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8

VISUALIZATION STRATEGIES

In the preceding chapter, we highlighted the storytelling characteristics that transcend particular media, including film. In this chapter, we want to highlight the principal difference between film and other forms of storytelling—that film is a visual medium, and consequently, that stories told in film form must take advantage of the visual or the story may disappoint, or fail to reach, its intended audience.

This does not, however, mean that film has more in common with painting or photography. As a narrative form it has more in common with theater and the novel than it does with a single photograph or painting. But when directly compared with these narrative forms, it quite quickly reaches the limits of that comparison.

The best way to understand film and film writing is to consider film writing to be a narrative storytelling form that shares common narrative qualities with other narrative forms, such as the play or the novel. Film, however, is also a visual medium that must conform in its narrative to the qualities unique to film, qualities that will differ considerably from other narrative forms. In this chapter we will clarify the similarities and highlight the differences.

STORYTELLING IN THE CONTEXT OF FILM

As we have established, film stories come from many sources. Looking at a number of recent films, we find stories, such as Miller's *Lorenzo's Oil*, based on newspaper accounts of real-life events (in that particular case, a parent's search for a scientific cure for her child's illness in spite of the medical establishment's pronouncement that her son is incurable). Other films are based on national figures such as James Hoffa (David Mamet's screenplay *Hoffa*) and Malcolm X (Spike Lee's film *Malcolm X*). In both cases, published biographies were a major source of the material for the films. Robert Redford

turned to the Norman McLean novella *A River Runs Through It* to make his film of the same name. Rob Reiner turned to the Aaron Sorkin play *A Few Good Men* for his film of that name. Francis Ford Coppola went back to the Bram Stoker original to make his own version of Dracula (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*), and James Ivory and Ismail Merchant turned to the E. M. Forster classic *Howard's End* to produce the film of the same name.

Whatever the source, all of these films have strong visual qualities, and each has transcended the form, and in some cases the quality, of the original. Another storytelling quality of the film story is the importance of genre films. Audiences know what to expect in terms of visual qualities from a western, a science fiction film, a horror film, or a musical. The result is the creation of a visual shorthand for the writer of these genre films. We bring a set of expectations to a western, such as Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (script by David Webb Peoples). Also, we know what to expect when we see the horror/science fiction film *Alien 3* (written by David Giler, Walter Hill, and Larry Ferguson), at least in terms of visualized action.

But audiences also want to be surprised. While the writer has to adhere to particular narrative conventions to facilitate audience recognition, he or she has to throw a curve that surprises or shocks. The risk is that the writer will lose the audience if the story veers too far away from convention; the gain can be a unique insight into an experience. This is precisely what happened in Neil Jordan's mixed-genre thriller/melodrama *The Crying Game*, and in Agnieszka Holland's satiric war story *Europa Europa*. However, although the narrative strategy may shift, the corresponding need for visual action does not. Both films remain powerfully visual.

FILMIC QUALITIES

In terms of visual characteristics, film stories can take advantage of both the physical and dramatic properties of film. Perhaps no quality is more apparent or more underutilized in screen stories than the appearance of reality. Because it looks real, the viewer will enter into a film experience more readily and in a more unconscious manner than, for example, when watching a play in a theater.

The appearance of reality also offers the writer the opportunity to develop complexity of character or situation in a more believable manner. The benefit here for the writer and the audience can also be considerable. Film can also offer the writer the power of movement. Not only does the camera record the motions of people, but editing offers the viewer a range of time and place limited only by the imagination of the writer and the budget of the producer. The resulting dynamism means that the writer doesn't have to be confined to one geographical place or to one time. You are free, and if you tell your story well, we in the audience will follow.

But time and space are not the only variables the writer can introduce. Sound design can help create alternate places and spaces without actually going there. For example, Alfred Hitchcock in his first sound film, *Blackmail* (1929), wanted to allude to the sense of guilt the main character feels. The setting is the breakfast table, in a dining room behind the parent's store. A customer speaks to the main character about a murder that happened the night before. What the customer doesn't realize is that the main character was the accidental perpetrator of the murder. She is overwhelmed by guilt while the customer gossips about ways of killing people. The visual we see is the bread knife in the hand of the main character. On the sound track we lose the gossip and hear only the word "knife." Here sound and image together create the subjective emotional state of the main character—guilt!

Sound juxtaposition is one option. Visual juxtaposition is another. That can mean juxtaposition of two disparate shots to introduce a new meaning beyond the meaning of each visual separately, or it can be juxtaposition within a single shot. An image is contextual: it has a right side, a left side, a middle, a foreground, and a background. If you wish, you can present a particular visual juxtaposition that highlights a power relationship, the shifting importance of two elements, or a developing relationship. All are visual interpretations of what the audience will see.

Although writers do not write camera shots in their scripts, they are constantly dealing with relationships and shifts in relationships. Our point here is that visual detailing by the writer can articulate those juxtapositions and shifts.

Finally, in terms of physical properties, the level of visual detail will create as much complexity as you need. An example will clarify our meaning. In a theatrical stage scene where the goal is to suggest the character's obsession with appearance, we see only one set of clothes; few in the audience can see the makeup or the clothing changes made earlier. Consequently, if we want to make the point about the character's obsession, we have to have a full closet on stage or have the character or another character comment on this particular obsession.

In film, on the other hand, we have the option of showing characters trying on one set of clothing after another. We can see characters change their makeup, we can follow them to shops, and of course, we can see them add to their closet of clothing. The level of physical detail can suggest that a character is a kleptomaniac, or simply insecure about his or her appearance. In other words, we can make the point about the obsession, and if we wish, we can begin to explore the psychology of the obsession. How complex we want to be depends totally on our writerly wish. We can have complexity or simplicity; it's strictly a matter of visual detail.

In terms of dramatic properties, the principal quality of film is that visual action is crucial to the establishment of motivation, to the characterization of both the main and secondary characters, and to advancement of the plot. The story spins out through visual action. If the story was spun out through dialogue, there would be very little to differentiate a film from a play. In the theater, dialogue is everything; in film, visual action is everything. A more

subtle, but no less important, characteristic of film is that the point of view of the narrative is underscored visually. The narrative may point out that X is the main character, but it is the fact that events happen to X, events in which he is not an observer but something between victor and victim, that will underscore the point. These visual articulations will also facilitate identification with X, and they will if necessary give us insights into his subjective world. It is the struggle of his subjective world with the objective real world that is at the heart of the drama of the film. Only by understanding his world can we appreciate the deepest dimensions of his struggle in the larger world. All this must be accomplished visually if the film writer is to work with this medium.

CALLING THE SHOTS

The two most familiar types of shots in film are *close-ups* or *long shots*. Films are made up of disparate fragments of film, of which close-ups and long shots are but two types. Another would be the extreme long shot (dolly, tracking, trucking, stedicam, tilt, pan).

Having mentioned the visual variety of images in film, we must also state that determining shots is the prerogative of the film's director. What creative decisions, then, does this leave the writer? Should the writer think in terms of shots (single images) or in larger dramatic units?

The answers to these questions are both simple and complex. The writer should be thinking in terms of images as he or she writes the script, but it is not necessary for him or her actually to detail those shots in the script. Indeed it will probably be counterproductive to do so.

How then can you tell your story in images, if you can't list those images in detail? In order to answer this question, we turn to the terms used in writing film scripts.

FILM-WRITING DEFINITIONS REVIEWED

The dramatic terms introduced earlier can be divided into two groups: those that are character related and those that are plot related.

There are two groups of character types: *main characters*, and *secondary characters*.

The Main Character

The main character, the subject of your story, often called the protagonist, is the reason for your film story and should be situated in the middle of the action. The story, or plot, gives the main character the opportunity to overcome his or her dilemma.

The main character should have the energy or drive to carry us through the story and should also appeal to us in some way. Some writers use a charismatic main character; others will place a goal-directed character in a situation that creates an identification or empathy with that character. In both cases the main character should be visually and behaviorally defined in such a way as to help the story.

The more visual consideration given to who the character is and what he or she looks like, the more likely the character's look can help the story. Whether the main character is heroic or tragic, the writer should be very clear about the goals of the character.

A word about goals. In a sense, a character has a goal in every scene. That goal may be simple. What the writer also needs to keep in mind is the character's overriding goal, sometimes called the *supergoal*. The supergoal forms the larger issue that drives the character throughout the story. Many writers now talk of their screen story as a journey for the character (after the writings of Joseph Campbell on the importance of myth). The supergoal is what prompts the main character to undertake his or her journey,

Secondary Characters

Secondary characters have much simpler roles in the screen story. Often they are almost stereotypic. They have a purpose, and they live out that purpose in the course of the story. They too have goals, but their goals are more or less related to that of the main character. They are in the story either to help the main character or as a barrier to the main character's goal. Secondary characters should also have visual and behavioral characteristics that help the story.

The most important of the secondary characters is the antagonist, whose goal is diametrically opposed to the goal of the main character. Often the antagonist is the most complex of the secondary characters.

The Plot

The plot is the series of scenes that leads the character from dilemma to confrontation to resolution, following a line of rising action. In the course of the plot the writer should never forget where the main character is. Plot cannot exist without character. If it does, we lose our involvement and as an audience become voyeurs rather than participants in the film story.

The Catalytic Event

The catalytic event is that critical event that precipitates the main character's action. It is the trigger for energized action to achieve his or her goal. In the short film, the catalytic event is central, because it precipitates the story.

The Climax

The climax is that point when the character is faced with making his or her choice. It is the ultimate scene, in which the main character will finally achieve, or fail to achieve, his or her goal.

The Subtext

Every story has a surface meaning and a secondary, often more important, meaning. If the surface meaning in "Little Red Riding Hood" is "beware of wolves in grandmothers' clothing," the subtext is that children should listen carefully to their parents.

Plot Twists, Surprises, and Reversals

Plot twists, surprises, and reversals all refer to the same device. The writer employs twists and turns in the plot in order to create tension and maintain viewer interest. Plot twists and turns, whether they are called twists and turns, plot points, surprises, or reversals, are necessary mechanically to the film story. They keep us guessing and involved with the story.

The Structure

The dramatic organization of the film story is referred to as the *structure*. The structure is chosen as a mode of organization that best suits the narrative goals of the story, and it often revolves around a number of acts.[1] Writers will emphasize plot over subtext in particular film genres. Some genres, such as adventure films, are all plot and virtually no subtext; others, such as film noir and the horror films, have much more subtext than, for example, situation comedies. The genre the writer is working within will determine the balance of plot to subtext. The best structural choices are made when the writer is thoroughly familiar with the narrative characteristics of the genre. Structure is the shape of the plot.

The Scene

The scene is the basic building block of the structure. One act will comprise a number of scenes. Scenes are sometimes clustered, in a sequence of two to four scenes that share a narrative purpose.

Each scene should advance the plot. Within each scene, characters have specific goals. The scene is visually constructed around a narrative purpose but worked out in terms of character goals. If Character 1 has one goal and Character 2 has an opposing goal, the scene will proceed until Character 1 or 2 has achieved his or her goal. When that has happened, the scene is over. In the course of the scene, the other character does not achieve his or her goal. The success of one character or the failure of the other links directly to the advancement of the plot.

Scenes tend to be relatively short and specific; transition scenes are less common than they used to be. Consequently, the best test for the validity of a scene is the question, does this scene advance the plot? If it does, how? If it does not, the scene should not be included in the screenplay.

The Outline

The first step in the film writing process, after conceiving an idea, is forming an outline. The outline is actually a brief summary of the idea. The focal point of the outline is the character. After identifying the character, the writer should define the premise in terms of a conflict for the main character. It would also be useful to identify the catalytic event.

The outline should not be a plot summary; consequently, it should fit easily on a single page.

The Treatment

After the development of the idea, the character, and the premise of the outline, the writer next faces the task of creating a plot line, which, when completed and broken down into a series of scenes, is called the *treatment*. For a short film, a treatment should be two to four pages long, and it should summarize the scenes in single paragraphs or numbered paragraphs. Treatments are sometimes called *step outlines*.

The Script

The script is essentially the elaboration of the treatment, including visual description and dialogue. The script should always be presented in *master scene format* (an example of master scene format is given later in this chapter). The key controversy about script format is whether to include short descriptions in the scenes. We recommend omitting them.

The master scene format allows readers of the script to visualize the story more readily than if they were stopping for technical descriptions, such as of a close-up or long shot, in the body of the script.

These are the primary film script terms you will encounter. We turn now to the principle of visualization, in order to assist you in telling stories in images.

THE PRINCIPLE OF VISUALIZATION

Whether the writer imagines the film, conjures up a dream, or simply draws an image, the operating principle is that the writer should visualize rather than verbalize. The key to the success of that visualization is the meaning it gives to the story. Images can be neutral, moving, or overwhelming. The creativity of the writer and later of the director makes the difference between functional and fantastic. We propose to take you through a process of visualization that will help you aspire to the latter.

THE PROCESS OF VISUALIZATION

The first step in visualization is to consider the way you tell your story. We suggest that a retrospective approach to telling a story is less effective than telling the story in the present. Presenting a story so that it seems to be occurring as we are watching it gives the story immediacy and energy and puts the writer in the strongest position to direct the story.

To tell the story retrospectively is to tell it in the past tense, therefore making it more distant. To tell the story in the present is to use the active, action-oriented grammatical option.

The second step in the process of visualization is deciding how to present your main character. A character who is lost, confused, or passive is more likely to talk than to do. A character with a goal is likely to act in order to achieve that goal. Consequently, presenting your character as goal directed will help you visualize his moving toward that goal.

The third step is to set the action of the story in settings where there are visual opportunities and where the setting helps your story. The young girl in "Little Red Riding Hood" is in a forest. Forests can suggest tranquillity or danger; in either case, the setting of the forest adds visual opportunity to the story.

The fourth step for the writer is to apply the magnifying lenses of "watching, waiting, wanting" to the story. By this we mean that the idea of *watching* should permeate your story. The audience should be watching events unfold for the main character.

Waiting involves a second layer of interaction with the story. What visual events can we inject into the story to help propel the character into a setting that also, in a sense, contributes to the story?

Finally, the tool of *wanting* needs to be developed. What is the character willing to do to achieve his or her goal? The writer needs to provide steps to allow the character to climb toward the goal. As the character strains to reach the height of the goal, the viewer should also experience the shortness of breath due to that climb. Only by taking this upward journey with the character can we in the audience join the character in wanting to reach the summit.

The fifth step is to provide visual surprises along the way. Those visual surprises may be exciting, expressions of the character's anticipation. The visual surprises may be character related or plot related; in either case, they help flesh out the visualization of the story.

By this time it should be clear that the writer's goal is to move the viewer from the position of voyeur of the story to the position of participant in the story. This happens through identification with the main character and through the main character's struggle to attain his goal.

The question of whether you are keeping viewers outside the story as voyeurs or bringing them into the story as participants is one you should return to on a continuing basis throughout the writing process. In order to reinforce the sense of being inside the story with the character, the writer should rely on visual detail to cement the believability of the character, place, time, and plot. Visual details can range from the time of day to the climate particular to a place, clothing, gait, mode of interaction, and so on. The greater the visual detail in the script, the greater the believability in the story.

One more step remains to exploit fully the visualization process. Look over your story, rethink it, and rewrite it as a silent film. Distancing yourself from language will help you think and make writing decisions visually. Now that you have thought about your script in visual terms, we recommend that you add sound in order to add another level of credibility. Sound can also help you introduce a level of metaphor to the story. We will discuss this point in the following section.

SOUND DESIGN AS COMPLEMENTARY TO VISUAL DESIGN

Whether the sound is synchronized (directly related to the visuals—hearing the sound of a door opening when we see the door open) or is used asynchronously (in contrast to the visual), the overall pattern of the sound adds another dimension. In this way, the sound can be used to support an aura of realism arising out of the visuals, or it can be used to create an alternate or multilayered view, as described in Chapter 3.

The key is to use sound purposefully. Having used the visual dimension to tell your story, to characterize, and to create a sense of place, you should view sound as yet another opportunity to tell your story even more powerfully.

SOUND AS THE INTERPRETER OF VISUAL IDEAS

Sound can alter visual meaning; it can complement visual meaning. In Ken Webb's *The Waiters*, sound does both.

This film, about the process of waiting, moves through a variety of characters and settings—a suburban commuter waiting for a train, a woman waiting for a sign from above, an actor waiting to be discovered, a young man waiting to fly, a young boy waiting for Santa Claus. The narrator explains in an amusing way why each is waiting. The reasons given range from the rational to the irrational. Nevertheless, the visuals suggest that most of the characters get what they want, particularly when their wish was irrational or supernatural. Consequently, the surprise of seeing them get what they want, no matter how preposterous, is extremely funny. Webb ends the film with a low-angle single visual of a waiter reciting the items on a menu in an Italian restaurant. The shot makes up a quarter of the entire film. The result is to shift our attention away from people waiting and wanting, to people waiting *on* and offering. The result is to bring us back to earth.

In *The Waiters* it is the sound track that explains the diversity of visuals, linking them to one another. The narrator also tells us why the people are waiting. When each person's situation resolves, it is the narrator who explains how that resolution has been achieved. That is not to say that the visuals are unnatural at this point, but rather to underscore that the diversity of people and visuals means that the visuals cannot do the entire narrative job on their own. They need sound and narration to tie them together and to help us understand the solution and lead us to a response to the diverse expectations. The subtext of the story—that all of us wait for something out of our control to resolve dilemmas—is quite touching, and Ken Webb's ability to make us laugh about the issue reflects how effectively sound and visual have worked together in this short film.

FORMAT

The format that you use can emphasize the importance of the visual in your script. The format we suggest, as discussed earlier, is the widely used master scene format, an example of which follows:

Title
By
For_____
(TV program or production company)

1. It is raining, a thunderstorm. A young man, Brad, walks to his mailbox. He opens the box with much anticipation. He opens it. The rain is falling like a sheet. He can barely read, but he notices the words "pleased to offer you." He stuffs the letter into his pocket and begins to run.

BRAD
Mom! Dad! I'm in! I'm in!

He runs and is lost in the hail that begins, but we can hear his voice. Brad is a happy man.

Cut To:

2. Int. Kitchen. Day.

Brad's Mother is stirring the soup. He is soaked to the skin.

MOTHER
You'd better get out of those clothes or you won't live long enough to go to that fancy school.

BRAD
It's not fancy. It's just good.

MOTHER
Good and fancy.

BRAD
Good.

MOTHER
They won't make you soup like this.

BRAD
You can mail me some every week.

MOTHER
Now you're making fun of me.
Wait till you're up there. You'll probably think of me and your dad as sources for your humor. I hope you won't forget us, Brad.

BRAD
I haven't left yet, Mom.