4 Visual Storytelling

Screenwriting is exactly that: writing for the *screen*. This means everything that appears in a screenplay is seen or heard by the audience, and although many novice screenwriters spend much time writing dialogue, it cannot be emphasised enough that screenwriting is very much a visual medium. Of course voice is important and can be a crucial element of telling a story, but the visual importance of screenwriting needs to be appreciated fully. A common cliché, not only in screenwriting but many forms of creative and media writing, is *show, don't tell*. In this context it means writers need to carefully consider how they visually tell a story and show the audience what is happening. The narrative experience of film and television is an audio-visual one, not just audio (sound, music, dialogue), so finding ways in which story can be conveyed in pictures and imagery is vital. It is worth considering that we live in a highly visually literate culture, where people are reliant upon look and image, and can with ease understand complex and demanding ideas when portrayed visually. Screenwriters should not be afraid to allow the narrative to develop in images, using the performance space of the screenplay (the screen or, if reading, the imagination) to convey story, character, theme and meaning.

The basics of visual storytelling

Unlike novels where much of the action is imagined, or in theatre or radio where action and emotion is heard, on screen everything is seen. From a simple gesture or facial expression to more elaborate action sequences, characters inform an audience about their state of mind, feelings, wants, needs and plans by *doing*. This can be understood as *Action, Behaviour, Character* – ABC. *Action* is what an audience sees; comprised of the *behaviour* of a set of people interacting in a scene; from which *character* traits can be deduced and decisions made about a character, what they want or need, how one character views another. The observing of characters interacting in a scene has the power to tell an audience as much as, sometimes more than, the spoken word.

The skill lies in translating character – personality, emotion, descriptive adjectives – into action and behaviour.

American Beauty utilises these ideas to full effect. The film's protagonist is Lester Burnham, a middle-aged man who feels he needs a new direction in life. The opening sequence establishes the character's dramatic problem through what he does. Although it employs a voiceover crucial in creating audience identification and revealing exposition, it is the use of physical action and behaviour that promulgates a clear understanding of who Lester is. He lies lazily in bed looking at the ceiling, his face telling of the dread he fears will creep into his day. He goes to the shower and masturbates, his voice telling the audience that 'it's all downhill from here.' His pessimism for life continues as he looks out despondently from an upstairs window, watching his wife Carolyn neatly pruning the roses and talking with their neighbour. Surrounded by a suburban nightmare, Lester is running late for work. This is important because not only does it physically show us his character but it sets him apart from his wife and daughter Jane. They are waiting for him, he is the one who is late, suggesting they are more organised and in some ways 'better' than he is. Lester's own words are that he is a gigantic loser. Later in the film when Lester begins his search for a new lease of life, one of the first things he does to initiate the change is get out his old gym gear and begin to work out. This character choice to physically make a change and behave differently demonstrates the power of action and behaviour in depicting character on the screen. As screenwriters, we need to experiment with ideas around character behaviour and it is good practice to take everything known about a character and write scenes to visually depict this. These will not necessarily make it into the final draft, but develop an intrinsic awareness of how to use action and behaviour to tell an audience about character. Another useful exercise is to put a character into a given situation and see how he or she reacts. Knowing who a character is and how they usually behave, it is interesting to see how they react in a situation alien to them. For example, how would an arrogant, selfish, womanising protagonist physically react when faced with a pretty young woman wielding a knife and demanding his wallet?

The *visual grammar* of character is also important, adding an experience of story that goes beyond simple action and behaviour and is punctuated by traits such as dress and appearance, lifestyle, physical environment and gesture. These *expressers of identity* are useful tools to work with because of the function they serve in understanding story. The interplay between such elements of visual grammar and the journey

being undertaken by the character can be understood by the way of *choice*: a character chooses a way of sculpting their identity through visual display. Dress and appearance can be understood as a physical space in which a character can purvey their inner self (identity) via dressing the body. This may come in the form of a character's costume: what they choose to wear on a night out, accessories they wear, or even bodily 'dressing up' such as piercings, tattoos and cosmetic surgery. If the character has to wear a particular type of dress enforced by others, it can be interesting to see how he or she may *appropriate* this outfit. Whether it is a schoolgirl who wants to glamorise her uniform or a civil servant who adds accessories to his shirt and tie, characters can appropriate what they wear to make a statement about their identity. This is very much linked to story and choice, and can be a vital way of defining character by performative visual grammar. Many of these decisions will come from the costume designer and not the writer, but it is possible (and useful) for the writer to at least consider such things because it can influence the script. If a writer knows a character would be wearing this, not wearing that, then the scene can be written to include implicit or explicit references to costume, in this way working with the scene's essential story function and colouring it with visual grammar.

Lifestyle is another feature of character through which visual expression is also possible. Factors to consider include: what does the character have on their bedroom wall? What type of newspaper or magazine do they read? What car do they drive? Where do they go on holiday? Where can they be seen eating out? Such questions, when pieced together, form a strong sense of character profile, and can reinforce the screenplay. Novice writers tend to set scenes in familiar places like kitchens, living rooms and streets, but knowing the lifestyle of a character can add texture and a sense of reality which can be played out by use of visual lifestyle depiction. This relates closely with physical environment (which will be discussed further later on). Here, the writer can use physical space and its inhabitation to suggest further profiling. For example, looking at the lifestyle questions, where does a character choose to eat out? Is it a posh restaurant or a greasy spoon? Does it have a calming and relaxed mood or is it chaotic and noisy? Although it could be said the character has no ownership of these locations – they are just places that exist – we would suggest they can be understood on a character-driven level. Firstly, the character has chosen to go to this place therefore it reveals personality and taste through physical choice. Secondly, how the character acts within and reacts to this space reveals character further; it could be a way of punctuating someone's taste, lifestyle and ability to frequent the place, or a way of juxtaposing character and space to reveal who and what this character is not. Whoever the character and whatever the physical environment, the two can work together as visual grammar to deepen the understanding of both character, and subsequently, narrative.

These techniques can be used to great effect in the opening minutes of a screenplay (see Chapter 3). Featuring as part of the 'set up' of classical narrative, the opening is often a predominantly visual sequence revealing character, story world and theme. A crucial part of the screenplay, it carefully introduces character(s) to the audience and provides essential backstory information which will help the narrative to unfold. This can quickly and effectively set up character, telling an audience who they are, what they are about, and what they want. Action, behaviour, dress, appearance, lifestyle depiction and physical environment all give an audience vital visual clues to decode in order to formulate knowledge and opinions on character.

The 'four tools technique'

Taking this grammar a step further, when considering how to realise action on the page, the *four tools* technique offers a clear working practice that quickly develops strong scene writing skills. These techniques not only develop the character-driven discussions above into story-driven ones, but offer specific practical considerations for the hands-on writing of the script. Even with the skill to think visually, translating this into actual writing on the page needs practice, and thus each tool has accompanying exercises in Chapter 7.

Specific verbs

By using verbs rather than adjectives, scene description immediately becomes more economical and punchy. Verbs are already external and dynamic and therefore innately dramatic. By choosing a verb the writer ensures the description becomes 'playable', that it will work on screen. Much of the writer's work is to ensure the story will be clear and effective on screen, and using verbs helps to approach emotional beats in an external, dramatic way rather than a nebulous internal manner. If visual storytelling is about externalising inner emotional states, using not only verbs but the technique of specific verbs accomplishes this in

a simple and economic way. By being specific, a writer gives clues as to how a character is feeling, how much they want something, how important it is, or how they are reacting to what is going on. Thus, instead of saying 'she looks', a scene description might choose one of the following more evocative synonyms:

Glance, Peer, Peek, Stare, Glare, Gaze, Squint, Wink or Regard.

Each of these verbs have specific emotional connotations and encourages the audience to infer their own assumptions as to the situation, reading a character as angry, curious, shy, playful, resentful. With just one verb, the writer gives the reader maximum information about a character's internal state as well as ensuring it will play on screen.

Objects

Another effective way to show how a character feels is to give them an object to interact with. Adding objects to a scene can offer characters an opportunity to act or react (throwing it, hiding it, using it to block or distract), and can give useful clues to the status or balance of a relationship, such as who has an object, who has taken it, if there is or has been a struggle over it, if it has been stolen, if it is given away or offered, who takes it or refuses it. In this way objects quickly establish or reveal changing *dynamics* within relationships, without resorting to long-winded explanations.

Often, a script will have a few *key objects* running through the story and the way they are used in different scenes suggests not only how a character feels at that moment but how a character, relationship or situation is changing (tracking the emotional journey). In *Misery*, various book-related props such as the manuscript to Paul Sheldon's new book, the new *Misery* manuscript, the published *Misery* books, Sheldon's manuscript satchel and the typewriter are used in various ways to chart who has power over whom. By using such objects, characters can speak volumes about inner thoughts and feelings to both reader and other characters without having to spell it out in dialogue. As an object is used throughout a script, the audience/reader also begins to have certain expectations of it – how it will be used, how sought after it is, who might struggle over it – and in this way the writer can use them as *valued objects* that create tension or relief (fear and hope) and become ways to create meaning not only through action but through *comparison* and *context*.

The recurring objects in *Misery* have a symbolic and thematic resonance and coherence (books or writing paraphernalia), which makes for sophisticated storytelling, but an object does not always have to be a valued object (an object with desired status in the story). Instead, a character could be provided with an object in a scene that does not have any intrinsic value to the plot but simply works as a temporary tool to allow characters to express themselves through action, so the audience can see if they are nervous, angry, thoughtful or loving. This works in a similar way to dialogue subtext, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Environment

When writing a scene, it is essential to always consider where it is set. Even in low budget dramas, there is a lot to be said for thinking creatively around scene locations. What is the emotional beat or conflict in the scene; what do the characters want? Once established, the writer can brainstorm where to best set the scene: an open or enclosed space; private or public; a place where there is a chance of being interrupted or bringing in a third party? By setting a scene in a different location, it might also offer up new objects to be used by characters and help bring the scene alive.

Thinking back to earlier character-driven questions of visual grammar, it is useful to consider how a character feels in a location – are they comfortable or awkward, do they want to be there or get away, are they trying to hide (physically or emotionally)? In a relationship, a particular location might be better suited to one of the characters, making them feel more at ease or in control and therefore setting up a power dynamic. Locations can also add spice to a scene and make it feel fresh. It can either heighten or counterpoint the emotion in the scene and be used thematically or symbolically to create richer subtext: is a character isolated, imprisoned emotionally, lost in a crowd, overwhelmed? By putting a character in a particular environment, the writer can let one strong image speak volumes and stand back to allow the audience to find their own way to them.

Blocking and body language

Even though screenwriting is as much about reaction as action, writers often forget to write in the reactions of characters who are not talking.

Adding specific body language (e.g. 'he slumps on the chair', 'she turns away' or 'he leans against the wall, tapping his foot') can tell the reader how a character is feeling, how they are reacting to a situation and suggest what lies behind this. However, there is more to physical movement than body language. The writer may also consider how to block the scene – that is, how characters move around the location in relation to each other. When directors work with actors, they block a scene in terms of how the actor/character feels in the space as well as in relation to the camera. For writers, the camera is not their tool, but what should be considered is how characters react physically to each other and to the space. For instance, are characters facing each other? Is one standing and one sitting? Has one of them turned their back? Is one of them hanging around by the door, about to leave? Do they walk up and speak right in their face? Showing how close or distant characters are from each other can clearly show the status or changing dynamic of a relationship, or how a character feels in a space. Though this might be changed once the script is produced, the object is for the writer to create an accurate and engaging reading script that guides the reader through the emotional journey. Blocking (or staging) is one of the most effective and economic tools in a screenwriter's arsenal, and can speak volumes with just one small movement, if placed with precision and insight.

Implying the shot

The writer needs to make the reading of a script as smooth and engaging as possible. Including camera directions distances the reader from the story and takes them out of the action, forcing them to *interpret* emotion rather than *connect* to it. At this stage, the screenwriter's job is to render the emotional beats as readable as possible. Even writer–directors have to secure funding and talent and would do well in employing this approach. However, writers often think in terms of framing and camera movement, seeing the story unfold on an imaginary screen, feeling that key moments require a close up or long shot to convey meaning. Although technical directions should not be included in a script, they can be suggested by 'implying the shot'. Instead of camera direction, the writer describes what they see on their imaginary screen, *not* thinking about how it would be achieved technically, but how it looks, and writes this as the scene description. For instance, to create tension in a scene by using a close up where it cannot be seen who is there, instead

of writing 'close up on hand opening door', consider 'a hand pushes down the handle and opens the door'. By writing 'hand' instead of 'the stranger opens the door' or 'Betty opens the door' the reader is automatically drawn closer into the action and 'sees' what the writer sees in their head. Or to get a sense of vastness, 'she wanders along the water's edge, a small solitary figure in a desolate landscape' is more effective than 'long shot of Lynette walking along the sea'. Writing in this manner gives a direct emotional connection to the moment, and is thus more akin to viewing the film where one receives the *effect* of a camera shot rather than having to translate and interpret what would be achieved.

Scene case studies

Strictly Ballroom – though a seemingly simple fable on the surface, this is a carefully constructed script with beautifully written details. The end scene sequence uses various excellent visual techniques to make its points in a moving, dramatic and funny way. A powerful and recurring tool is to externalise internal struggles by making them physical. The most important example is during Scott's moment of hardest choice, when he has to decide whether to dance with Liz and be part of the Federation conventions, or follow his heart and dance his own steps with Fran. This internal emotional struggle is represented by a literal physical struggle over Scott by Shirley and Doug. His mum and dad each represent a different approach to dance and as they argue and reveal to Scott the true backstory of what happened to them, they literally fight over him, pushing him back and forth, Shirley trying to push him into the arena and Doug holding him back. Furthermore, Shirley and Doug are not only a symbolic key to Scott's progression but also function as a subplot in their own right (the threat throughout is that Scott will end up like his father, with the irony being that he does but in the true manner and in so doing honours his father, heals the past and enables a happier future). Other key physical externalisations include Barry Fife finally collapsing, bringing the trophy table and his toupee tumbling down with him as the collapse of the Federation becomes undeniable, and Scott visually interrupting Barry's 'future of dance' speech by sliding onto the dance floor with Fran. By giving characters something to physically struggle over (another character, a sound cable, a dance step) the story becomes primarily told through actions and visuals.

City of God – a good example of simple but effective visual storytelling is the sequence where Bene and Thiago's relationship is sealed through a cycle race (using objects to develop a relationship). Thiago is seen to secretly break to let Bene go on and win, seeking his approval and friendship. When Bene asks Thiago to bring him cool clothes, he gives him a huge wad of cash (another object) – the seemingly most dangerous thing you could do to a drug addict, but instead this seals their friendship and shows Bene as someone who instils trust and devotion. Then Thiago gets Bene's clothes measurements by physically comparing their bodies, measuring their feet to get shoe size, the reach of their arms and backs for shirt size. The effect of this is powerful not only visually, but also emotionally. They literally (physically) become intimate at the moment their friendship is established. On a more thematic level, the scene also shows Bene 'becoming' Thiago – they are (physically) the same (size). As the purpose of the sequence is to begin Bene's transformation from Lil Ze's right-hand man to someone who wants a better life, this works as a perfect visual and thematic metaphor. Later on, this transformation is again seen physically, as Bene bleaches his hair to ginger like Thiago's and arrives at Lil Ze's wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt, proclaiming his change ('I've become a playboy'). This physical and symbolical change is what prompts the beginning of Bene's leaving of Lil Ze and hints at the possibility of the danger it might cause him. It is simple elegant moments like this that makes *City of God* far more than a string of stories woven together by voiceover narrative, as underneath the scenes themselves are constantly addressing the themes of the world and its characters.

Writing scene action

Many novice writers treat scene directions as prose, which cannot be realised in the frame and slows down reading pace. Scene action should be *written in present tense*: the character does and decides to, not did and decided to. The screenplay is an active form and living process, and the action needs to reflect this. Similarly, the writer should *only write what the audience can see*. The purpose of screen direction is to give a sense of what is unfolding within the frame, not what happened to a character twenty years ago. Of course backstory is essential and what a character is motivated by should be inferred in the story, but this should be accomplished by the actions and dialogue in the present, not stating the character's history in the middle of a scene. Overall, the style

of scene action should be *tight*, *fluid* and *sharp*. Overly long, detailed screen directions can slow down the reading process and digress into the realms of prose fiction. Consider this:

> SAM sits down on the wooden step. She thinks long and hard about what has just happened, and how her life might be from now on. She wipes a slowly dripping tear from her pale, gaunt face, knowing that this tear will be the first of many. After a long pause, in which she looks around at the gloomy surroundings, she decides to leave. She slowly manages to raise herself and walk away, looking back at the step for one last time before she leaves the place forever.

This is clearly too long and too much like prose. It slows down the reading process and takes the reader on an imaginative journey rather than one of actuality. In no way does it represent the fluidity and action of a screenplay, and for the actress playing the part, it dictates too much. Scene action might rather read like this:

> SAM sits on the step, pensive. After a moment, a tear rolls down her cheek.
>
> Silence as she takes in the surroundings. Long pause.
>
> She slowly rises and heads off, taking one last look back. She leaves, sad.

Notice how the same information is presented, but in a quicker, less flowery way and how the paragraph of action is broken up. The economy of screen direction is paramount and *long screen directions should be split into smaller sections* to avoid a heavy page of text. As a general rule, *every time the dramatic beat changes, or the camera would focus on something different, a new paragraph should start.* This ensures a tight pace, and helps to formulate the page into digestible, workable parts for production.

Visual symbolism and metaphor

As well as relating to character and story, visual storytelling has the capacity to speak to audiences about wider themes and meaning; the

myth of the screenplay. As well as operating locally within the story world, visual symbolism and metaphor can break out and say much more. As Charlie Moritz writes, 'developing this ability to recognise when a setting, image, or event provide both the occasion for a totally believable, engaging narrative at the surface level, as well as carrying the potential for deeper meaning is a key asset in a dramatist's armoury' (2001: 137). So, working not only on a literal level but considering the subsurface, dramas which offer a more symbolic, deeper meaning are likely to create a stronger level of identification for audiences and result in a more engaged and enriched experience.

Lost in Translation is essentially a film about two people who literally feel lost in the worlds that they inhabit. Bob and Charlotte feel like outsiders; displaced; have no direction; are being carried along by others. They crave to find meaning and hope that will help them to survive. The film can be seen as carrying an overall message of the 'postmodern' condition. It is a critique of modern society and its concerns with mass consumption, recycling messages and images, offering surface illusions, replicating reality and partaking in 'false' communication. The challenge for the protagonists is to find ways in which they can survive, even transcend, this world, finding humanity and experiencing real feelings which touch the heart. The film, therefore, must portray a world in which these characters can feel consumed and part of the mass, giving them the dreams and motivations to escape.

Bob (an actor) is driven through Tokyo city. It is bright; striking; perhaps vulgar. As he gazes somewhat amazedly out of the car window he spots on a billboard an advertisement for Suntory whisky, a product endorsed by and featuring an image of himself in a dinner suit. As well as setting up who this character is, this visual image immediately spells out the theme of consumption and the idea of someone being 'used' for capitalist means.

Settling into his hotel room, Bob receives a fax from his wife: he's forgotten his son's birthday. On a literal level this works to add to the character set-up (forgetful, distanced from family), but symbolically to reinforces the theme of postmodernism. The fax is a *copy* of something real; a means of 'false' communication. Sitting on his bed, he puts on the hotel's slippers, generating metaphorical meaning in that the character is wearing something that does not belong to him; it does not fit. That night he receives yet another fax from his wife, this time showing him different types of shelving that he can choose for his office back at home. On a symbolic level once again, these visual moments carry a deeper meaning than one solely of plot. This is a story world

portrayed to the audience where nothing seems real, and truth is hard to distinguish.

In the morning Bob's hotel curtains open themselves, presumably on some sort of timer. This visually suggests he has no control over his life, being carried through by others. He goes to the bathroom and the shower fitting is too short for him, so he comically tries to squeeze under it and wash, another symbolic moment suggesting he is displaced in his current environment and is inhibited by the actions and decisions of other people.

When the audience meets Charlotte she is seen visiting a shrine, which provides a visually harsh contrast to the stifling scenes of Bob and his encounters with places and people. The audience witnesses Charlotte immersed in a succession of traditional Japanese rituals where nothing from the modern world interferes. This immediately provides a counter text to what has been seen, and begins to forge links between the characters' story worlds, their dramatic problems, and thematic statement. Charlotte later recalls this experience on the telephone, another sign of false communication, where she expresses her dissatisfaction with her current state. The earlier visual metaphors provided to the audience depict this state successfully, and the juxtaposition between nature and tradition with product and postmodernism certainly signals tensions which will be explored throughout the narrative. In the face of this admitted unhappiness, the audience sees Charlotte trying to change her appearance. She applies lipstick and alters her hair in an attempt to feel better. This has thematic importance as it reinforces notions of surface appearance, and what is *seen* is different to what actually *exists*. Looking even deeper, the difference between appearance and reality is symbolised by the fact that Charlotte's husband John is a photographer. He is often seen with a camera and goes about pursuing his photographic career, again pointing to a thematic allusion of copy and falseness.

Later, Bob is seen in his hotel room watching a repeat of a programme he was once in, where he is supposedly talking with a monkey, now dubbed in Japanese. This moment of plot is credible on a literal level as it shows what kind of actor Bob is (he later says he would prefer to be doing a play somewhere), but symbolically the show is dubbed from one language to another and the monkey is 'talking' and as such a portrayal of something not real; a different version; for the purposes of consumption. In the same scene Bob opens the door to a pseudo-prostitute who has been sent for his entertainment. Bob clearly is not interested. She proceeds to roll around on the floor, pretending to be

a submissive slave in a fantasy role play. Not only does this scene work to provide humour and empathy for Bob, who wants and needs none of this, it once again underlines the central theme. The prostitute is *pretending* to do something. For Bob, he is being consumed and swamped in a world of surrealism which he desperately wants to escape.

Other moments of visual storytelling play out metaphors for the audience as the film's narrative accelerates. Bob is taking promotional shots for Suntory whisky, the photographer telling him to change his expression and pretend to be feeling something else. When he tastes the whisky he realises it is not real; probably coloured water. Bob is seen trying to exercise on skiing assimilation machine. Actress Kelly fumbles her way through an interview, talking utter rubbish, cut against visual scenes of Charlotte helping a group of traditionally dressed Japanese women to arrange flowers: a juxtaposition of the systematic, fake, and consumer-driven with beauty, tradition and nature. Charlotte continues her wandering and finds herself in a games arcade. Here she witnesses an onslaught of young, displaced characters interacting with the machines around them. They pretend to play the guitar, to shoot a gun, to fight, to dance in a club. This is a setting of hyper reality and mass simulation, inviting the audience to make sense of the thematic meaning behind the chosen images and relating them to the protagonists and their journeys.

Bob and Charlotte become close friends and decide to spend a night out together. Careful consideration of visual imagery continues as the audience is exposed to more symbolic and metaphorical allusions to the theme. In the first bar that Bob and Charlotte visit images of simulated fireworks are projected onto screens. Everyone sings karaoke and Charlotte decides to wear a pink wig, disguising her appearance and making her look like someone else.

Towards the end of the film when there is a fire alarm at the hotel, Bob and Charlotte stumble upon each other outside. This point of plot can be seen as not only a device used to push the two protagonists back together and share an intimate moment, but again it is symbolic of theme. It has been a false fire alarm, there is no fire, and so perhaps the audience is reminded the two are still caught up in a hyper-real world and need to be rescued.

On his day of departure from Tokyo, Bob receives another fax, this time a picture and the message 'I love you' from his daughter. This signals the end of Bob and Charlotte's time together; he has a family to go back to and be father for, but symbolically the image is yet another sign of the false world in which he lives. It is as if he is reminded that he has to go back to how things were, but does that mean he will return as the same man? Or will he return to his ordinary world having gained some new knowledge from his experience in Tokyo? Could Charlotte have provided elixir to help him survive?

Bob's entourage surround him as he leaves the hotel, asking if they can have a final picture of them all together. Bob agrees and so he stands there, an icon in the middle of a group of people who adopt fake smiles, helping to create in the photograph an image of what never was. But Bob has probably learned something, and no longer feels trapped in this world. On the way to the airport Bob asks the driver to stop as he sees Charlotte walking down a busy street. As they say their final goodbyes probably the most memorable moment of film occurs, where Bob whispers into Charlotte's ears. She smiles, encouraged by his words, but the audience never hears what is said. This is a final epiphany to the film and the last moment of tremendous visual subtext: the audience does not need to hear what is said. It is left to their own imagination. Instead of allowing the secret to be told, the audience is denied access to this personal moment which cannot be transformed, transported, replicated, copied or destroyed.