful familiarity. In fact, their stylized behavior throughout brings to mind, as no doubt it was intended to, the kind of undersized underdog antiheroes portrayed in silent films by the great actor/writer/directors Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

In *The Red Balloon*, the young hero is slight but wiry, with an elfin, dreamer's face. We first see him as a very small figure in a very large square dominated by massive stone houses. His briefcase reminds us of the sort of small humiliations unfeeling adults can visit on children. In addition, it lends the boy a somewhat comical air. The balloon, of course, is red—the color of blood, the color of life, the color of trouble. In the context of the film, it is not only the main character's friend but his double, his secret self.

WHAT THE IMAGES TELL US ABOUT THE MAIN CHARACTER'S SITUATIONS

In *Incident at Owl Creek*, we read the sign and hear the roll of drums, the hoot of an owl, and a bugle call before we glimpse the main character. Each of these sounds acts as a powerful stimulus to the forming of mental images. Together, they provide us with important information and set a tone of foreboding that will quickly be justified. We hear the owl and realize that although there is faint light and it is growing brighter, it is still (technically) night—and executions traditionally take place at dawn. We hear a roll of drums and imagine soldiers marching; we hear a bugle call and realize that it must be reveille.

After this, we witness the grim realities of the main character's situation, including the carefully detailed looping, tying, and knotting of the rope in the hangman's hand. Time slows onscreen, as it is supposed to at such moments in life. Yet when the prisoner is pushed out onto the plank, we see the river rushing along below his feet. Although we do not realize it at that moment, what has been set up with this single image is a possible route of escape.

In *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, the main characters emerge from the sea with their wardrobe, like two children with an unwieldy suitcase, onto a wonderfully clean and empty beach. The scene is shot and cut in a leisurely way, and the young men behave as though they had all the time in the world. But as soon as they begin their journey through the streets and back alleys of the city beyond the beach, the rhythm and tempo of the film change. We are bombarded with visuals in the editing style of an old-fashioned

The activity on and about the bridge further demonstrates the violent, hostile nature of the city by showing us separate events taking place simultaneously—a robbery, a murderous assault, and the two innocents trudging by with their wardrobe. In addition, by drastically varying locations early in the film (tranquil beach, bustling city boulevard, quiet side street, bridge, and dangerous ravine), the screenwriter establishes a powerful tension between the simple need of the protagonists and the unpredictable dangers of the environment in which they find themselves.

In *The Red Balloon*, our first glimpse of the little boy is of a small figure enclosed by towering houses. The images of a shadowy male figure watching him from an upstairs window of the school, and of the equally shadowy female figure watching him from an upstairs window of his house, serve to emphasize the lack of freedom in his life.

Although the balloon is eventually punctured by enemies, it is full and bouncy throughout much of the film, its long string as lively as a cat's tail. Its brilliant red, beside being emblematic of life and courage, serves to underline the dreariness of the stone-colored world through which the little boy ordinarily moves.

A FURTHER EXAMPLE OF SCREENWRITING IN IMAGES

The opening sequence of the script for the feature film *Dangerous Liaisons*, written by Christopher Hampton, provides a fine example of how a writer can delineate with images alone aspects of environment, character, and conflict.

The sequence that follows is written in what is known as "master format," the film script format most widely used in the United States at the present time. (Other examples, and a discussion of various kinds of formats, can be found in the Appendix. Thoughout, "INT." means interior, and "EXT.," exterior.)

2 INT. MADAME DE MERTEUIL'S DRESSING-ROOM DAY

The gilt frame around the mirror on the MARQUISE DE MERTEUIL's dressing table encloses the reflection of her beautiful face. For a moment she examines herself; critically, but not without satisfaction. Then she begins to apply her makeup.

ANOTHER ANGLE shows the whole large room, the early afternoon light filtering through gauze curtains. MERTEUIL's CHAMBERMAID stands behind her, polishing her shoulders with crushed mother-of-pearl. Three or

room. It's midsummer in Paris in 1788.

INT. VICOMTE DE VALMONT'S BEDROOM DAY

VALMONT is an indistinct shape in his vast bed. His valet-de-chambre, AZOLAN, leads a troupe of male SERVANTS into the room. One raises the blind and opens enough of a curtain to admit some afternoon light, another waits with a cup of chocolate steaming on a tray, a third carries a damp flannel in a bowl. As VALMONT stirs, his face still unseen, AZOLAN takes the flannel, leans over and begins a perfunctory dry wash.

INT. MERTEUIL'S DRESSING-ROOM DAY

A steel hook moves to and fro, deftly tightening MME DE MERTEUIL's corset.

This intercutting of the elaborate dressing rituals of De Merteuil and Valmont continues, without dialogue. Essentially, as the script makes clear in the last shot of the sequence that follows, we are watching as squires gird two seasoned warriors for battle. De Merteuil's stomacher is put in place by her maids, and the seamstress sews her into her dress. In the anteroom to Valmont's dressing room, a mask covers Valmont's face as a servant blows powder onto his wig. He lowers the mask, and we at last see his intelligent, malicious features.

> ANOTHER ANGLE SHOWS THE COMPLETE MAGNIFICENT ENSEMBLE: or not quite complete, for AZOLAN now reaches his arms round VALMONT's waist to strap on his sword.[5]

In the sequence that follows, battle of a sort is joined between these two characters in the grand salon of Mme de Merteuil's town house.

WHAT THE IMAGES IN THIS SEQUENCE TELL US

We learn immediately that Merteuil is beautiful and knows it, that both she and Valmont are enormously wealthy, and that they are being readied (and are quite accustomed to being readied) for some sort of formal occasion. The nature of the crosscutting indicates both that there is a parallel between the characters and that they are dressing to meet one another in a contest of some sort. We also realize that Valmont appears somewhat less eager—or perhaps just more indolent—than Merteuil. Brief references to clothing, accessories,

been told us in just two pages of film script!

A FEW WORDS ON THE WRITING EXERCISES IN THIS BOOK

They are intended (1) as aids to freeing perception and imagination, (2) as explorations to be embarked upon without thought of evaluating results in the ordinary way, and (3) as finger exercises, to be used as warm-up for future scriptwriting.

In doing them, don't concern yourself with grammar, spelling, or punctuation. To do so may inhibit the flow of images, associations, and vague, floating ideas that are the raw material from which good stories are made. If the work is being done in a classroom, students might read the exercises aloud if they choose, but in our experience, the exercises work best when there is no analysis or criticism afterward. Assignments, of course, are another matter. If you are doing the exercises on your own, you might want to read them aloud to a friend or friends—often reading work to an audience enables you to find things in it you might not otherwise be aware of. Just explain that it's better if there is no discussion of the material at the time.

A further note: in doing the exercises, it is helpful to use a timer of some sort so that you are free to focus completely on scribbling as fast as you can. Let your pen or pencil do the thinking.

EXERCISE 1: USING VISUAL IMAGES

X is your character, whoever he or she may turn out to be. Write down the following paragraph:

> Dusk. Sound of soft rain. Fully dressed, *X* lies on the bed, gazing up at the ceiling. After a moment, *X* gets up slowly and crosses to the dresser against the opposite wall.

Begin writing, stopping at the end of ten minutes. Put the page aside without reading it. Take a couple of deep breaths and have a good stretch before going on to the next exercise.

The writer/director Ingmar Bergman has said in a number of interviews that for him a screenplay begins with a single compelling image (in *Persona*, it was an image of two women; in *Cries and Whispers*, of a blood-red room). He then unravels that image, so to speak, and writes down what he discovers in doing so. If the results engage him, he continues; if not, he stops.

your recollection of the previous exercise rather than what you have written down. Most of the questions you will ask your character are those actors often ask themselves (as the characters they are playing) before going onstage or in front of a camera. The responses to these questions are known as the "given circumstances" of a character's situation at any particular moment.

EXERCISE 2: USING VISUAL IMAGES

Quickly write down the following questions, leaving plenty of room for each answer:

- Who are you?
- Where are you?
- What are you wearing?
- Why are you here?
- What do you want at this moment?
- What time of day is it? What season? What year?
- What is the weather like?

You have only ten minutes in which to write down all the answers, so scribble whatever comes to mind, no matter how absurd it seems. You can always cross out later. Set your timer and GO!

SECOND ASSIGNMENT: REWRITING IN FORMAT

You should now have more than enough material for this assignment, which will require somewhat more time and thought than the previous exercises. It consists of two parts. The first is to rewrite your scene from Exercise 1, using whatever information you find useful or provocative from the answers in Exercise 2. (At this point, you don't have to justify anything in terms of story.)

Give your character at least a first name; if this threatens to hold things up, go to the phone book, open it, and choose a column at random. Pick a name from that column that seems right for your character.

The second part of the assignment is to revise the revision, keeping only those details that seem essential (again, no need as yet to figure out why), and to put the results into proper screenplay format. Follow the master-scene format of *Dangerous Liaisons*, but don't be daunted by Hampton's elegant style, as he is a professional writer, more gifted than most, with many plays and screenplays to his credit. Still, if you are going to learn by imitating and analyzing, as we suggest, then it makes sense to imitate and analyze the work of a master.

detachment from the material and may see possibilities that you've previously overlooked.

The assignments, as opposed to the exercises, will benefit from reading and discussion in class or, again, if you are working on your own, with friends who have some idea of the writing process.

NOTES

1. Jean Cocteau, *Three Screenplays* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Frederick Luhr, *Raymond Chandler and Film* (New York: Ungar, 1982).
5. Christopher Hampton, "Dangerous Liaisons," unpublished screenplay, 1988.

FILMS DISCUSSED IN THIS CHAPTER

Beauty and the Beast, directed by Jean Cocteau, 1945.
Dangerous Liaisons, directed by Stephen Frears, 1989.
Incident at Owl Creek, directed by Robert Enrico, 1962.
Orpheus, directed by Jean Cocteau, 1950.
The Red Balloon, directed by Alfred Lamorisse, 1955.
Two Men and a Wardrobe, directed by Roman Polanski, 1957.

USING SOUND TO TELL THE STORY

Besides conveying what (as we have noted) philosopher Susanne Langer calls "the feeling-tone" of a film or tape, aural images can expand the frame in terms of offscreen space and extend the meaning of what is being shown, by using sound as metaphor.[1] When these images are an integral part of the story, they usually originate in the script.

The great French director Robert Bresson, whose films are known for the quality of their visual images, is a master at extending the frame through sound. In his chapbook, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, he states that sound always evokes an image, although an image does not always evoke a sound.[2] He applies this principle to great effect in a scene from his film *Pickpocket*, in which the impoverished hero stands behind a prosperous-looking couple at a racetrack, trying to get up the courage to make an attempt on the wallet in the woman's pocketbook. We hear the blaring announcement of the next race over a loudspeaker, a bell's loud clanging, the pounding of hooves, and cries of a crowd we can't see but that seems to be all around us. Meanwhile, the camera steadily regards the man and woman facing us and also the young man standing just behind and between them. Because of the background sound, as well as the reactions of the couple as they follow the race, we believe that it is going on somewhere "behind" us and so are able to focus our entire attention on the inner struggle of the main character.

Another example, which uses offscreen sound to create a rising sense of unease in both main character and audience, is from an independent feature called *The Passage*, which was written and directed by Pat Cooper, one of the authors of this book.

In the film, a ghost story, a writer called Michael Donovan has left his wife in New York and gone to a desolate part of Cape Cod to do research on nineteenth-century shipwrecks. He rents a handsome old cottage on a dune overlooking the sea at a spot where shipwrecks once were common, and he immerses himself in the history of the place. The sequence that follows describes his first encounter with the ghost.