II

Showing and Telling

How do I express in a picture that she's in a mood with me?
I'm not going to say 'She's in a mood with me',
I'm going to say 'She's tapping her foot'.[1]

Mike Skinner, The Streets

The Volkswagen 'Lemon' one-sheet has a justifiable place in the history of advertising. Briefed with selling a small car built in Germany to an American nation that equated size with importance – and all this only fifteen years after the end of the Second World War – the Doyle Dane Bernbach agency catalysed what was to become known in marketing circles as the 'creative revolution'. They changed the face of advertising, and they did it by showing, not telling.

Take a look at the advert and ask yourself: 'What does my mind immediately try to do?' It attempts to make sense of the relationship between the image and the strapline. It probably asks, 'How is the car a lemon?' followed shortly perhaps by another question, 'Why would they say that about their own product?' It's a basic narrative technique which forces you to read the copy underneath in the hope that it will explain such a superficially strange juxtaposition. The advert sucks you in; it impels you to do the work. As such, its structure – because it generates conflict and the desire for its resolution – is fundamentally dramatic.

The Pixar screenwriter and director Andrew Stanton was a movie buff who had seen every single David Lean film except *Ryan's Daughter*. It's 1992, LaserDiscs are all the rage and he finally gets to watch the work of his idol. 'It was like the clouds parting,'[2] he said, and one sequence in particular – a cut between two scenes – unlocked for him the mysteries of dramatic structure. In the first scene, the unhappily married Rosy Ryan tries to tell her priest that she's sexually frustrated; there has to be more to life. This is pre-war Catholic Ireland, however, and the priest has harsh words of warning. 'Rosy, don't nurse your wishes. You can't help having them, but don't nurse them, or sure to God you'll get what you're wishing for.' Immediately the film cuts to the arrival of a tall handsome stranger disembarking from a bus, lit in striking silhouette against the sea. Stanton got exactly the message Lean intended – 'this man is exactly what Rosie wishes for, and he's going to bring trouble'.

The film doesn't *tell* you that connection. Stanton worked it out, as any viewer would – it *showed* you. And this was the moment that

he started to understand one of the most basic but important tenets of dramatic construction. Screenwriting is showing not telling; structure is the presentation of images in such a way an audience are forced to work out the relationship between them. Stanton had stumbled upon what is known amongst film theoreticians as the 'Kuleshov Effect'.

The Kuleshov Effect

In the early years of the twentieth century the Russian director Lev Kuleshov filmed a Russian matinee idol staring in turn at a bowl of soup, a coffin and a girl. Audiences raved about the actor's ability to effortlessly evoke hunger, grief and desire. What they didn't know was that he used the same shot of the actor each time – just cut to each different object.[3]

Kuleshov discovered that the extraordinary new medium of film took advantage of the human need to impose order on the world. If an audience is presented with disparate images they will assemble them into a meaningful order. It's a truth on which all film grammar is based.

Stanton, together with his co-writer of *Finding Nemo*, Bob Peterson, coined a phrase for the underlying structural importance of this juxtaposition, 'the unifying theory of two plus two'. As he puts it:

> Good storytelling never gives you four, it gives you two plus two . . . Don't give the audience the answer; give the audience the pieces and compel them to conclude the answer. Audiences have an unconscious desire to work for their entertainment. They are rewarded with a sense of thrill and delight when they find the answers themselves.[4]

It's a statement of profound importance, and not unique to the moving image.

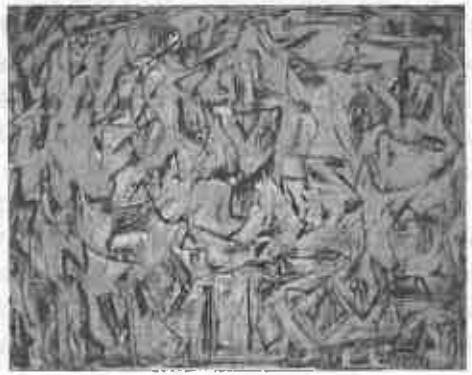
> Gary Davies appeared to ask whether we were ready to boogie before urging a big Wembley welcome for Kim Wilde . . . [And] there she was, waving a red scarf and bending over a lot so that the cameras could catch the cleavage. 'It's great to be here,' she said. After a song or two a discussion developed in our row about the catering staff, who were dealing out the lager and cold dogs in what seemed to be Motherwell colours. We reached no important conclusions.[5]

When the DJ and journalist John Peel reviewed Kim Wilde (supporting Michael Jackson) at Wembley in 1988 he illustrated the difference between showing and telling. It's easier to write *diegetically*, 'Kim Wilde was boring'; indeed, in journalism (particularly the tabloid variety) it might be preferable, but it's less deep, it's less involving. Instead Peel dramatizes the boredom through the juxtaposition of images, and in so doing he forces the reader to become involved. He writes *mimetically*, forcing the reader to bridge the gap between Kim Wilde and the catering staff and thus draw their own vivid picture of the event. Peel is using the language of film.

In its infancy, television turned its back on such language in favour of a more 'proscenium arch' approach: the camera was part of the audience; the action observed, separate, on the stage. It ignored the work of Kuleshov and Eisenstein (the father of the montage, effectively the Kuleshov Effect in action), partly because such theories were still relatively obscure but also because the technology simply didn't exist to capture the fast-cutting juxtapositional language of film economically.

Though technology has changed, it's surprising how many people assume TV drama to be diegetic. While American cable drama has largely been liberated from this tyranny (helped by larger budgets and technology), it's still not uncommon to find screenwriting manuals that insist story be carried in dialogue. The same belief underlies the plaintive cries of critics who bemoan the lack of theatre on television, claiming it's a natural fit.[6] But they are wrong; it's not there for one simple reason – it doesn't work. It's boring and turgid and painful because it's not written for the medium. Television drama, like film, relies on the juxtaposition of images to convey a mental state. Theatre, much more a diegetic medium, doesn't. The very way theatre operates should make this obvious: there are no close-ups; there is little or no fragmentation of either time or space; and we rely, for example, on the soliloquy to convey the feeling that a great film-maker can create through the manipulation of pictures. Theatre isn't worse or inferior to television – its potency simply lies in live performance.[7]

Film, then television, liberated mimesis – and exploited its potential ruthlessly. In doing so, it changed entirely the way the world heard stories about itself. The development of the moving image was akin to the discovery of molecular science; it ushered in art's atomic age. Take a look at the following painting by Willem de Kooning, one of the pioneers of Abstract Expressionism.



Again, monitor yourself as your brain absorbs it, tries to order and make sense of the shapes within. Are they faces? Naked bodies? Women? Then when you learn its title is *Excavation*, ask how you reassess and reorder your thoughts to render sense. The act of interpretation – of fusing the disparate together – creates the picture in your head.

When Marcel Duchamp placed, with questionable genius,[8] a urinal in an art gallery and called it *Fountain* he was simply extrapolating this process – making the gallery itself the frame of the work.

The *Fountain*'s power grows from its environment; from the fact it simply *doesn't* belong. Two opposites are placed side by side; art is rendered from juxtaposition. That interpretation is the art.

It's a process open to abuse and obfuscation; as the worst of modern art attests, you can of course juxtapose anything. Exploiting the human desire to fuse opposites can be a profitable business, but when it's done with skill and insight it can be a meaningful one too. When the shapes coalesce and evoke a truth from their association, the observer is rewarded with an overwhelmingly powerful experience.

Good dramatists know this, which is why they exploit it to the full. The moving image by its very definition cannot deal with what we cannot see. There are two ways round this for a writer. Their work can *tell* us or it can render complex emotional experience into pictures.

It should, of course, do the latter. As E. M. Forster said, 'In the drama all human happiness and misery does and must take the form of action. Otherwise its existence remains unknown.'[9] In pure film and television, feelings, reflections and motivation – indeed, all interior life – are expressed in action and thus inferred, by the viewer, from context. A screenwriter cannot simply write, 'David stares into the fire wondering whether to vote Labour or Conservative', as the audience have no way of inferring that. Certainly they can have him say, 'I've been pondering which way to vote', but if they write, 'David stares into the fire' and it's preceded by a scene in which the character realizes something he always thought certain about one of those parties has been found wanting, the audience will understand mimetically. They won't need to be told, and it will be far more powerful because they will have worked it out for themselves. As The Streets' Mike Skinner said, why tell us she's angry, when you can show her tapping her foot? We see her face, we see her foot, and we *know*.

A well-told film or television work thus reveals its story through its structure – the order in which images appear. Characters are revealed through behaviour and explanation of motivation is avoided; characters do things, and through doing them we understand them. As long as a character has a clear goal, the way they choose to act in achieving it will reveal them. In a strange way, a protagonist is like film itself; as

they pursue their desire they project their content, their purpose, their nature onto the audience. When they cease to move, they cease to be revealed; the audience ceases to be active and so ceases to care.

Audiences *like* to work; it's the working that glues them to the narrative. In detective drama, the viewer's urge to understand is absolutely central to narrative propulsion, but it's true of all film and television. As *The Wire* creator David Simon put it:

> [A viewer] loves being immersed in a new, confusing and possibly dangerous world that he will never see. He likes not knowing every bit of vernacular or idiom. He likes being trusted to acquire information on his terms, to make connections, to take the journey with only his intelligence to guide him. Most smart people cannot watch most TV, because it has generally been a condescending medium, explaining everything immediately, offering no ambiguities, and using dialogue that simplifies and mitigates against the idiosyncratic ways in which people in different worlds actually communicate. It eventually requires that characters from different places talk the same way as the viewer. This, of course, sucks.[10]

Bad writing explains; good writing shows.[11]

Andrew Stanton noted that his theory of 2 + 2 = ? – of showing rather than telling – doesn't just apply to images.

> I want to get an abortion, but my boyfriend and I are having trouble conceiving.

American comedian Sarah Silverman's joke is built on a classic subversion of expectation. But take a look at any joke, or any scene in any drama: the juxtaposition of opposites, verbal or visual or both, is the central plank not just of showing rather than telling, but of all humour, all narrative. Something, confronted with its opposite, makes us recast our notion of that 'something' again. As we noted in Act II of this book, scene structure is the smallest applicable version of thesis/antithesis/synthesis; the crisis point in every scene is

a microcosm of an inciting incident. It appears that this unit – of something confronted by its opposite – is of central importance to storytelling.

At its most heightened, subversion of expectation doesn't just occur to the character, but to the audience as well. In Henri-Georges Clouzot's 1950s masterpiece *Les Diaboliques*, a wife and mistress of a provincial headmaster gang up to kill him. They succeed, but the corpse first disappears then returns to haunt them. The wife, who has a weak heart, dies of shock, and we learn that the mistress and the headmaster – who isn't really dead at all – planned it all along.

In *Sixth Sense* and *The Hours* exactly the same trick is used: the audience is forced to believe the version of events presented to them, only to learn later that crucial elements are the opposite of what they appear – in both films the protagonists are dead and the audience is manipulated to think the opposite, before being exposed to reality in the final scenes.

It's the Kuleshov Effect. In all these stories the audience is presented with key facts then invited to infer a connection. It's a heightening of thesis/antithesis to make the impact more extreme; it's the mechanism of Sarah Silverman's joke. It's also a technique at the heart of dramatic construction, with a lineage that runs from Greek tragedy to the present day. In *Oedipus Rex* Oedipus sets out to discover what is causing the plague in Thebes – only to find that he is. The same DNA is in the marrow of *The Bourne Ultimatum* and *Planet of the Apes*. In Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, three men plan to find Death but instead find a pile of money. Each double-crosses the other and they all end up, with perfect irony, dead; in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the killer turns out to be the narrator of the story, and the novel, in hindsight, a suicide note.

Aristotle writes of this effect in *The Poetics*: 'A change to the opposite in the actions being performed . . . in accordance with probability or necessity' and cites the story of Lynceus to press his case. The hero is being led away to execution, followed by Danaus, who is planning to perform the deed; 'but, it came about as a consequence of preceding events that the latter was killed and Lynceus

was saved'.[12] It's *peripeteia* again, a reversal of fortune; the world suddenly revealed as the opposite of what it appeared. To the Greeks it was always partnered by *anagnorisis* or 'discovery', in which a character's ignorance is replaced by knowledge. Aristotle argued, I think correctly, that it's a fundamental unit of dramatic construction – something is confronted by its opposite and revealed to be something else.

The use of sudden revelation, of the last-minute twist, seems a world away from the films of Eric Rohmer or Ingmar Bergman, and it's easy to dismiss it as a populist technique – possibly because it's the recurring motif of soap plots ('You ain't my mother' – 'Yes I am'). But *EastEnders* uses and exploits that technique for a reason. It's not just that cliffhangers are a direct descendant of Greek tragedy – at best nothing more than *peripeteia* in action. They are, but they're also more than that.

At the beginning of a scene characters establish themselves on fairly solid ground, pursuing a goal they believe will restore order to their world. Just when they think they might be getting somewhere, something happens to throw their world into turmoil once again. Finding themselves in the middle of an uncharted world, the characters have to start, yet again, asking the question 'How the hell do I get out of that?' Scene and story shape directly echo each other. Subversion of expectation is actually a mini journey 'into the woods'. Effectively a character goes 'into the woods' in every scene.

The 'forest', then, is an explosion of opposition: whether embodied as inciting incident or act turning point or midpoint or crisis point or scene turning point, it is the primordial building block of all drama. And those blocks create the confrontation of something with its opposite. Kuleshov stumbled on something far more than a clever editing technique: he discovered, though never fully appreciated, this simple, basic building block. Everything that follows – character, dialogue, multi-protagonism, thematic stranding, television structure – all of it flows from here. When two opposites are juxtaposed correctly, an explosion occurs, and story comes alive.