Max Thurlow & Clifford Thurlow

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# MAKING SHORT FILMS

## The complete guide from script to screen

Fully revised and with more interviews and insider tips!

BLOOMSBURY

TITLE

# MAKING SHORT FILMS

3RD EDITION

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## The complete guide from script to screen

THIRD EDITION

Max Thurlow and
Clifford Thurlow

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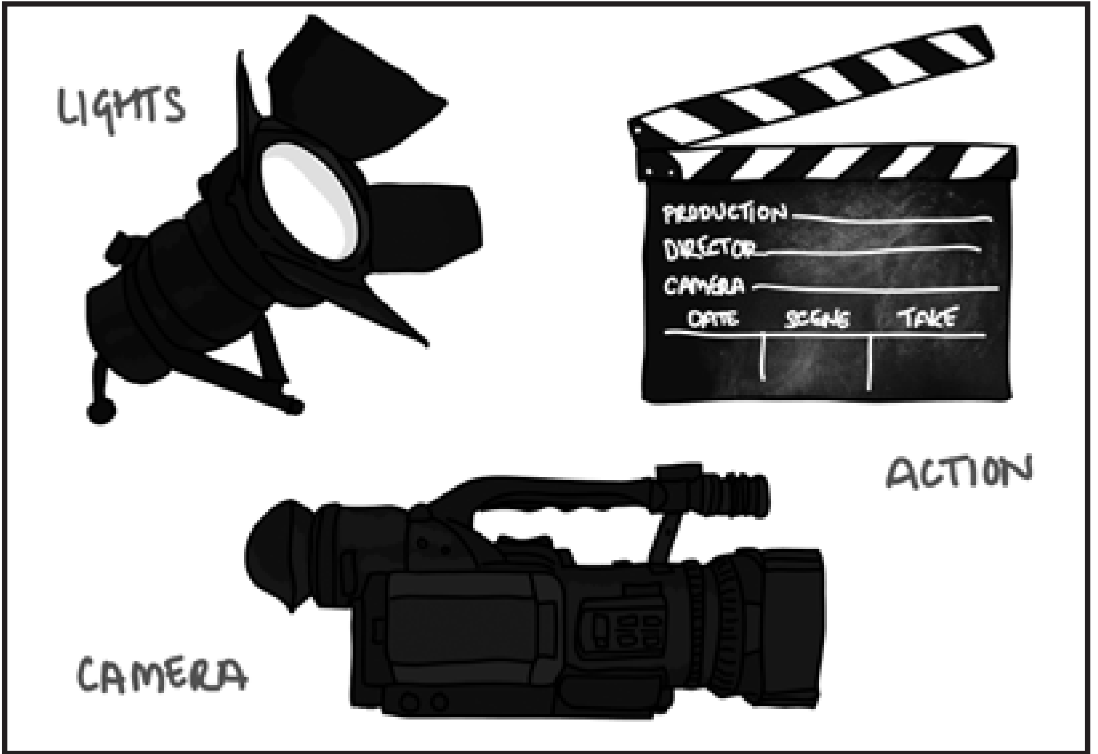



**1** Lights, Camera, Action

# INTRODUCTION TO MAKING SHORT FILMS, 3rd Edition

In the long, hot summer of 1929, Luis Buñuel set out for Cadaqués, an isolated fishing village clinging to the last rocky outcrops of the Pyrenees and inaccessible except by sea. Under his arm, Buñuel carried the first draft of a short film and was making the journey from Aragon to the Spanish coast to see Salvador Dalí, his collaborator.

They had already made *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Âge d'Or*, the latter "a uniquely savage blend of visual poetry and social criticism," according to writer Paul Hammond,[1] this surreal masterpiece being banned from public viewing thanks to Dalí's "subversive eroticism" and the film's "furious dissection of civilized values." Vicomte Charles de Noailles and his wife Marie-Laurie, a descendant of the Marquis de Sade, had promised funds for the new film and Buñuel was anxious to have his writing partner on board.

But Dalí that summer had other manias in mind. He needed a muse and was pursuing the Russian beauty Gala, wife of poet Paul Éluard, and a significant, if controversial figure in the Surrealist Movement. It was said that if one of the artists—Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Man Ray et al—did a particularly fine piece of work, the others would nod judiciously and whisper: "Ah, but of course, he was having an affair with Gala at the time."

Buñuel, with all the determination that was to characterize his career, followed Dalí from the shingle beach where fishermen repaired their nets, to the dining table where the local wine was said to have the bitter taste of tears, to the modest hut where his old student chum from Madrid's Residencia de Estudiantes had set up a studio. All to no avail.

In desperation, Buñuel tried to throttle Gala, to the consternation of the rest of the party: René Magritte, his dull wife Georgette, art dealer Camille Goemans, and his svelte girlfriend Yvonne Bernard. Cadaqués, despite its lack of a road, had been discovered by the Paris avant-garde and the appearance of this exotic group would be covered in the columns of the fortnightly *Sol Ixent*. Finally, his fingers prised from Gala's white throat, Buñuel packed his bag, shoved the script under his arm and sailed back around the coast, the still surface of the Mediterranean doing little to calm his fury. Salvador Dalí had worked on the scripts for two short films and Buñuel was now on his own.

He did not see Dalí again until 1937. Civil War had broken out in Spain. Fascist thugs had murdered their fellow student, the poet Federico García Lorca, and fearing that he was next on the list, Buñuel fled to New York, where Dalí, always one jump ahead, was safely ensconced with Madame Éluard. He was making a handsome living painting portraits of society ladies and collaborating on movie sets with Alfred Hitchcock.

Buñuel asked him for a $50 loan. But, just as Dalí had spurned working on short film number 3, he refused his request and ended their long and fruitful friendship with a letter of such eccentric misanthropy that Buñuel's son, filmmaker Juan Luis Buñuel (*Calanda; La Femme aux Bottes Rouges*), carries the offensive missive folded in his wallet to remind him of the joys of generosity.

Filmmaking is tough. Buñuel's flight from Spain at the outbreak of Civil War, the banning of *L'Âge d'Or* and the long years of exile in Mexico were not wasted years, however, but the very experiences that infused the wit and imagination that would make him one of the greatest filmmakers of the twentieth century, as indeed, Salvador Dalí, who suffered his own array of paranoias and phobias, would become one of its great painters.

Buñuel's early films were random, scattered, indeed surreal, but he came to understand that the key to a great film is the script. If anything, the script for a short film is more important and perhaps more difficult to write than a feature, simply because the brush strokes by necessity must be fine and detailed, each moment perfect. He was learning his craft by trial and error and would have been the first to admit that he still had a long way to go. *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Âge d'Or* always head the Buñuel filmography, but he had already made with cameraman Albert Duverger back in 1929 the forgotten, five-minute short *Menjant garotes* (*Eating Sea Urchins*) on 35mm. Illustrating, perhaps, the incestuous nature of filmmaking, it was Salvador Dalí's young sister Ana María who had kept *Menjant garotes* stored in a biscuit tin where it remained until her death more than half a century later.

Shot for the most part in harsh sunlight, the film follows Dalí's plump father and stepmother as they stroll through the terraces of Cadaqués before sitting down to a plate of sea urchins. Buñuel had planned his setups with care, the light filtering through the window as Dalí senior slices into his *garotes* revealing the first glimpse of a visual style that he would come to develop. But, a vital lesson to Buñuel, and all first-time filmmakers, that for all the extravagance of camera angles and lighting effects, in spite of the Hannibal Lecter grin of Señor Dalí as he slurps down the first sea urchin, the film is so slender on story it is at best rather ordinary and, at worst, plain boring.

Buñuel needed Dalí's inspired if contradictory logic and had taken the train from Aragon in the hottest month of the year to try and get it. A phrase, a gesture, a jump-cut between unrelated events, a moment's silence or the introduction of music can make all the difference between success and failure, a story that grabs you and one that's as flat as the bay of Cadaqués in summer.

Filmmaking is a team process. Often, contacts made and films shared in the early days will last through a filmmaker's career. Each film is a voyage of discovery and adventurers who have made the journey together before know they are with people they can rely on. Buñuel mastered his craft making short films and that is how most filmmakers start. From Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton with their first silent movies to the current young auteurs Lynne Ramsey (*Ratcatcher; Morvern Callar*), Phillip Noyce (*American Pastoral, Dead Calm*), Robert Rodriguez (*Sin City, El Mariachi*), and Christopher Nolan (*Memento*, *Insomnia, The Prestige*), before tackling a feature, they cut their teeth on the silver ring of shorts.

It was Luis Buñuel's passion to make films that made him a filmmaker, but there is another lesson to be learned from his flurry of activity that summer in 1929. *Menjant garotes* had been financed by his family, but getting it in the can, even if it was to remain hidden for decades, gave Buñuel the experience and, in turn, the confidence to go out and source funds for future projects.

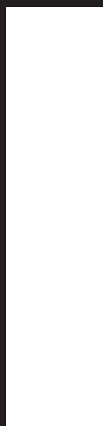
For anyone on the same path today, the journey has never been easier. Cameras are smaller, lighter, less expensive and easier to use. A laptop with a few basic programs is sufficient to edit, compose music and add sound effects to a film. Since the publication of the second edition of *Making Short Films* in 2008, innovative changes in distribution are making it easier than ever to get films shown. It is an exciting time to be a filmmaker.

Anyone can do it, but how do you stand out in the crowd? How do you bring your movie gems in front of those who can make a difference to a new filmmaker's career?

The aim of *Making Short Films* is to answer those questions and to inspire filmmakers through the stages of writing, producing, financing, casting, directing, editing and distributing short films. The book includes an analysis of the scripts of six very different shorts: a 2012 Oscar-nominated comedy, a modern surrealist film, a country-house haunting, a high-tech horror, a mockumentary with Nick Moran as a fighter pilot, and a *noir* thriller adapted from a short story. There are introductions to essential industry software, advice on what camera to buy, basic sound and lighting tips and an extra 20 interviews with filmmakers in all areas of the industry.

In Buñuel's era, revolutionary politics or a flash of thigh was enough to make a film controversial. In an age when almost nothing is controversial, films will need other qualities. *L'Âge d'Or* would remain banned for many years, but has since been shown on television, it can be viewed at the surrealist galleries at the Tate Modern, and of course on YouTube. When it was first screened in Britain, in Cambridge, in 1950, the sole complaint was from the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals. Bare breasts and a nun being thrown from a window caused no offence, but one of the characters is seen booting a small dog up the backside. Social mores had changed, but not the English.

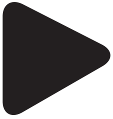
PART



TITLE

# The holy trinity

START



CHAPTER 1

# The Writer

How do you write a short film?

There is a certain irony in the question in as much as the secret of writing a short film is the same as writing anything: first, it ain't easy, and second, the secret is there is no secret. It's plain hard work. Scriptwriting is re-writing. Whatever goes down on paper, however well it looks, and with the abundance of scriptwriting programs and story-creating paradigms, it's probably going to look super, that first gush of words is unlikely to produce anything of great value.

What that gush will do is give you something to work with. It is the cloth from which the tailor fashions a suit, the fittings are the re-writes, the new drafts.

It is often said that you should write about what you know about. I would amend that to say, better still, write about what moves you, your passions, dreams and desires. You have to get into the midst of the story before even you, the writer, knows what it is you are trying to say. Character drives plot, but the underlying theme, the message, is what holds the narrative together.

## CHARACTERS

Once you give birth to your characters, they are responsible for their own actions, and the effects caused by those actions. Put a volatile character in a compromising situation and he will swing out with both fists; neither he nor you will be able to prevent it.

Put temptation in the way of a thief and just watch his eyes light up as he sees the main chance. Are we, the reader or viewer, interested in these people? Do we want to follow their story? Do the characters start at point A and shift subtly, cleverly, gradually and convincingly through dilemma, reversals and crisis to point B? Will the brute learn self-control; the thief not to take what isn't given? Do they have obstacles to overcome? Most important: is there conflict? All stories progress through conflict: action and reaction.

Boy asks Girl: Will you go to the movies with me? Girl says: Yes. No conflict, no story. Boy asks Girl: Will you go to the movies with me? Girl says: No. I can't stand men with beards.

Now we have a story. Will he shave off his beard for her? Will he shave it off in order to get her to see the movie with him, then grow it again once they're an item? And if he does regrow his beard, will she break off the relationship?

## THEME

Now, we have conflict, the grist of every TV soap, but what underpins the story is the theme: the writer's viewpoint, the attitudes and issues the writer wants to explore. A theme can normally be expressed by a well-known saying, in this case: You can't tell a book by looking at the cover. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy discovers there's no place like home. *Rocky* learns if at first you don't succeed, you try, try, try again.

*The Boy With The Beard* is about superficiality, the comical aspects integral to the plot adding light relief, and underpinning the theme. When the Boy sees that the Girl is merely frivolous, he will stop pursuing her. The Girl, oblivious to her own nature, rather than looking introspectively, will look outside herself and seek ways of punishing the Boy. The initial point of conflict is the beard. The first turning point is when the Boy shaves off his beard to get a date. The plot requires another turning point, the second hook, to swing the story into a new direction.

In this case, we will add the Rival, the key element to most love stories and the third spar in the eternal triangle. Our Rival is a clean-shaven shallow character with an equal fondness for taking girls to the movies. When the Girl goes out with the Rival, she finds him self-centered, conceited, his conversation dull. She still hates beards, but she will now look inside herself and realize that she has been superficial worrying over such trivialities. She has started to look inside the book, not just at the cover, and, as if she is looking in the mirror, she will glimpse in the reflection the danger of losing the man she really loves.

It is the emotional journey that holds readers and grabs an audience. To begin with, the Boy was pursuing the Girl. Now, the turnaround is complete. She will start pursuing him, extending the theme and highlighting this aspect of human nature: the tendency to reject what we have and miss it the moment it's gone.

With the story dynamic in flux and the characters now familiar, the scenes should turn with greater urgency, racing us to a conclusion that should achieve two goals:

**1.** to be both what the audience expects
**2.** yet not exactly in the way they expect it.

The audience wants to be surprised, not disappointed by the obvious.

## CONSTRUCTION

Each scene should have its own beginning, middle, and end, a minor conflict leading to resolution and on to the next scene, the characters

growing from each development. The effect is like placing tiles on a mosaic path, each contributing to the story's journey and driving us forward to a satisfying conclusion.

If the story has been well told, the characters would have gone through changes. We will have observed their small imperfections, foibles and flaws, the acts of kindness and humanity that add up to the sum total of what they are, a representation of ourselves.

The metaphor of the sculptor releasing the figure from the block of marble is familiar and can be extended to the part played by the writer, the unique mannerisms, word patterns, strengths and weaknesses of his characters[1] laid bare as each new challenge chips away the outer layers to reveal the individual beneath. Our own dreams and deepest desires often remain a mystery to us; we are a collage of inconsistencies. But the writer must know his characters and their motivations; they must remain consistent *even as they change* in order for them to become interesting to the audience.

The Girl of our story will have fallen in love with the Boy for what he is, not how he appears, and will accept his facial hair. The Boy, conscious of her love and aware of the compromises she has made, will stop being so obstinate about his beard, perhaps shave it off for their wedding day, when the priest—this now being a Greek Orthodox story—has the longest beard known to mankind. The Rival, too, will have changed. He lost the girl, but has learned that you can't tell a book by looking at the cover. He'll probably grow a beard as well.

*The Boy With The Beard* is a morality play that evolved *while I was writing it*. It began as a romantic comedy, but the weighty undertones could with careful writing and re-writing draw us into new depths: perhaps the Boy is a recent immigrant and wears the beard for religious reasons? Perhaps the Girl was once assaulted by a bearded man carrying a knife and the memory still haunts her?

If we take the cross-cultural theme, I would now name my characters: let's give the Boy the heroic-sounding name Alexander, the Girl Wendy, something fresh and easy on the tongue. The Rival we'll call Dirk, for reasons that will become clear. Writers keep books with titles like "Naming Your Baby" on their shelves and pay as much attention christening their characters as parents give to naming their new-born infants. In Spain, people remember Don Quixote more than Cervantes, his creator. Great names of fiction live forever in our minds, Scarlett O'Hara, Sam Spade, Luke Skywalker, Lolita, Robin Hood, Nurse Ratched, Scrooge, Bond—James Bond. In *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* the chameleon-like Bob Dylan is named Alias.

The film *In The Heat of the Night* turns on the scene when gum-chewing police chief Rod Steiger asks Sidney Poitier his name.

**1.1** *In the Heat of the Night* (1967)

P.17

**"So, boy, what do they call you up there in the north?"**
**"They call me Mr Tibbs."**

The response earns Poitier respect and he states his name with such power the producers used the line to title the sequel. Good line, bad script. In the original, Poitier is picked up on a murder rap for no other reason than he's

black. His knowledge, detective skills and humanity move the plot along and secure his release, but as a gritty look at Southern racism, the film is not about Poitier, but Steiger, as he comes to terms with his bigotry, his lack of humanity and, for good measure, his personal loneliness.

*They Call Me Mr Tibbs* is about *what it's about*, without subplots or theme; it lacks authenticity, the quality the writer should be striving for. If a scene doesn't work, only by looking for the veracity of the scene, for the authenticity of the characters' needs, desires and actions, will we unearth its weaknesses.

When a scene is stuck in as a device to move the plot along—*'Hi, John, fancy seeing you here. Are you going to Anne's party at the country club Saturday?'*—the filmgoer knows he's being made a fool of, it's a subtle thing like an instrument out of tune in an orchestra, but you can sense it in the auditorium when, instead of watching the screen, people are glancing around or—the ultimate nightmare: talking. You still see the above "Hi, John" scene, or the girlfriend opening a drawer by "chance" and finding a gun hidden among the handkerchiefs, but this is lazy writing and it's growing harder to get away with it.

In this chapter and throughout the text, examples have been taken from features, not short films, simply because there are so few universally recognized short films to quote from. The structure of short films, and all stories, is essentially the same, and writers of short films are presented with special difficulties, the challenge of space and time, or the lack of it. Once they overcome those challenges, they will be ready to write a feature.

Going back to Wendy, if we want to run with the idea that she was assaulted, we could remap the story as Gothic horror, a now clean-shaven Alexander becoming an avenging hero who pursues the bearded attacker to a haunted house on a windy cliff top where the rivals fight to the death. And who is the bearded attacker: Dirk, of course, in another guise, so named for the knife he carries.

When I was looking for a story to make the above example, a number of films rushed into my mind. But I needed something less complex, a fable, more than a feature. I was sitting with my morning coffee flicking through the local paper, avoiding the computer hum in the office next door. Writing is hard; it's always hard, any diversion to avoid it will do. I turned finally to the newspaper's back page and there was an attractive woman and a young man with a full beard pictured at their wedding; in their optimistic expressions was *The Boy With The Beard*, waiting to be found.

PAUSE

**HOLLYWOOD REPORTER'S TOP 10 SCRIPTS:**

1. **Casablanca (Epstein-Epstein-Koch)**
2. **The Godfather (Puzo-Coppola)**
3. **Chinatown (Towne)**
4. **Citizen Kane (Mankiewicz-Welles)**
5. **All About Eve (Mankiewicz)**

**6.** Annie Hall (Allen-Brickman))
**7.** Sunset Boulevard (Brackett-Wilder-Marshman)
**8.** Network (Chayefsky)
**9.** Some Like It Hot (Wilder-Diamond)
**10.** The Godfather II (Coppola-Puzo)

Most scripts can be found on the Internet Movie Script Database: www.imsdb.com.

## STORYTELLING

According to American writer and scholar Joseph Campbell, the stories are already there, inside us, bursting to come out.

**Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tsu; now and again crack the hard nutshell of an argument of Aquinas, or catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairy tale: it will be always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told.[2]**

The above paragraph comes from *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell's analysis of world folk tales that shows how common threads and themes in storytelling bridge the frontiers of culture, religion, and time. It was Campbell's study that inspired Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*, an insider's look at how writers can utilize mythic structures to create powerful narratives that are dramatic, entertaining and psychologically authentic. Since its first publication in 1998, *The Writer's Journey* has become the Hollywood "bible" on the screenwriting craft.

The stories are there aplenty, in the depths of our own subconscious, and I quote Campbell to counter the post-modern belief that everything under the sun has already been seen and every story has already been told. In writing classes and spats among movie addicts someone will invariably remark that there is only a handful of different stories—the exact number always varies—and writers throughout time just keep retelling them: *The Boy With The Beard* is *Romeo and Juliet*; the man with the fatal flaw—*Achilles*; the precious gift taken away—*Orpheus*; virtue finally recognized—*Cinderella*; a deal with the devil—*Faust*; the spider trapping the fly—*Circe;* change or transformation—*Metamorphosis*; the quest—*Don Quixote*.

To the list we can add the coming-of-age plot (*Gregory's Girl, On the Waterfront*); rivals (*Chicago, Amadeus* and Nolan's *The Prestige,* mentioned above); escape (*The Great Escape, The Shawshank Redemption*); revenge (*Hamlet, Gladiator*); the con (*House of Games, The Sting*); manipulation (*Svengali*). These stories have been reshaped over and over again, but it is

the reshaping and combination of plots that makes them fresh and original. Cross *Romeo and Juliet* with *Cinderella* and what do we end up with: the Richard Gere/Julie Roberts film *Pretty Woman*; change *Cinderella* for *Orpheus* and we have Nabokov's *Lolita*. The genius of George Lucas is that he borrowed from them all to create *Star Wars*, a mythical adventure in the tradition of *Gilgamesh*, the pre-Biblical epic still on the bookshelves today.

The themes running through Clint Eastwood's Oscar-winning *Million Dollar Baby* are little different from Stallone's *Rocky*. Rocky transforms to the girl fighter Maggie Fitzgerald (Hillary Swank), but the story in this incarnation is more about Frankie Dunn (Eastwood), her trainer. The most important lesson Dunn teaches his fighters is "always protect yourself." But we discover that Dunn, on bad terms with his daughter, is himself emotionally vulnerable. Maggie Fitzgerald is a poor waitress already past 30 trying to make something of her life through boxing. At first reluctant to allow a female boxer in his gym, old Frankie finally takes on the girl, teaches her everything he knows, and puts the emotional heart back in his own life. Maggie realizes her dream, she becomes a great boxer, and the conclusion does just what it's supposed to do: it takes us to the big fight and pummels the wind out of us with a knock-out punch of a surprise ending not to be given away here.

*Million Dollar Baby* is an old story made fresh in its modification. In the time of the Greeks they were saying there's nothing new under the sun. The fact is in art, each new creation is a reworking of the old, and it is that reworking that gives a story new life. We are still discovering species of bird, insect and fish unknown to mankind. Every generation has its own hopes and fears, its own tales to tell: melting ice caps, vanishing rain forests, GM crops, terrorism. What makes our story special, what draws in the reader or viewer, then, is not the underlying mechanics of plot, but the characters. Great characters move the audience and, as plot unfolds through conflict, great villains make great stories.

Once born, before a word of narrative goes down on paper, writers should sketch out complete biographies of their characters, their ages, idiosyncrasies, disappointments, hopes and dreams, not caricatures or stereotypes, but flesh-and-blood originals with all the qualities, doubts and nervous tics that make us all one-offs. Characters need a past, a network of relationships. They will show the audience just a fraction of this in the drama, the tip of the iceberg, and then usually at a time of crisis. But from this study, you should be able to extract the essence of your characters and summarize them in a few sentences.

**1.2** *Thelma and Louise* (1991)

P.**17**

Callie Khouri does it marvelously in her screenplay *Thelma and Louise*, describing Thelma's husband (the perfectly-named carpet salesman Darryl) in three swift brushstrokes:

**Darryl comes trotting down the stairs. Polyester was made for this man and he's dripping in men's jewelry. He manages a Carpeteria.**

**Darryl is checking himself out in the hall mirror and it's obvious he likes what he sees.**

**He exudes overconfidence for reasons that never become apparent. He likes to think of himself as a real lady killer. He is making imperceptible adjustments to his over moussed hair. Thelma watches approvingly.**[3]

What Callie Khouri did was take the traditional buddy movie and put two girls in the lead roles. In the story, while Louise is fighting the demons from the past, Thelma is finding herself, both in their own way "coming-of age." When they have fully matured into new beings, they know they can never go back to what they were; they are ready for the ultimate metamorphosis: the drive over the cliff edge into the Grand Canyon.

Each story will have running through it what's called the Active Question: will they get married? Will she stop using drugs and run in the Olympics? Will he get revenge? Will they escape—the robbers with the bank haul, Thelma and Louise from the tyranny of men?

If the characters we create have a tale worth telling, they will *want* something: to get the girl, revenge, justice, to steal the Goose that laid the Golden Egg, a sign of self-worth, find the road to El Dorado. A story becomes interesting when the writer sets up obstacles that prevent their heroes getting what they want (Thelma and Louise first lose their money, essential for their flight). The story hooks us as they overcome those obstacles and/or villains and thereby grow and change in the process.

In order to grip the audience, the characters must be seen to go through a range of emotions: fear, self-doubt, sorrow, elation. The screenwriter achieves this through conflict *(you will never marry that man; I will never go out with a boy with a beard; you'll never be good enough to run in the Olympics).*

As the conflict unwinds, the audience will be seeing themselves in the hero or heroine and will be sharing those emotions. Conflict is to drama what sound is to music. It is the heart of drama, the soul of drama, the secret of suspense, the key to emotional engagement, that thing that keeps filmgoers on the edge of their seats. If you laugh out loud while reading a book or feel a tear jerk into your eye while you are watching a movie, the writer has done his job.

*Thelma and Louise* is often quoted on film courses and Callie Khouri's script should be on the reading list of every writer who wants to turn their pen to film, shorts or a feature, not only for its pace and dialogue, but for the symbolism neatly woven into the plot. *Thelma and Louise* is about male dominance. Darryl's comic machismo, the attempted rape and the truck driver's lecherous behavior subliminally underpin that theme. Male domination is an abstract concept, but Callie Khouri has written scenes as symbols of that concept to make the abstract real and more easy to understand.

On the list of memorable names above is Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The perfect use of symbolism is explored in this movie through the use of the water fountain McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) has failed to budge on the various occasions when he tries to lift it. McMurphy is a free spirit gradually crushed by the institution. In the final scene, Big Chief (William Sampson) seizes the fountain and crashes it through the bars—to escape from the despotic asylum.

As a sub-plot, Big Chief's strand of the story tells us more about McMurphy, Nurse Ratched and oppression, underlining the theme. Sub-plots contribute color, comedy and nuance; they serve to confirm the main plot, reveal the contradictions of the principal characters and place obstacles in the hero's path. Characters who serve this function need as much fleshing

out and, ideally, will go through changes during the course of events from one state to another, in the case of Big Chief, from tyranny to freedom.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* holds our attention because of the power of the characters drawn in Ken Kesey's novel. We as people are interested in the joys and sufferings, the ups and downs of our neighbors and friends; as Marcel Proust once said, at heart everyone is a gossip. Disney cartoons and science fiction monsters are anthropomorphic, and it will take rare skill for a writer to keep us involved in a plot where the hero goes into battle against some anonymous adversary like nature, disease, the tobacco companies or big business. The enemy needs a human face—Christopher Eccleston in Danny Boyle's virus nightmare *28 Days Later*; Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*. In *El Laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's Labyrinth* in English), writer/director Guillermo del Toro combines the harsh reality of Franco's Spain with the imaginary, fairy tale world seen through the mind of a young girl played by Ivana Baquero. But it is the human face of fascism brutally revealed by Sergi López that allows us to comprehend the human cost of the dictatorship.

In life, the whistle blower usually loses his battle against the corporate giants. It is the role of the writer to put the world back in balance and show us the little guy fighting back; except in downbeat *noir* and ironic tales, people come away from films more satisfied with positive endings. As Oscar Wilde reminds us: The good ended happily, the bad unhappily—that is fiction. Whether it's James Bond entering Ernst Blofeld's fortress, Rocky Balboa in the boxing ring, or Charlie Sheen challenging Michael Douglas in *Wall Street's* final reel, the hero and the antagonist must have this conclusive, face-to-face confrontation to send the audiences home contented. The little guy rising to the challenge and overcoming evil appeals to our deepest humanity. We are the little guy.

## THE WRITER'S CRAFT

One thing that first-time writers and filmmakers need to prevail over is that everyone has grown up on the same diet of countless movies and endless hours of television. We know how it's done because we've seen it done, over and over again. It looks easy. Film courses and text books, including this one, light the road before us. The struggle then, as Luis Buñuel understood, is to break the mold of our education and environment, think in fresh ways and use new technology to find our own originality.

**Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade, just as painting does, or music. If you are born knowing them, fine. If not, learn them. Then rearrange the rules to suit yourself.**

What Truman Capote[4] is saying in the above is that storytelling has rules, but like the moon and stars to the navigator at sea, we must still pilot our own course through the darkness.

Imagine a journey by land from London to Athens. We may take the ferry to Bilbao in Spain, cross the Pyrenees and hug the Mediterranean coast. Alternatively, we can take the tunnel to France, slip through Germany

and Austria, then follow the Adriatic. The two journeys will be touched by different languages, foods, customs and landscapes; different people with different skills and knowledge will cross our paths along the way. But the destination is the same and the journey will be the hero's own personal and unique experience, the material face of the more profound internal journey.

While the script for a short film will require conflict, emotional engagement and resolution, as discussed above, there is the added difficulty of wrapping it all up, preferably, in under ten minutes. Surreal or experimental short films may be useful for filmmakers to show a new narrative or visual style. In drama, the best short films have a simple plotline and, in my experience, can generally be noted for containing these three elements:

One main character
One story or conflict
One result or resolution

**1.3** Ashvin Kumar directing (2004)

P.**17**

On the list of "Ten Short Films You Must See" (see *Part VIII: A Brief History of Short Films*), is Ashvin Kumar's 2004 Oscar-nominated short *Little Terrorist*. This perfectly illustrates the point made above: one main character, one story, one result.

Ten-year-old Jamal is playing cricket with his friends on the Muslim side of the Indian/Pakistan border. When the ball is hit into the minefield dividing the two countries, Jamal slips under the barbed wire and picks his way among the mines to rescue the ball (a cricket ball in this poor community would have greater value than in our consumer driven society).

Jamal is seen by guards and escapes their gunfire by fleeing into India. Hunted by the police, he is taken in by a Hindu Brahmin who disguises Jamal by shaving his head and leaving a single curl of hair at the crown, a Hindu custom. The audience sees that life in the Hindu village is the same as life in the Muslim village beyond the barbed wire and that "common human decency" is the same the world over.

The Brahmin knows his way across the minefield and returns the boy that night. They stop at a tree with cricket stumps painted on the trunk: as a boy, before India—Pakistan partition, the old Brahmin played cricket in this very place. Jamal runs safely home to his village, only to be given a good spanking by his mother for cutting off his hair. Result: boys will be boys, mothers will be mothers, and Jamal has seen a glimpse of life beyond the minefield. The plot of *Little Terrorist* is simple, but Kumar's non-partisan exploration of universal themes and his eye for detail makes the story compelling to watch and satisfying in resolution.

**1.4** Oscar nominee Ashvin Kumar

P.**18**

**www.little-terrorist.com**

## TIPS

All stories, long or short, for film or the written word, benefit from structure. In *The Writer's Journey*, cited above, Christopher Vogler outlines the 12-stage journey the hero normally takes in those stories we find ultimately satisfying. A short film will lack time for all the intricate stages and archetypes, but a sense of structure is still crucial.

**1.5** *Babel* (2006)

P.**18**

The 8-Point Guide below remains true to Vogler's principle, but is more practicable for a short film. We have applied the framework to both the short story and short film script in *Part VI, Greta May—The Adaptation*, and a careful reading reveals the 8 steps that hold the story in place. The 8-Point Guide is not a formula, but a road map, and the best stories will take the framework and bend it into a new shape. Note also, that the 8 points do not have to be in sequence; with flashbacks and flashforwards, they may appear in any order (except, perhaps, the resolution), for example *Pulp Fiction* and Alejandro González Iñárritu's dazzling multi-linear, multi-lingual and multi-faceted *Babel*, a film every new writer and director should watch many times.

PAUSE

## 8-POINT GUIDE TO MAKING SHORT FILMS

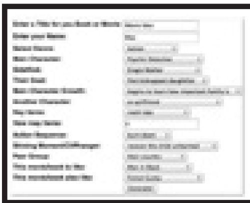
**1.** Introduce main character(s); set the scene.
**2.** Give the character a problem, obstacle, obsession or addiction.
**3.** Let the character work out a plan to overcome the problem.
**4.** Before setting out to solve the problem, there may be a moment of doubt that will require the hero to seek advice from a mentor: teacher, best friend. This is an opportunity to let the audience know more about the problem and weigh it up in their own minds. What would they do?
**5.** With new resolve (and often a ***magical*** gift from the mentor: the watches Q gives James Bond; Dorothy's ruby slippers), the hero sets out to overcome the problem, obstacle, obsession or addiction.
**6.** Overcoming the problem or challenge (getting the girl; escaping tyranny; saving the world) will be met by extreme opposition from the rival, who will usually have greater but different strengths and will in some ways bear similarities to the hero: the nemesis is the hero's dark side.
**7.** The hero will appear to fail in his quest. He will give up or glimpse defeat, even death, and will require superhuman effort to overcome this daunting final task.
**8.** The hero wins the final battle, with an opponent, or enemy, or with himself, and returns to his natural state wiser, or stronger, or cured, but not necessarily happier. The journey has made him a different person. He has glimpsed death and can never go back to the simplicity of what he once was.

To the 8-point guide above, I would add the following recommendations when tackling a script.

## 10 TIPS

- Don't trust in inspiration, unless you want to be a poet. The first idea you get is often borrowed from every movie you've seen and book you've read.
- If you do work on that inspired project: re-write, re-write; re-write. That is the most important three things you will ever learn about scriptwriting, and I repeat: ***re-write, re-write, re-write.***

- See your writing from the other side of the screen, from the audience point of view; if there is no audience, there is no message.
- Do not adjust your writing to the market by attempting to stay abreast, or even ahead of changing trends; such work is a form of cultural static lacking veracity and, often, even relevance.
- Be true to your own vision. Write about what you know about? Absolutely. But then write what you believe in.
- Four steps to writing a short film scenario: find the ending; then the beginning; then the first turning point – the event that gets the story going; then the second turning point, the scene that swings the story around and sets up the ending.
- Enter your story a short time before the crisis that ignites the drama.
- Scenes are like parties: arrive late and leave early.
- Persevere.
- Listen to criticism. But don't always take it.



**1.6** Myers

P.**18**

If you are really stuck for ideas, Bill Myers has created a free piece of online software on his website www.bmyers.com.

The program is easy to use. Just complete the blanks, click Generate, and your movie treatment is created instantly for you.

From the above, I created an action film, where a psychic detective and single mother join forces to find her kidnapped daughter. A single click on "Generate" gave me the following movie idea:

**Movie Idea**
An original screenplay concept by
**Max**

**Action:** A Psychic Detective teams up with a Single Mother to find kidnapped daughter. As the story unfolds, the Psychic Detective begins to learn how important family is with a ex-girlfriend.
By the finale, they manage to burn down 3 meth labs, recover the child unharmed and win the respect of their country.
Think Men in Black meets Forest Gump.

## SOFTWARE FOCUS – SCREENWRITING

There are literally dozens of programs that help you, as the writer, to format and present a screenplay properly. These range from specialized applications to word processor add-ons to web-based resources.

The two industry leading applications are Final Draft and Movie Magic Screenwriter, both available on Mac and Windows. Both programs will remember and automatically fill in information like character names, scene headings and transitions. They will also automatically paginate and format your script to industry standards. Script elements such as Action, Character, Dialogue and Shots will be formatted as you type. A personal favorite is the

option to keep track of ideas via Script Notes. Information can be added, but hidden, so it doesn't disrupt the flow of the text and can be returned to at a later time. Scenes can also be viewed in different ways to get a better view of the script as a whole. Chapter 27 is a detailed guide to using Final Draft.

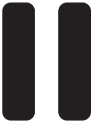
For writing a short script, both of the above could well be over budget, but the good news is there is a lot of excellent freeware that provide the same features. Screenpro is a good formatting template for Microsoft Word with a range of functions, and is available at a very low price. Page 2 Stage for Windows, and Montage for Mac, are both reliable—and free.

One of the many free web-based scriptwriting programs is Five Sprockets—www.fivesprockets.com—which describes itself as an "online production studio," and has many of the expected features in its script-writing section. It also helps you network with other writers and producers.

However good your script is, if it doesn't meet industry standards or is filled with typos, it is likely to be in the producer's bin before he's even finished reading the first page (see the AMPAS'S fourteen points below[5]). But remember the point of this chapter: that writing a good screenplay takes time, hard work, and rewriting. While time can be saved with good software, it doesn't help you to be more imaginative or do the writing for you.

Once the screenplay has been polished, redrafted and is ready for Hollywood, be sure to format it in the right way.

PAUSE



**Fourteen foibles that might invoke a poor first impression (based only on a script's title page and page one):**

- **Typo/misspelling on the title page.**
- **Typo/misspelling in the first scene header.**
- **Typos/misspellings in the first sentence or paragraph or page.**
- **Triple/double spacing of every/many line(s) on first page.**
- **Lack of spacing between scene header and description and/or between description and dialogue and/or between dialogue and dialogue.**
- **Use of font other than Courier 12-point, ten-pitch, non-proportional.**
- **Extensive use of bold print.**
- **Dialogue that stretches from the left margin to the right margin.**
- **Extra space between character name and dialogue.**
- **Description and/or dialogue typed ALL CAPS.**
- **Extremely narrow or extremely wide outside margins.**
- **Long, long, long descriptive passages.**
- **Handwritten or hand-printed script.**
- **Other glaring, non-standard format usage.**

## THE WRITER'S GUILD OF AMERICA (WWW.WGA.ORG)

If you are serious about writing and are based in the states, it's worth joining the Writers Guild of America, a labor union composed of the thousands of

writers who write the content for television shows, movies, news programs, documentaries, animation, and Internet and mobile phones (new media).

Their primary duty is to represent their members in negotiations with film and television producers to ensure the rights of screen, television, and new media writers. Once a contract is in place, they enforce it. Due to the WGA's efforts, writers can receive pension and health coverage, and their financial and creative rights are protected.

The WGA is also responsible for determining writing credits for feature films, television, and new media programs and also monitors, collects, and distributes residuals (payments for the reuse of movies, television, and new media programs) for writers each year.

### Register Your Screenplay

The WGA is also the world's leading screenplay registration service, registering more than 65,000 pieces of literary material every year. Submitting your work to be archived by the WGA Registry will document your authorship and establish the completion date of an original work.

Though the Registry does not claim it can prevent plagiarism, it can produce the registered material to any legal proceeding or arbitration regardless of location or membership as a neutral third party.

Registering can be done online, by mail or in person and costs $20 for non-members per screenplay. Almost any type of creative work can be registered, and material is kept on file for five years.

PAUSE

### TOP 5 HIGHEST PAID SPEC SCRIPTWRITERS[6]

**As with all aspects of filmmaking, scriptwriting is a tough area to get into. But some people make more than a decent living out of it. Spec scripts are sold on the open market, not written at the behest of a studio.**

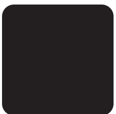
**1. Déjà Vu (2006)**
Screenwriters: Terry Rossio and Bill Marsilii
Fee: $7 million ($2 million guarantee and $5 million production bonus)
**2. The Long Kiss Goodnight (1996)**
Screenwriter: Shane Black
Fee: $4 million
**3. Panic Room (2002)**
Screenwriter: David Koepp
Fee: $4 million ($2 million guarantee, $1 million production bonus and $1 million for serving as a producer)
**4. Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby (2006)**
Screenwriter(s): Will Ferrell and Adam McKay
Fee: $4 million
**5. Basic Instinct (1992)**
Screenwriter: Joe Eszterhas
Fee: $3 million

To repeat the first line of this chapter: How do you write a good short film? It requires the same intense work as writing a feature or novel, it's just shorter. Finally, a quote from Jean Cocteau:

**Listen carefully to first criticisms of your work. Note just what it is about your work the critics don't like – then cultivate it. That's the part of your work that's individual and worth keeping.**

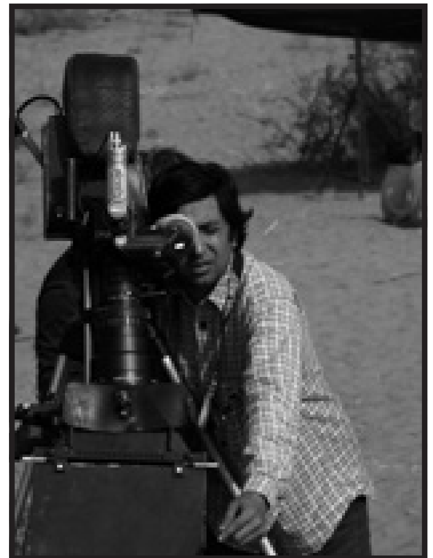
Poet, dramatist, novelist, film director, the kind of guy you could really grow to hate, Cocteau began his career with *The Life of a Poet*, a short film.[7]

STOP



**1.1** Sidney Poitier and Rod Steiger reaching boiling point in the racially charged *In the Heat of the Night*. (1967)

**1.2** Ready for the long ride; Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon in *Thelma and Louise*. Photo Roland Neveu. (1991)



**1.3** Ashvin Kumar directing *The Little Terrorist.* (2004)

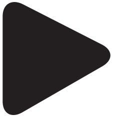
**1.4** Oscar nominee Ashvin Kumar

| | |
|---|---|
| Enter a Title for you Book or Movie: | Movie Idea |
| Enter your Name: | Max |
| Select Genre: | Action |
| Main Character: | Psychic Detective |
| SideKick: | Single Mother |
| Their Goal: | find kidnapped daughther |
| Main Character Growth: | begins to learn how important family is |
| Another Character: | ex girlfriend |
| Key Items: | meth labs |
| How may items: | 3 |
| Action Sequence: | burn down |
| Shining Moment/Cliffhanger: | recover the child unharmed |
| Peer Group: | their country |
| This movie/book is like: | Men in Black |
| This movie/book also like: | Forest Gump |
| | Generate! |

**1.6** Screenshot of www.bymers.com.

**1.5** *Babel* film poster. (2006)

START



CHAPTER 2

# The Producer

When a novelist completes his manuscript, apart from the re-writes and brawls with the editor, the job is done. With a screenplay, the journey is about to begin.

With short films, the writer, director and producer will often be one and the same. Filmmakers, though, will mostly find that life is too short to keep so many balls in the air all at once and, when they find what they are best at, they stick to it.

The foundation of every film, as the previous chapter makes clear, is the script, but it is the producer who will nurture the writer through the new drafts, fork out for the cappuccinos, then present the final version to the director, casting agent, actors, and funders. He will draw up contracts, speak to lawyers, settle feuds and stroke the highly-strung sensitivities of his family of creatives.

In the 2002 *Simone*, Winona Ryder is furious with Al Pacino because her trailer, while the biggest on the lot, isn't actually the highest. At first Pacino tries to let the air out of the tires on the offending vehicle, but when his patience runs out, he does the only self-respecting thing left to him and fires her.

In this parody on the movie business, Miss Ryder, in a refreshing self-parody, is replaced with a computer-generated star character. Such technology isn't yet with us, but the scene illustrates perfectly the relationship between the producer and his team, his role as best friend, adviser, marriage-counselor, guru, psychiatrist and, ultimately, the boss. From the moment a film goes into production, whether it's a Hollywood feature or a first short, the meter is running and the producer has to keep his eyes on the clock.

## FINANCE

It is often assumed outside the industry that the producer has a fat wallet from which he pulls fists full of dollars like Michael Lerner as the odious Jack Lipnick in *Barton Fink*. Not in real life.

Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner at Working Title are responsible for more than 60 films with hits including *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting*

*Hill, Bridget Jones's Diary, Atonement*, and *Anna Karenina*, a fresh new vision of Leo Tolstoy's epic love story adapted by Oscar-winning writer Tom Stoppard and starring Keira Knightley.

It's a great track record, but Working Title is backed by American studios. The producer uses other people's money, and only when he hands that money back with a slice of the profits will he raise funds for the next project.

There is another common misconception to bear in mind: even a no-budget film is going to cost somebody something somewhere along the line: the camera and equipment, postage, labels, pre-production planning, post-production film developing or transfer, and that's apart from the bus fares and bacon sandwiches during production. The producer with his pared-down micro-budget short may not have investors to worry about, but will need to show flare with his début in order to attract some cash next time around.

It's not essential for the producer to have a sister working in Barclays in Soho or a college buddy at the Chase Manhattan. What he does need is a nose for a story and the passion to convince backers and funders (more on that later) to finance his project over the many competing and perhaps equally good packages that flood across their desks. You will notice that in the mind of the producer, the script has become the product and the product, with its added elements, becomes a package.

## DIFFERENT HATS

The producer, then, is a salesman, a PR shapeshifter. He can sell plans for a bridge when there isn't a river; he is a UN peacekeeper between warring factions—the writer, director, leading lady—a shepherd who should guide his creatives and as such is a creative himself. You don't have to be able to score music to appreciate Mozart or Ry Cooder's seductive blues. Likewise you don't need to know what the *f* stops do on a camera, or how an editor adds fades on Final Cut. What the producer understands is human nature. He knows how to get the best out of his people and gives the best in return.

Producers are characterized as tough guys, the cigar-chomping tight wad, and while this might be true of a Hollywood Jack Lipnick, the parody is the exception and, in my own encounters with industry heavyweights, I have experienced only kindness and that species of vibrant, boundless energy it takes to be interested in everything and everyone they come across, the energy it requires to make movies.

PAUSE

### 6 QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN YOU READ A SCRIPT

1. **Who is the hero?**
2. **What is the active question: will he, will she, will they …?**
3. **Who or what opposes the hero?**
4. **From whose point of view is the story being told?**
5. **Theme: What's it about?**
6. **What is the visual style of the film?**

One time, when I was writing a book about Salvador Dalí, I met Hal Landers, the man behind such classics as *What Ever Happened To Baby Jane?* I mentioned that I was a writer—writers can't help themselves—and Hal asked to read the manuscript. It was something I would not normally have done, showing someone unfinished work, but I was swept along by Hal's enthusiasm.

The following morning, he insisted on calling a publisher he knew. That same day, the publisher was calling me and, by the end of the week, I was reading a contract. There was nothing in this for Hal Landers—except the dedication in the book—but he had used his contacts to pull the deal together, extended his own network and made life seem truly magical.

Hal Landers once bumped into Queen Juliana of Holland in a store in Paris. "Hey," he said, "aren't you the Queen of Holland? I'm from New Jersey, I've never met a Queen before. Why don't you let me buy you a cup of coffee?" The Queen was so overwhelmed by the approach she agreed, and they remained friends from that day on.

What these anecdotes illustrate is that the qualities Hal Landers brought to his daily life are the very qualities required by a producer: enthusiasm, energy, generosity, a good eye for product (the Dalí book is now in its fifth edition), an agile mind, the verve to think laterally and the personality to do the unusual. Like invite Queens for coffee.

## ALEXANDER SALKIND

One time when I was in Paris, I was invited to the première of *The Rainbow Thief*, a whimsical fantasy written by Berta Dominguez D, directed by Alexandro Jodorowsky and pairing Peter O'Toole with Omar Sharif for the first time since *Lawrence of Arabia*. I met the producer, Alexander Salkind, and at his prompting I told him that I was trying to interest broadcasters in a documentary project. He didn't make any phone calls on my behalf, but led me to the bar and told me how he got started in the film business.

He had arrived penniless in France from Russia and was taking a train from Paris to Lyon where he thought he might have more luck finding work. In the carriage, he met a man who owned three shoe shops. Alex told him a story he wanted to turn into a short film. By the time they arrived at their destination, the shoe shop owner was so intrigued, he decided to sell one of his shops and fund the movie.

Financially, it was a disaster. Salkind was depressed, but it was his first film and his collaborator, the shoe shop guy, considered the experience so valuable, he sold a second shop to finance the next film. That, too, was a flop, but he had started out on a course from which he saw no way back: he sold the last of his shops to fund one more film and lost everything.

Alex Salkind had to go elsewhere for finance, but he now had a showreel and was on his way. As for the shoe shop proprietor, he'd left the footwear business behind him forever. He'd caught the film bug, worked as Salkind's assistant and had a long career as a cinematographer. Salkind had learned the three essential lessons:

1. How to inspire potential finance.
2. How to manage a budget.
3. How to tell a good story.

With these skills he went on to make an enormous variety of movies, from Kafka's impenetrable *The Trial* (1962) to *The Three Musketeers* (1973) to the *Superman* movies where, due to deft negotiations and deceptive scheduling, his name is lent to what lawyers call the Salkind Clause: that an actor must be told *how many movies he's making*. When he filmed Christopher Reeve in the first *Superman* in 1977, the out-takes contained much of the footage used in *Superman II*.

Salkind by then was a powerful figure, "a Russian producer who moves somewhat mysteriously in international circles," according to writer John Walker,[1] but he had learned when he was penniless the value of a penny and never took his eye off the ticking meter.

The producer will always be pushing the production manager and first assistant director (1st AD) to keep to schedule, that's his job. But the enthusiasm and passion he brings to the project must animate them to give their best. He will develop the bi-lingual skill of telling his director two things at once: The rushes are great. Get on with it. He will know when his leading lady needs stroking or firing. Producing is a multi-skilled pursuit and communication skills form the basis of all the others.

The bigger the budget, the more of other people's money he's spending and the good producer will always be aware of that responsibility. He makes a modest living from the fee written into the budget. He makes the big money for those fat cigars from the points, the percentage of profits negotiated with finance or the studios. The success of a film will leverage up those points for future projects. Failure will make it that much more difficult to finance the next one and sobering statistics show that the majority of first-time filmmakers never make a second feature.

To turn the written word into film needs everyone from the stars whose names go up in lights to the runner on a work experience intern scheme. The process of mixing and shaping the many disparate elements is like taking base metal and turning it into gold. The producer is the alchemist. Behind the scenes he will be working harder than anyone. It's his reputation that's on the line.

## WRITERS

A variety of hyphenates shore up the title producer: Assistant, Associate, Executive, Line and the modest Co, but what we are dealing with here is *the* producer, the man or woman who finds the raw material: the book, play, short story, original script, a script adapted from another medium, an idea on the back of a pack of *Marlboro*, or inspired by a photograph on somebody's shelf—and what he sees is the film flash before his eyes.

This talent is more acquired than innate and for the producer to get started, the short film provides the same demands of story-telling and filmmaking found in a feature or TV drama. The constraints of budget and

the need to answer to backers or broadcasters will encourage the producer to seek out a story that works for a wide audience, and that's not a bad thing.

However, if you do have the urge to make something culturally or socially valid, a personal crusade, a showcase for your six-year-old twins, or something zany and completely off-the-wall like Martin Pickles' *G.M.*, a short homage to Georges Méliès (discussed later), the short film has all the challenges of a feature without the risks, critically as well as financially.

The first job is to find the script or find the story and put a writer to work on it.

Where do you find a writer?

Throw a stone out of the window and you'll probably hit one. Finding a good writer—finding a great writer, that takes time, practice, patience—and luck.

If you announce that you're looking for material, proposals will start dropping through the mail box with whining letters that diligently explain the story, always the kiss of death; if a script needs explaining, it isn't ready. Andrea Calderwood once remarked that when she left BBC Scotland for Pathé, the same scripts followed her down the M6 to the capital. She took on two assistants, they read 700 scripts between them, and rejected the lot. That isn't to say, of course, that the 701st isn't going to be *the one!*

It's an odd contradiction, but even with all those rookie writers out there, producers from the narrow streets of Soho to the gleaming glass offices looming over Santa Monica Boulevard are pulling out their hair weeping over the scarcity of good scripts. There was a time when every man leaning on every bar imagined he had a book in him. Now it's a screenplay. In fact, mention the movie business, and he'll whip it out of his shoulder bag, dog-eared and coffee-ringed, and ask strangers casually met if they would like to take a look. If you meet Andrea Calderwood in the bar she'll probably tell you she's a dentist.

While there are thousands of people writing scripts, producers continue to complain that there isn't anything worth filming, and with the complaint being ubiquitous, there must be something to it. Producers are therefore rejecting the scripts sliding electronically and physically over the transom and are making calls to publishing houses in search of the neglected novel, the remaindered gem, the book out of copyright, the self-published crime novel released digitally through Amazon. Others are venturing out of the West End to see fringe plays, and into the wind-blown canyons off-Broadway to hole-in-the-wall experimental theaters. If it's worth publishing or staging, it must be worth taking a look at.

But here lies the dilemma. The novel is about ideas, about the internal life of the characters. Proust in *Remembrances of Things Past* wanders off for a dozen pages to describe the smell of *madeleines.* Try getting your writer to put that in his screenplay. Or try getting him to take it out if he's attempted to slip it in. The stage play is about words, plays on words, the taste of words. There is a mass of material that can be adapted, but as anyone who has ever done any adapting soon learns, you have to read the original, take out the kernel and sling the rest to the pigeons. An adaptation is just as hard to write as an original screenplay, perhaps harder.

## SMILEY FACES

A friend of mine recently quit making corporate videos to adapt a biography, the hardest of genres. Within days he was phoning to chat about migraine and insomnia; his attraction to cliff tops and razor blades. Suddenly he was fighting with his girlfriend—her fault—arrived late for appointments; he was drinking too much or, alternatively, claiming he no longer drank at all (first sign of the alcoholic). Finally, he turned up at a meeting wearing odd shoes. He talked about the "verbal" power of silent movies then handed me a Post-it with this on it:

**The true way leads along a tight-rope, which is not stretched aloft but just above the ground. It seems designed more to trip than to be walked along.**

He'd found Franz Kafka,[2] or Franz Kafka had found him, and this is where the producer becomes the psychiatrist, the healer, the script editor. My writer friend was filled with self-doubt, not that he had done a bad job with the screenplay, he just needed someone to tell him he'd done a good job, a great job . . . just a few tweaks here and there, get the first turning point forward a few pages, put some action into that soggy middle . . . maybe cut out that section on page 73 where the cop explains the whys and wherefores to his sergeant.

Producer Maureen Murray (www.foxtrotfilms.com) puts smiley faces beside the bits she likes in a script and her writers are more able to cope with the cold straight lines that slice like razors through the bits she doesn't. She makes suggestions, but expects the writer to find solutions: the two skills are different and must complement each other like *yin* and *yang* in a perfect if reversed fit.

A producer is not a writer who has too much in the in-tray to write, but must be able to distinguish good writing when it's on the page and bad writing that needs erasing. Re-writes are a form of torture, "the main condition of the artistic experience,"[3] according to Samuel Beckett, but no screenplay surfaces through the slush piles without them. A film may not live up to the script's potential, but there has never been a great film made from a bad script.

Producers are not always looking for the best script they can find. They may be looking for a script that appeals to them for their own reasons. J. Arthur Rank[4] was a Methodist lay preacher who showed films to children at Sunday school. In 1932, when he discovered more people went to the cinema than to church, the wealthy young mill owner entered the movie business with the intention of making and distributing films that had a positive social content. In the competitive movie market, the Rank Organization had to make films with one eye on the audience, but Rank in looking at scripts and dealing with producers never lost sight of his original aims.

Rank was concerned with the moral and ethical state of society in his time, as an examination of this theme can provide useful and entertaining material at any time. No one who saw *Syriana* and *Good Night, and Good Luck*, two films in 2005, would have missed the filmmakers' allusions to and reflections on the Iraq War. The actor/producer George Clooney was the prime mover behind them both and his political stance got him in a whole

lot of trouble with the American right wing press: If you're not with us you're against us. But Clooney was big enough to swim against that particular tide and come fall 2006, Americans were swimming the same way, voting the Republicans out of power in both Houses of Congress. Clooney's films did that? No, of course not. But they were a valuable part of the drip, drip, drip of opposition that finally encouraged the American people to take a fresh look at the entire Iraq crisis.

**2.1** *Goodnight and Good Luck* (2005)

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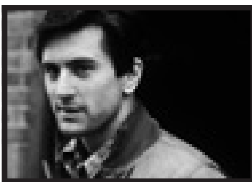
From the early days of Chaplin's Little Tramp movies, film has evolved as a primary source of social and philosophical debate. Film, with greater facility and to a larger audience than literature, can convey complex ideas through the intentions, actions, and relationships of the characters; those actions, and the results of those actions, involve the audience on an emotive level.

Day in and day out on the news we hear stories of rape, robbery, muggings, violence at school, on public transport. We watch a movie about Joe Wright, a man doing two jobs in order to help his sister Maria pay for an operation to right a crooked leg. We meet Bill Black, his neighbor. Black's a small-time dope dealer in trouble with the mob. When he robs Joe Wright at the very moment when enough money has been saved for the operation our heart goes out to Joe and Maria. We are glued to our seats until Bill Black gets his comeuppance, and we'd kind of like to see Maria walk straight again. Audiences will be moved far more deeply watching the soap story of Joe and Maria Wright than listening to the priest in church telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, as J. Arthur Rank realized when he first showed films at Sunday school.

## TELLING A STORY WELL

Some writers are good at dialogue, others structure, others still can see the big picture and take on adaptations. There are writers like Paul Schrader—*Taxi Driver, Cat People*—who go alone into the desert for a week, work 20 hours a day and return with a finished scenario.



**2.2** *Taxi Driver* (1976)

P.31

Maybe it needs fixing, but there's another kind of writer unique to the film industry, the script doctor, and that's what he does, not original work but, like a picture restorer, he fills in the fine details. The role of the producer is to match the writer with the story; in Hollywood, of course, they'll use a combination of expertise and leave the Writer's Guild to resolve the credits.

There is yet another kind of writer the producer must watch out for and he's the one who does a single draft and is reluctant to do more because he knows the script will be overhauled when a director comes on board. He's right, of course, it will be. But a director won't come on board if the script isn't fully developed in the first place. These writers, normally very competent, make a reasonable living writing first drafts and can't understand why it's rare for their scripts to turn into films. They are often wonderful raconteurs and can slip marquee names with their business cards into every conversation. This is the writer to avoid. Their stories are verbal, not on the page, and it is easy to be fooled by a colorful personality unless the producer has knowledge of script mechanics and the insight to enjoy their company and leave it at that.

If the producer has learned the art of managing money, he should max out his credit cards and spend some time on a desert island finding out how stories work. Read Æschylus, the lives of the great Olympians, Oedipus and on to Shakespeare and Chaucer. Dip into the wise worlds of Lao-tsu and Confucius; some Jacobean drama, and don't forget the exquisitely constructed short stories of Hemingway and James Joyce. See Sam Beckett's absurdist plays (demand them on your island) and study the greats: Dickens, Thomas Hardy, E. M. Forster, Daphne du Maurier, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Flaubert, William Golding ... and on to Tolkein, Nick Hornby, J. K. Rowling ... Gore Vidal, José Saramago and Michel Houellebecq. You may not want to produce vampire movies or erotica, but you should certainly be aware of the phenomenon that is *The Twilight Saga* by Stephenie Meyer and *The Fifty Shades Trilogy* by E. L. James.

**2.3** *Belle de Jour* (1967)

You can learn a lot about making films by watching films, but you learn story-telling from the written word. Buñuel hitched his wagon on to Dalí's genius to get started, but he was a voracious reader and became a masterly writer with the breathtaking *Belle de Jour* and Academy Award winning *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, to name just two of his many films. To get there, like Buñuel, it makes sense to start with shorts. Once you get those right, you'll have a showreel for Andrea Calderwood to brighten her quest for the perfect script.

## SHORT FILM DISCIPLINE

Unlike the United States and in Europe, many short films made in the UK have a sameness about them, no doubt because the majority are produced by young filmmakers eager to enter the industry and whose background and education is similar. They have the mixed good fortune not to have lived through the hard times of Alexander Salkind, who fled Russia, or Hal Landers, who grew up in the mean streets of New Jersey during the Depression, though, naturally, it is those experiences that shaped them and gave them an edge, the nerve it takes to approach strangers on a train and royals out shopping.

According to Dawn Sharpless, creative director at Dazzle Films, one of the UK's top outfits for sales, distribution and the exhibition of short films, shorts in the UK are falling behind because insufficient time is spent on their development. Short films are often seen as merely a stepping stone to features and filmmakers are in such a hurry to take that step they are not putting the time into creating powerful short scripts. The short film discipline is a genre in its own right, and only when that is fully recognized and appreciated will short films improve.

"Occasionally something makes you sit back in your seat and you realize that here's a filmmaker with a story to tell," Dawn adds.[5] "But the sad thing is that for every fifty shorts I see, you sit back only once with real excitement."

What's the problem?

"Inadequate planning. I think the whole secret is in pre-production," she says. "New filmmakers need to be more daring. Stories should take us to places we have never been to before—and that takes courage."

Her observation is substantiated by Elliot Grove, who heads the Raindance Film Festival. Some 2,000 shorts are submitted to him each year from 40 or so countries and 200 make it into the annual festival, the largest showcase of shorts in the UK. He has noticed that every year there is a flood of good shorts from a different country. Last year it was Poland; a few years ago, South Africa. "It's always somewhere new, but it has been a few years since I have seen anything in the UK that really knocks your socks off."

Elliot Grove has noticed that most British short films are dialogue driven, while those in the United States and Europe tend to be more visual. "It's an odd dichotomy, because those British films that are visual usually go around the world winning prizes."

In the US and Canada, young filmmakers have grown up on a diet of MTV, while in the UK, a lot of scripts and films Grove sees have been inspired by TV soaps with their incessant banter and lack of action.

With shorts, filmmakers should be exploring ideas and learning their craft, says Grove. They should study as many short films as they can, especially at festivals, where they will come in contact with other filmmakers meeting the same challenges and where they can ask each other how they got this effect or that shot. Film is a collaborative process, and Elliot Grove has been constantly and pleasantly surprised at how willing filmmakers are when it comes to sharing information.

Grove compares the difference between writing a short film and a feature as creating a haiku poem and a sonnet. "It requires different techniques, different skills, a different sensibility. With a good short film you have a calling card. And every time we have shown a filmmaker with great story-telling skills, they have moved on to making successful features."

Raindance first showed Shane Meadows before he made *TwentyFourSeven* and screened Christopher Nolan's shorts before he made *Following*, *Memento* and that latest incarnation of *Batman*.

## USING SHORT STORIES

If in the search for a feature, producers look at novels and plays, for a short film, one surprisingly untapped source of material is the short story, sadly neglected by mainstream publishers and mainly found in the hermetic world of the literary small-press and online magazine.

There are thousands of small-press journals and websites with a constant flow of new stories, usually by writers experimenting with style and who view publication as an end in itself. Few journals can afford to pay contributors, but the competition to get into print is still fierce and the quality of writing often very high.

Short-story writers know every word counts and, as a form, the short story has similarities to the short film that do not apply to the novel and play. Both make use of suggestion, atmosphere, nuance, the subtly implied gesture. Both are a riddle, every word having to carry its own weight, justify its existence. The short story weaves fine lines more than broad strokes. Explanation is death. A published story would have been honed and refined, every gesture and action thought through to such a degree

that if the woman in the story runs her tongue over her lips, there is such a good reason for it, you'd better make sure your script contains the same instruction and your director heeds it.

If you do hit on a writer with a fine short story, he will already be well versed in re-writing and prepared for it when you option a short script. And who knows, perhaps he has a feature script lurking in the bowels of his laptop?

Short stories are subtle, often enigmatic, with carefully drawn characters, and when filmmakers alight on them they tend to think in terms of features not shorts. There are many examples of successful adaptations, among the best known coming from three Philip K. Dick stories: Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*, from the imaginatively titled *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report*, and John Woo's 2003 adaptation of *Paycheck*, a story about a machine that can read the future and just as relevant in film terms half a century after it was first published in 1953. Dawn Sharpless was unable to come up with any examples of short stories that have been turned into memorable short films, but yearns for the day when that hole in the genre is filled.

As mentioned above, many short-story writers see publication as their main goal. There are many short-story sites. I have found FanStory, ABCtales and the Short Story Library (at Americanliterature.com) particularly good.

**www.FanStory.com**
**www.abctales.com**
**www.americanliterature.com**

## SMALL FISH

Instead of doing their research and finding material, producers in frustration will often turn to directors and accept their scripts, not because they're better, often it's the contrary, but at least they know the director is committed and they haven't got to go through the birth pains of yet another draft. The result, though, as Dawn Sharpless has observed, are too many forgettable films—shorts and features—written by non-writers and backed by producers too uncertain of themselves to find a writer and put in the hours bonding and working together.

Writers tend to be introvert. Directors are charming, outgoing, more fun to work with. But producers should be wary and heed William Goldman's haunting counsel: there are three essentials that come before you sign up a director. The Script. The Script. And the Script.

When Goldman's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* came out, New York's three leading papers devoted many pages to their reviews. Two of the critics were in raptures over the Redford/Newman coupling and forgot to mention the writer. The third hated the picture and blamed the script. Goldman had spent five years sitting in his New York apartment writing it.

Critics are not going to go easy on writers. The producer must. He should cultivate the wisdom of ancient China where the Emperor once sent an emissary to Lao-tsu asking for advice on how to rule the kingdom. You should rule the kingdom, replied the sage, as you would cook a small fish.

Producers are emperors. Writers are small fish. Don't grill him, don't batter, bone and leave him gutted. Writers are delicate: fine porcelain; thin ice on winter morning ponds; a love affair.

Imagine the plumber coming three days late to repair the loo. He shoves a new tube into the ballcock, fingerprints the tiles with lubricating oil and you feel a wave of gratitude when he accepts $300 cash and agrees to screw the government out of the taxes. Your writer drops in with three typos and an oxymoron fleshing out a secondary character and you want to kill him. Those stains on the bathroom walls have to be douched away and where better to spray some ammonia than at the self-doubting wordsmith. Writers cry easily. Don't use words like: pretentious, slow, lacking, boring, depressing, or another day, as in: "We'll talk about it another day."

He'll worry himself sick waiting for that day. Let slip the word pretentious and you're leaving yourself open to the pretensions of defining the term. Tell a writer his script is slow and he'll shuffle down to *Starbucks* for a double espresso with whipped everything, including the skin on his back. Tell him his work's depressing and he'll get depressed, swallow a fistful of codeine and consider Hemingway's last dance with a shotgun.

The major production companies work with established writers and, more than ever, are sourcing material from novels, biographies, plays, and, a disturbing trend, old movies—*The Wicker Man*, *The Four Feathers*, *Psycho*, *Vanilla Sky* from Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los Ojos*, all, in my opinion, inferior to the original. The new producer is more likely to be working with an inexperienced writer who, like the producer, is learning his craft. The writer will work for weeks and months before presenting what he believes is a masterpiece and it will require tact and patience for him to see that what he has typed is probably little more than a glorified treatment.

PAUSE

**There's a great saying: When nine Russians tell you you're drunk, lie down. I always think of that. If people say, "That's a ghastly idea"—and I'm certainly capable of ghastly ideas—then it might be worth listening. You have to listen, and it's desperately important to find people whose opinions you can respect and value—Anthony Minghella[6]**

## CUTTING DIAMONDS

When Lee Hall's script for *Billy Elliot* first went to the BBC it was about the miners' strike in Thatcher's Britain. Billy's desire to dance was a subplot. Hall's standpoint was socialist more than aspirational. Three years of development changed a story about class solidarity to class betrayal, from Old Labour to New Labour, and created a film for our times.

Hall's first draft, like all first drafts, was not a film but a road map leading to a film, a guide, not the place it became. When you read first drafts you are looking for a spark, originality, an individual voice, not gold dust but the

iron ore that can be mined and shaped into a bridge to span the gulf from development to production. A producer should identify all that is good in a script. If only 10% is good, salvage it, compliment it. Get rid of the 90% and start again.

*Billy Elliot* spent three years in development. *Good Will Hunting* needed seven. Richard Attenborough was white haired and 20 years older before *Gandhi* was ready to go. Scripts are hard to write, as difficult or more difficult than novels. They need many drafts and time, lots of time. Producers must face that. They choose a companion as much as a project. Their writer becomes their brother, their sister, their child. According to Cyril Connolly, writers are just that, infants crying in their cots for attention. A writer needs faith, patience and passion. A producer needs all of that and a box of Kleenex to wipe away the tears.

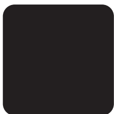
When a producer finds his writer he sticks with him. *The Claim* (2000) was produced by Andrew Eaton with Frank Cottrell Boyce writing and, by the time Michael Winterbottom began directing in Canada, they were already working on *24 Hour Party People*, the next project.

At a Script Factory screening of *The Claim* in London, Cottrell Boyce spoke about the long process he'd gone through to take the themes from Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and transpose them to the 1849 gold rush in the American West. He told the audience the first drafts (that's plural) of his script were done *just to see what the themes were.* The next drafts have to be a good read so that the *Suits* with their check books can see the story in their minds. The script that goes out to actors is slightly different again. *But every draft is different to the shooting script*. Those earlier drafts contain an explanation of themselves that you don't need when you're ready to shoot. It's a leaner and fitter thing. "I love this stage. It's really great when you feel something coming to life. It's like cutting diamonds."

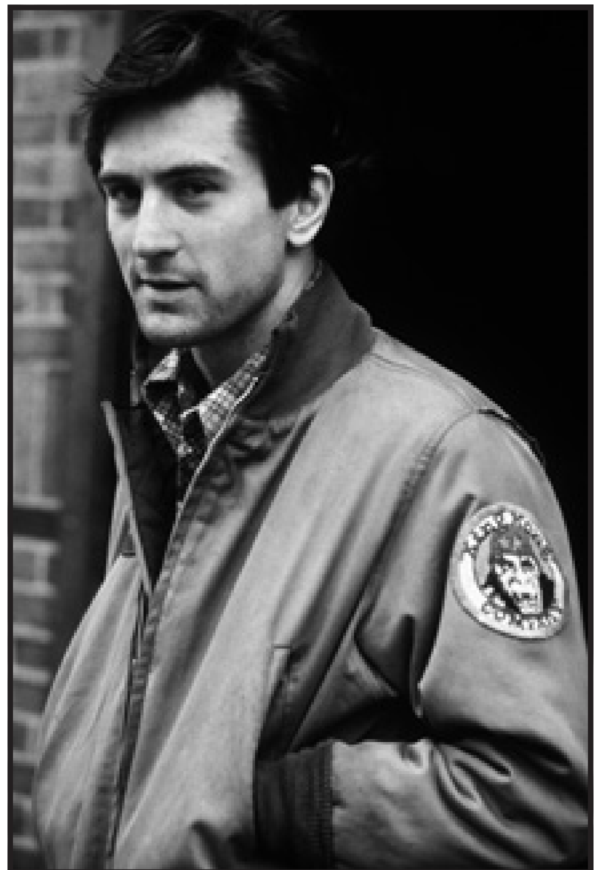
Frank Cottrell Boyce did not choose to write *The Claim*. Andrew Eaton chose it and stuck Hardy's novel on his desk. Of course, writers want to write their own stories. But it is the job of producers to know what they can market. With a short film, the producer has an added burden: telling a good story in ten minutes is hard and finding slots for films that are longer is harder still, as we shall discuss later when it comes to distribution.

Once the producer has survived the writing process and has a script in his hand, he moves to the next square on the board where he must find a director and build his team.

STOP

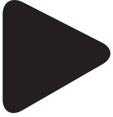


**2.1** George Clooney and fellow travellers take on commie hunter Senator Joseph McCarthy in *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005)



**2.2** *"Are you looking at me?"* Robert de Niro in *Taxi Driver* (1976)

START



CHAPTER 3

# The Director

The writer has labored over his ten, descriptive, lively but tightly-written pages, and the producer hands this precious object to the director. It is hardly surprising that writers want to direct their own work but this impulse is, in a historic sense, a relatively new trend and many subscribe to Hitchcock's faith in what he called The Trinity: Writer. Director. Producer. By keeping the roles of writer and director separate, the producer has greater control.

In the case of Hitchcock, while he was directing one film, every morning he would have breakfast with the writer he'd set to work on a new project. He didn't read the pages or interfere with the ongoing narrative, but like the operator of a Punch and Judy Show, his hand was manipulating the twists and turns from behind the scenes.

The director, whatever his modus operandi, will invariably work on the script and his name often finds its way onto the writing credits, something Hitchcock grandly renounced. The director also gets the debatable designate *A Film By* . . . just above or just below the title, depending on his status, and the power of his agent when it comes to negotiating the contracts. The deifying of the director in this way occurs because he is the creator of the finished work, the artist who takes the raw material of the script and combines the elements of mise-en-scène, a phrase borrowed from the theater and meaning "to put on stage."

In film terms, John Gibbs in his excellent study *Mise-en-Scène* suggests a useful definition might be the contents of the frame and the way those contents are organized, both halves of the formulation being significant:

**What are the contents of the frame? They include lighting, costume, décor, properties, and the actors themselves. The organization of the contents of the frame encompasses the relationship of the actors to the camera, and thus the audience's view. So in talking about mise-en-scène, one is also talking about framing, camera movement, the particular lens employed and other photographic decisions. Mise-en-scène therefore encompasses both what the audience can see, and the way in which they are invited to see it. It refers to many of the major elements of communication in the cinema, and the combinations through which they operate expressively.**[1]

In the novel, the word alone must convey mood and meaning. In film, every frame is packed with information, a shadow, a ticking clock, the breeze fingering the curtains: every detail is significant. Stephen Fry while directing *Bright Young Things* (2003) from the Evelyn Waugh novel *Vile Bodies* was shown by the props department several cigarette cases from the thirties for him to choose from. That cigarette case may only be seen for a fraction of a second—it may be edited out of the final cut—but it is the attention to detail that creates audience identification with character and involvement in their lives.

The director must have an eye for every small detail. He decides who does what, when and why, this multiplicity of detail described by actor Gary Oldman after the first time on the floor as “death by a thousand questions.”[2]

The fusion of these disparate parts is the puzzle the director (with the editor’s help) assembles and it is his vision that we see on screen. Of all the jobs in film, the director requires the least training and the least experience with technology. That isn’t to say that directors do not know their way around an editing suite, or which filters to use on the camera. Most do. The best learn. What the director needs most, however, is the insight to understand immediately what the story is about, what passions drive the characters, and what each actor needs in order for them to make those passions real.

When we think back on any situation, in the pub with friends, a bitter row, a day on the beach, a night of love, we see it from our own point of view. As we piece the memory together, the mind selects the most salient and piquant details with camera angles, distances, juxtapositions, close ups and long shots in a richly woven tapestry.

This selection of fragments is the same as taking frames of film and, in our heads, cutting movies from our recollections. According to anthropologists, once monkeys learn to use tools, to prise open sea shells, for example, future generations are genetically blessed with that knowledge. Likewise, a century after the Lumière Brothers first shot moving pictures, it seems an innate human predisposition to be able to piece together the puzzle of a film story and, perhaps more important, to actively take part in its telling by incorporating our own experience and imagination.

Actors develop and refine this art; the director like a hypnotist will draw out the appropriate memories to bring a scene to life. You don’t have to be an out-of-work father with hungry mouths to feed to play the role, as Clint Eastwood showed in *Unforgiven*, the story of a retired gunslinger who crawls back into his old skin in order to put food on the table. Similarly, it’s unlikely in Beverly Hills that Sigourney Weaver would have come face to face with an *Alien* bent on genocide (though anything’s possible in Beverly Hills). Both performances were convincing because these proficient actors are able to dredge up emotions that inform their characters.

The director must know the character he is creating as well or *even* better than the actor; the evolution of their story will be part of the pattern painted inside his mind. Shooting schedules by necessity divide scripts into convenient but disconnected chunks that are stuck together when filming is completed. Cinema actors are trained to give realistic performances with minimal preparation; it is considered by many that too much preparation

can blunt their edge, the reverse of work in theater, where rehearsals are lengthy and stories are told chronologically.

A woman, for example, who stabs her husband and is taken away by *gendarmes* in a rainy Paris exterior, may not get to show what led up to the fatal event until weeks later when the crew moves to do the villa interiors in sun-drenched St Tropez. If the director dresses the woman in the Paris scene in a clinging gown that becomes diaphanous in the spring rain, it's going to look a whole lot different than if she's wearing an anorak and climbing boots. Are her shoulders sagging, or does she hold her head high? Is mascara running in black streams over her cheeks or are her scarlet lips puckered in a defiant smile? Was her husband a brute and we were with her, feeling her pain and relief as she plunged the knife in his back? Or is she a scheming gold digger who deserves the guillotine? How the audience reacts depends on the scene staged by the director and the performance drawn from the actress.

To return to *Unforgiven*, Clint Eastwood would not have approached the role by trying to *act* the feeling of a man suffering the torments of failure. Rather, he would have allowed the appropriate consciousness to take possession of him. That state would generate the emotionally applicable movements, responses, behavior and body language, a glimpse into the inner soul where all sensation occurs on a deeper level. It is the art of restraint and suggestion that Eastwood has mastered, a particular achievement as he normally directs himself.

More than the writer who has shaped his theme, plotted his turning points and set up his surprises, the director would have combed the material for the emotionally charged moments and, through his cast, reveals the heart of character. An actor well directed will make his feelings so clear that lines in the dialogue mentioning love, despair, jealousy, hatred and so on can be edited out of the final cut, the telling having been supplanted by showing, the point made by Frank Cottrell Boyce in the previous chapter, his diamond-cutting analogy for the shooting script being that moment when the last traces of dust are blown away and the sparkling gemstone is revealed.

## POV—POINT OF VIEW

A film goes through three stages to reach completion: pre-production, production and post-production. All carry equal weight and, as the producer will remind his director, it is in pre-production where they can save time and money on production and post. The ticking clock is the perfect symbol for the process: for the producer the ticking clock is a meter ringing up the bills; for the director, the ticking clock is more like a metronome guiding rhythm and pace; for the audience the ticking clock is a ticking bomb that holds us breathless waiting for the explosion. The director will keep us waiting, building the sense of urgency, the tension.

Typically, the writer would indicate in a script:

**The Firefighter dashes like a 100 meter sprinter into the blazing building to save the baby.**