# THE DIRECTOR'S IDEA

## THE PATH TO GREAT DIRECTING

Ken Dancyger

By the author of **The Technique of Film and Video Editing**, **Alternative Scriptwriting**, and **Writing the Short Film**

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*For Joshua and Malka*

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# Acknowledgments



*The Director's Idea* is a book that comes out of my teaching experience with production students at New York University and with professional producers and editors at the Maurits Binger Institute in Amsterdam. In earlier books I had examined the storytelling tools of the screenwriter as well as of the editor. Now students and professionals have pushed for an articulation of the storytelling tools of the director.

Needless to say, a book such as *The Director's Idea* needs and gets a lot of help from many quarters. At Focal Press I'd like to thank Elinor Actipis, the acquiring editor as well as Becky Golden-Harrell and Paul Gottehrer who each in their own way have helped move the book to completion. I'd like to thank my friend Maura Nolan who helped me prepare the proposal and Dave Wapner who helped in the preparation of the manuscript.

Above all I'd like to say that my wife Ida was immensely helpful in the manuscript preparation and as a constant on-site editor of my work. She proved tireless and invaluable.

I'd like to thank all the external reviewers, but would like to especially single out Warren Bass of Temple University. His review made this a better book. I appreciate his intelligence, acuity, and passion. I only wish I have made the book as good as his road map proved to be for me.

Finally this is a book about directing for directors and talented individuals who want to become directors. Although its shortcomings are my own, I hope the book has succeeded in conveying a passion for directing that for me has never dimmed. I wish as much for the readers of this book.

Ken Dancyger
New York
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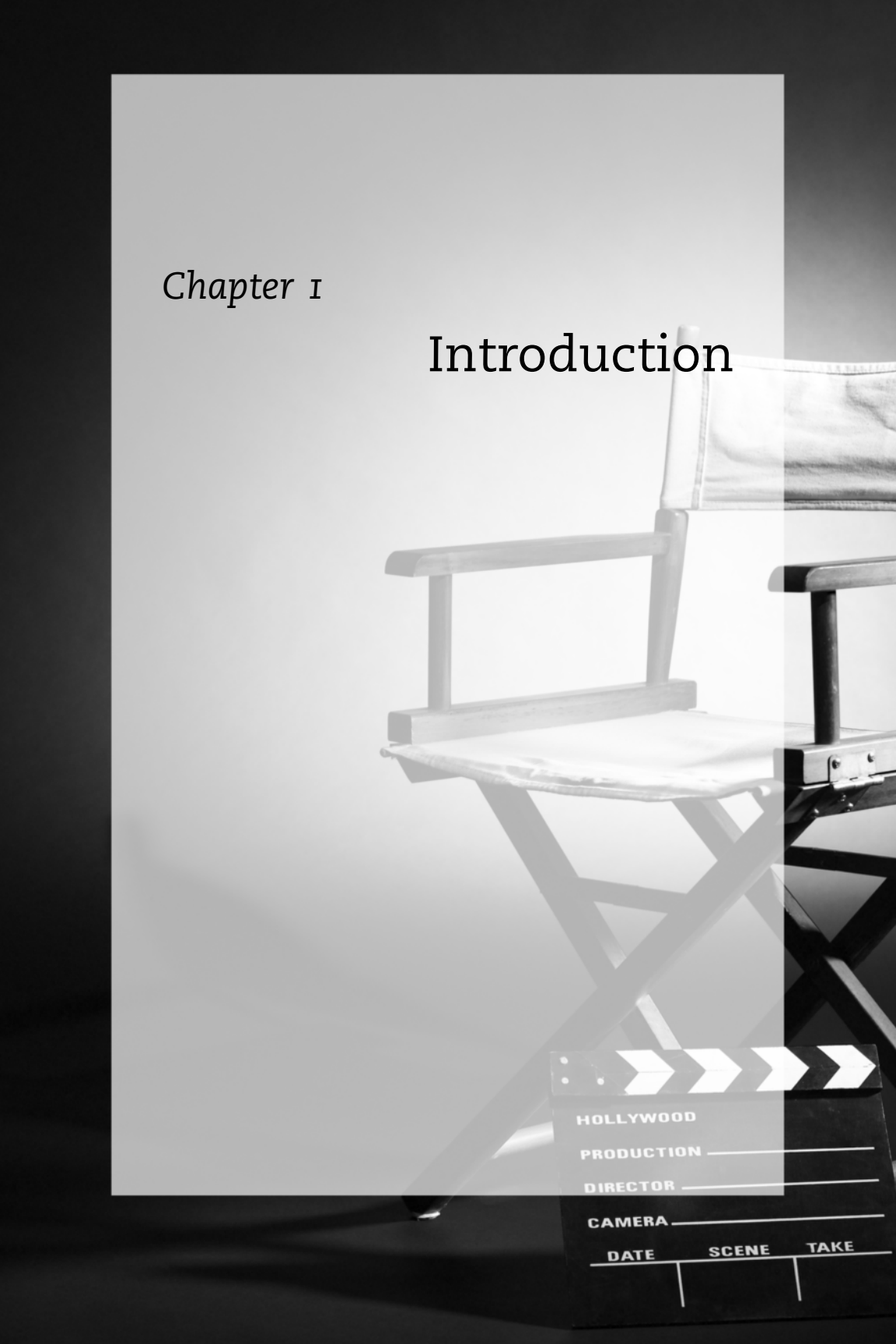
*Part I*

# What the Director Does

*Chapter 1*

# Introduction



Much has been written about the mystique of film directing, so much so that the craft and the art of directing have been submerged in a swell of adulation. The adulation is understandable. Film—celluloid or digital—is the art form of the twentieth century, and the director is given much of the credit for a film's success. Paradoxically, directing remains a vocation that has used its mystique to its advantage; consequently, less is understood about the means of directing than about the other key roles in production. So, one of the goals of this book is to develop an understanding of what the director does and, by doing so, to help the reader become a better director. The path to better directing is exploring the tools available to the director and understanding how those tools can be deployed to make the competent director a better director and the good director a great director.



Having stated my über-goal, permit me to step back a bit to contextualize the goal of the book. First, the book examines the role of directing in production. Filmmaking, more than most popular or elite art forms, is collaborative. Producers, cinematographers, art designers, sound designers, editors, composers, scriptwriters, and actors all contribute mightily to the power of a finished film. Many have used the analogy of the director as the conductor of an orchestra or the coach of a sports team. Such analogies are, on one level, good. The director must marshal a varied group of talented individuals into a winning team and a single voice, and the sum of the whole must always be greater than the sum of the parts. This is the directing challenge, and this is where directors distinguish themselves as good directors or great directors, as opposed to competent or less competent directors. To do so, however, the director must be a politician, technician, storyteller, and artist.

This book focuses on the director. That is not to say that producers, writers, or actors are less important. Indeed, all are critical to the success of a film, and their roles are clearly understood. The goal of this book is to make the role of the director equally clear.

## What Does the Director Do?

The director is responsible for translating a script (words) into visuals (shots) that will be turned over to an editor to pull together into a film. Start and finish points, however, may well blur, as the director

joins the project in the writing or pre-production phase and does not leave the project until post-production. Thus, the director may well be involved in all aspects of the editing phase, such as sound design, music composition, recording, and mixing into the overall sound, until the film is completed. In other words, the director is responsible for the creative supervision of the film from early in its conception to its completion. The director will work most closely with the producer, who is responsible for the organizational and financial supervision of the film from its conception to its conclusion.

In the pre-production phase, the director may either play a secondary role to the scriptwriter or partner with the writer. The exact nature of the role depends on the director's track record, influence, and interest. There is no such variability in the production phase, when the director is clearly in charge. Interpretation of the screenplay, blocking, breakdown of the script into specific shots, and modulation of the performances of actors are some of the specific responsibilities of the director in the production phase. In the post-production phase, the director's interest or influence will either expand or reduce the director's involvement. Generally, directors are quite involved in this phase even though editors (picture and sound) are driving many decisions.



What should be emphasized, however, is that writers, directors, and editors share one goal—to tell the story as effectively as possible—but their contributions differ. Writers use words, directors use camera shots and performances, and editors use visuals and sound to tell the story.

## Who Is the Director?

Directors, as with every other profession, come in all different shapes and sizes. Whether they are male or female, Western, Eastern, Spanish, or American, their uniqueness is a result of the mix of each director's beliefs, experiences, interests, and character. Some directors are playful (think of Federico Fellini). Some are deadly serious (think of Ingmar Bergman). Some prefer particular genres (think of Clint Eastwood). Some seem to thrive on a diversity of genres (think of Howard Hawks). Some are political (think of Sergei Eisenstein). Some are apolitical (think of Blake Edwards). Some prefer comedy (think of Woody Allen). And some try to alternate

serious films with comedy (think again about Woody Allen as well as Billy Wilder).

My point here is that each director has a distinct personality that makes the work of that director different from the work of others. Part of the pleasure derived from films is their diversity, which contradicts the notion roaming around too many halls of film education institutes that there is one right way to make a film. My feeling is that there are many right ways, depending on the character, beliefs, and interests of the specific filmmaker.

## How Did We Get Here?



Directors were not always the central figures they are today. As Hollywood developed into an industry, stars and producers were far more important than directors. David Selznick, a studio executive, became an important producer; consequently, he is the central creative figure associated with "Gone with the Wind." No one remembers the four directors and as many writers on the film. When one speaks about "Casablanca," it is Bogart and the Epstein brothers, the writers, who are remembered rather than Michael Curtiz, the director. Otto Preminger and Joe Mankiewicz both began their ascent in the film industry as producers. Both later made their mark as directors. Billy Wilder began as a writer, as did Preston Sturges. There were important directors in Hollywood (such as John Ford, Frank Capra, and Howard Hawks), but whenever possible they also acted as producers of their films. Even today, Jerry Bruckheimer and Brian Grazer are important producer figures in the industry. So, how did the director become so important?

The pivotal event occurred in France rather than in Hollywood. There, critics such as François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Roehmer gathered around the journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, under the editorship of André Bazin. In post-war France, they studied and wrote about the creative genius of John Ford, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Anthony Mann, and Sam Fuller. They considered these American filmmakers to be the auteurs of their films, and they criticized the structure and output of their own French film industry. They began to make their own films—independent, low-budget films in the freer style characteristic of American cinema. The effect of their adulation was revolutionary, as directors came to be widely

regarded as the auteurs or creative kingpins of their films. This concept was seized by cinephiles in England, where Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson wrote about film in the same spirit and began to make their own films in the freer, more personal style of the French "New Wave" filmmakers.

In America, the notion of auteurism was quickly adopted by John Cassavetes, Arthur Penn, Mike Nichols, and Sidney Lumet. Also, an intellectual–journalistic rationale was provided by Andrew Sarris; in his film reviews and later in his book *The American Cinema*, Sarris articulated and applied the auteur theory to all of American cinema. The auteur revolution had come to the United States, and film schools became a hotbed of auteurism. Graduates of the late 1960s (particularly Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and George Lucas) fueled in their early films the idea that the revolution was going to take over Hollywood.



In fact it did not, as studios, agents, and actors became more important even as the director's status was rising. Everyone in film—actors, editors, writers, musicians—became superstars right along with the directors. As the commercial stakes rose, so too did the superstar population of Hollywood. Globalization and technology have deepened these trends, but today the director is at the pinnacle of the film hierarchy.

## Where Are We Today?

Film today is one of the most important global industries. For many Hollywood films, most of the revenue can come from outside of the United States. A tentpole film such as "Troy" can expect to earn two thirds of its revenue offshore. In the United States, film and television are key export industries. In so fluid and lucrative a milieu, it is no wonder that directors are superstars the world over.

Wong Kar-wai of Hong Kong, Tom Tykwer of Germany, Luc Besson of France, and Steven Soderbergh of the United States are all at the peak of industry and public attention. In one sense, they are part of a continuum begun with Charlie Chaplin and Alfred Hitchcock 70 years earlier, but today is different. In addition to the industry being more global, there are other reasons for the increased importance of directors.

One reason is financial. George Lucas ("Star Wars"), Steven Spielberg (the "Indiana Jones" series, "Jurassic Park," "Jaws"), and Peter Jackson ("The Lord of the Rings" trilogy) have created financial empires within the Hollywood industry. Their scale is unprecedented. Another reason is critical recognition, that is to say, the attention of the critics. Francis Ford Coppola ("The Godfather" series, "Apocalypse Now"), Martin Scorsese ("Raging Bull," "Goodfellas," "Kundun"), and Spike Lee ("Do the Right Thing," "25th Hour") are not runaway commercial hit directors (indeed, the works of Scorsese and Lee are rarely commercially impressive); nevertheless, they are critically embraced and valued far beyond their commercial viability (or lack thereof).



Yet another reason is the director's willingness to experiment. Steven Soderbergh experiments with clashing style and content ("The Limey," "Traffic"). David Mamet, a well-known playwright, experiments with very filmic plot-oriented genres ("Heist," "Spartan," "The Spanish Prisoner"); Mike Figgis experiments with technology ("Time Code"); and Oliver Stone experiments with the MTV influence ("Natural Born Killers").

A number of filmmakers try to replicate their style and success as commercial and television video makers. The world of advertising has launched the careers of Tony Scott ("Man on Fire"), Michael Bay ("Bad Boys"), and McQ ("Charlie's Angels"). Their transition to filmmaking has worked and created yet another layer of directors in the industry.

Finally, some directors were something else before they became directors, such as the actors Robert Redford ("Ordinary People"), Clint Eastwood ("Mystic River"), Mel Gibson ("The Passion of Christ"), Diane Keaton ("Unstrung Heroes"), and Angelica Huston ("Bastard out of Carolina"). The theater directors Sam Mendes ("American Beauty"), Nicolas Hytner ("The Crucible"), and David Mamet ("The Winslow Boy") follow in the footsteps of Elia Kazan, and all do very good work.

Another consideration with regard to today's directors is that they are far more international than their predecessors. Many successful foreign directors (that is, directors who are successful in their own countries) are now working in English productions as well as those in their languages of origin. Istvan Szabo of Hungary ("Taking Sides," "Sunshine"), Luc Besson of France ("The Messenger,"

"Leon the Professional"), and Tom Tykwer of Germany ("Heaven") are among the best known of these filmmakers.

American directors are also taking a more flexible approach to their careers. Spike Lee makes documentaries and commercials between his feature films. Martin Scorsese also makes documentaries between his features. Steven Soderbergh occasionally jumps into digital video and small-scale features in between his more commercial projects. Barry Levinson takes on edgy television projects in addition to his more conservative (read commercial) feature films. Oliver Stone has moved from directing a low-budget HBO documentary about Castro to directing a $200 million feature about Alexander the Great. In Europe, Lars von Trier continually experiments with the style of his films. Roger Michell jumps from film to television to theater with great frequency.



One of the most interesting career paths exhibiting this flexibility is that of Ang Lee. Lee has moved from ethnic family comedies ("Eat Drink Man Woman") to Jane Austen family comedy ("Sense and Sensibility") to Chinese-language action adventure ("Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon") to American action adventure ("The Incredible Hulk"). And I have not even mentioned his Western or nonlinear films! This degree of diversity keeps the director challenged and in risk-taking rather than risk-aversion mode.

What I am suggesting is that today the director is a superstar, but the means of becoming such a superstar as well as sustaining one's superstardom have grown far more complex.

## The Structure of the Book

This book is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the question "What is directing?" and discusses how a director arrives at the director's idea. The first half of Part I defines the director's idea and differentiates competent or technical directing, good directing, and great directing. I realize that *competent*, *good*, and *great* are loaded, subjective words. They are hierarchical, and my use of such terminology and my taste may not match those of the reader; nevertheless, I am going to use these terms to capture the sense that there is a distinct path to improved directing and that the path requires a premise, a director's idea, to guide the choices the director makes.

Those choices—the direction of the actors, the shot choices, the proximity of the camera to the action, deciding when to switch to a stationary camera, and finally text or script interpretation—are the substance of the second section of this first part. Approaches designed to reach the director's idea of the reader are provided in an appendix that appears at the end of the book.

The second part of the book is comprised of 14 case studies of the work of individual directors. The case studies are organized as follows:

1. Articulation of the director's idea.
2. Application of the director's idea.



Scenes from each director's work have been chosen to examine their approach to directing. The discussion of these scenes includes:

1. A summary of the narrative content of the scene
2. The performances (how they are adapted to orchestrate emotionally the director's idea)
3. The camera work or visualization utilized to achieve the director's idea
4. Lighting, sound, and, if applicable, art direction and how they contribute to the director's idea
5. A summary of how these elements work together to further the director's idea

## How I Came to Write This Book

I have already pointed out that this book presents a hierarchy of directing. Understanding the genesis of my biases will allow readers to either give in to my views or to temper their views with mine. First and foremost, I hope that the reader will come to share my excitement for great directing and to appreciate how to reach for those stars. Second, I must say that I have always been smitten with the directing bug. From the very first time I made a film I knew that I had experienced a singular pleasure of the act. Of course, I instantly associated that effort with those of my idols, the poetic John Ford, the vigorous Raoul Walsh, and the epic Anthony Mann.

Although I had not yet navigated the emotional depths of, for example, Charlie Chaplin, I felt certain that doing so lay just ahead.

The joy of directing has never left me, but in short order it was joined by a drive to write, and nothing proved more pleasurable than editing my own work. Indeed, the process of discovery I experienced in the editing process is quite unmatched in all of my film experiences. I began to teach and quite enjoyed that, also. I have never thought of myself as pollyannaish. I simply enjoy every aspect of the form. It is all about telling a story, about having—and giving to the audience—a thrilling experience. This has not changed, even after thousands of films viewed and even more thousands of students taught. In the past 15 years of my career, I have been writing books about scriptwriting, editing, and production.



In 1988, an editor at Focal Press, Karen Speerstra, asked me to evaluate a book proposal on directing. I did so, and in the course of that evaluation I shared with her that the best directing book I ever encountered was Karel Reisz's *The Technique of Film Editing*. First written in the early 1950s, that book was for me the bible of directing, and I said as much to Karen. Her response was to ask me if I wanted to write the third update of the Reisz book. Of course I did, but it did not come to pass. What did result is what I call the cousin of the Reisz book, my 1993 book, *The Technique of Film and Video Editing*. That book, now in its third edition, has given me the opportunity to flesh out Reisz's subtextual idea: What do directors need to know about shots to make a strong film? Much has changed—styles (*e.g.*, MTV), pacing, types of documentaries, elaborate nonlinear films—but the ideas of Griffith and Vertov and Eisenstein and Pudovkin remain the fundamentals for the shot organization and selection that create powerful film experiences. And those ideas are at the core of the Reisz book.

Flash forward to 2003. I am teaching a workshop in Amsterdam on the history of editing. Attending are working editors and producers. To a person, the attendees express their regret that directors have not come to the workshop. They should be your audience, I am told again and again. Thus, the idea for this book took form.

I would like to end this chapter with the following ten ideas about directing that I would like to share with the reader:

1. Writing, directing, and editing are all about storytelling. The writer uses words, the director uses the camera and the

performance, and the editor uses shots and sound. The means differ but the goal is the same: Tell the story as clearly and as strongly as you can.

2. Making a film is both a creative and organizational challenge, akin to setting up, operating, and shutting down a small (or mid-size) business; consequently, the director needs a creative team (actors, cinematographers and crew, sound and crew, art director and crew, editor and crew), as well as an organization team (producer, production manager, script supervisor, assistant director), and must get along with both teams. Think of this role as a mix of general and captain.
3. Many different styles of leadership can be effective.
4. Making a film requires making hundreds of decisions each day.
5. Directors can never be over-prepared.
6. Directing is technical, intellectual, emotional, and creative. The more layers operating for the director, the more likely the film will be lively and engaging.
7. Actors are critical to the success of a film; they are the front line, the great risk takers in a production. Because of the risks they take, they deserve the respect of their directors.
8. Character matters. Good and great directing is fueled by the character of the director. By character I mean that vague mix of ethics and behavior that make each of us who we are. False character, conversely, does not make for good directing.
9. The story, whether 30 seconds or 3 hours, can be told in many ways. The emphasis or interpretation of a director will depend on that director's interests, intuition, and belief system. One interpretation is not necessarily better than another. It is simply different. And herein lies another pathway to viewing directing as a unique expression of the director (as opposed to an objective view of the work).
10. Technology is not a solution to the directing challenge. Technology is just technology. Directing is the human factor in the directorial equation.

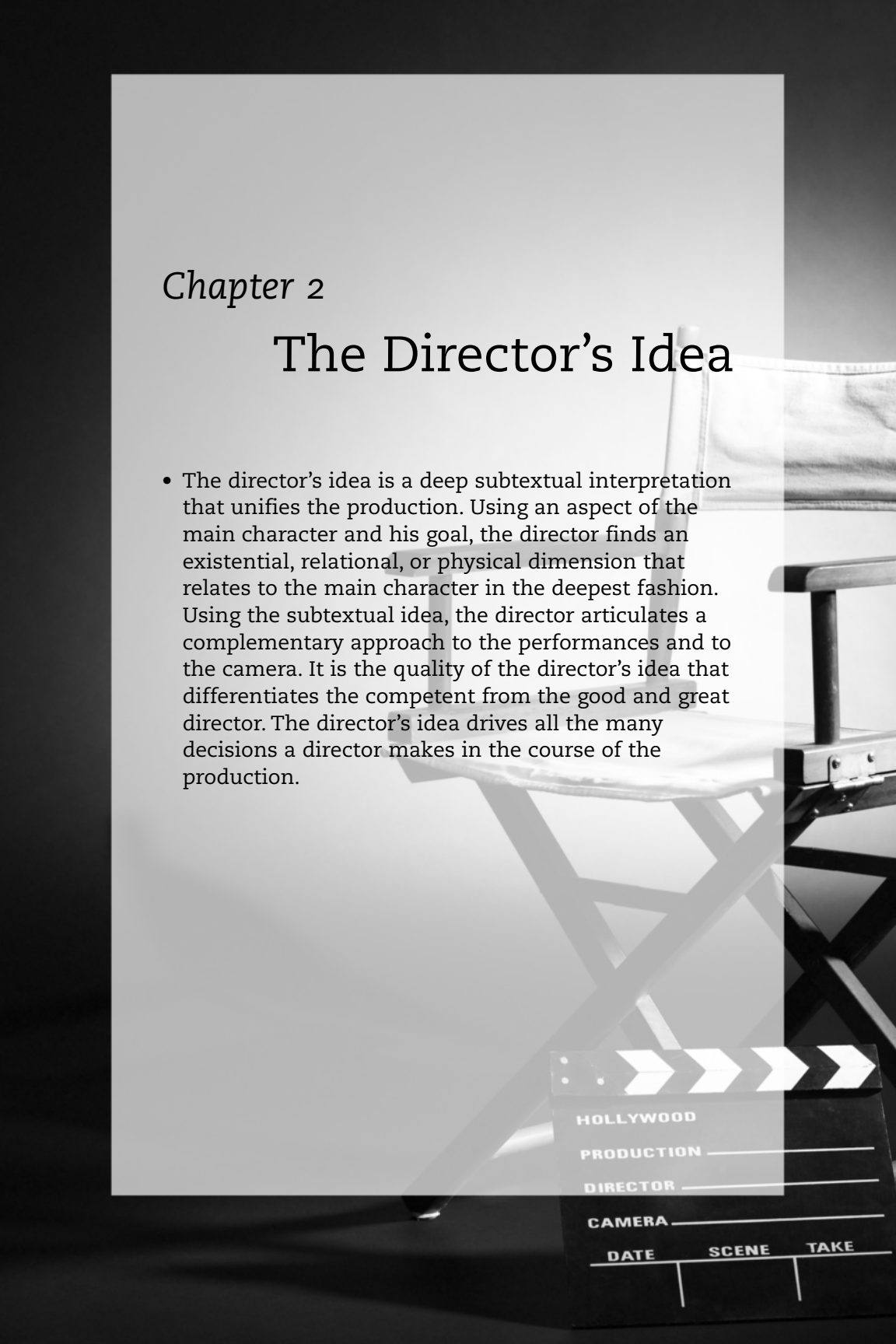


And now let us begin.

*Chapter 2*

# The Director's Idea

- The director's idea is a deep subtextual interpretation that unifies the production. Using an aspect of the main character and his goal, the director finds an existential, relational, or physical dimension that relates to the main character in the deepest fashion. Using the subtextual idea, the director articulates a complementary approach to the performances and to the camera. It is the quality of the director's idea that differentiates the competent from the good and great director. The director's idea drives all the many decisions a director makes in the course of the production.



In this book, I am going to say many things about technique, about directors, and about directing. To persuade the reader that what follows is not simply esoteric, abstract, and academic, I would like to use this chapter to demonstrate that the views presented in this book are conceptual in their framing but practical in their goal. The goal is to help readers become better directors by utilizing the concept of the director's idea. What needs to be said at the outset is that there are all kinds of directors: intuitive directors, self-conscious directors, dictatorial directors, laissez-faire directors, directors whose agendas are political, and directors who are utterly commercial and exploitative in their intentions.



In order to develop our understanding of directing, we must consider three broad areas of decision making that are critical to defining the type of director: (1) text interpretation, (2) attitude toward directing actors, and (3) how the camera is used (*e.g.*, shot selection, camera angle, shape of the shot, point of view of the shot). Beyond those areas is the issue of whether the director's decisions add value to the project. What I am proposing in this book is that there are three categories of such decision making: competent, good, and great. To understand directing, each level of decision making must also be clearly understood; accordingly, the next three chapters address the concepts of competent, good, and great directing.

In each case, the consciousness of the director's idea is where progress begins. The competent director conveys a singular attitude about the script, be it romantic, violent, or victorious. The good director conveys a more complex, layered vision of the narrative. The great director transforms the narrative into something surprising and revelatory. Each of these options exists. Only the ambition of the director can elevate the audience's experience.

The goal of this book is to illuminate the pathway from basic to great. We can assume that the director consciously chooses a director's idea, which implies an awareness about the directorial choices that must be made and a sense of what constitutes better directing. This is not a matter of intellect or personality. It is far more about conscious goal setting and moving along a pathway to achieve that goal. The opposite view, which has its proponents, is that art (including directing) is mysterious, subconscious, intuitive, and therefore impossible to articulate. My approach in the book is to embrace what I believe to be the source of art making: consciousness. The

greater the consciousness of the director with regard to what the director's idea is and how to apply it, the better, the clearer, and the more powerful the outcome.

The tools that the director uses are text interpretation, directing the actors, and directing the camera shot selection. The director can value one of these tools over the other or use them equally. Whichever he chooses, these three tools are the prism through which he filters the thousands of choices he will have to make in the course of a production. What I am suggesting is that a clear, articulated director's idea will help sharpen the focus and purpose of those thousands of decisions.



Here we come to the hierarchy that this book creates as its pathway to great directing. The presumption here, as elsewhere in life, is that some people are better at their jobs than others. In addition to our three categories of competent, good, and great, we could add another for those who misunderstand directing or are unable to function as directors. Let us call them ill-suited and unsuccessful in their goal of directing. Of course, our categories of competent, good, and great are subjective, so I put forward the following criteria.

The competent director tells a clear story, even an effective story, but the audience's experience of the film is single-layered and flat. A film directed by the competent director can be commercially successful and the director's career can be a rewarding one, but even from the directorial perspective the experience is flat. A competent director is technically competent and produces shots that are useful to a clear edit and performances that are credible within the parameters the director has set for the film. The competent director provides a kind of technical baseline for the purposes of this book.

The good director gives the audience a more complex experience, a layered experience. The layering may be generated from a more complex text interpretation, such as a modern main character in a classic Western, for example. The layering may arise from modulation of the actors' performances; Elia Kazan, the great director of performers, utilized this kind of strategy. Or the director might use a broader variety of shots, wide-angle foreground–background shots rather than mid two shots or extreme long shots rather than the anticipated close-ups. Whatever the choice, the good director seeks out a director's idea that will deepen meaning, add subtext, and complicate the narrative.

The great director not only adds value to the experience of the film but also provides a transformative experience. By transformative I refer to what all great art does: It gives us another way of seeing the ordinary. A man uses his bike for work. The bike is stolen. The economic future of his family is in jeopardy. The man steals a bike, and his son watches as he is caught. The boy shares his humiliation. Vittoria De Sica transforms an everyday story of survival into a story about poverty and fathers and sons. The shared humiliation of father and son will no doubt have an effect on the child. How will this boy grow up—a thief or a doctor? Will he be a caring or callous person? Such questions emanate from the directing of "The Bicycle Thief," in which De Sica transformed a simple story into something quite special about all of us. This is what the great director does. And the instrument is the director's idea. Because individual chapters are devoted to each of these categories, we will move on to a discussion of how a director's idea unifies a production.



## The Unity of the Production

It is critical for the viewer that the film be experienced whole. By that I mean that the text interpretation, the performances of the actors, and the shot selection act together to build the viewer's experience. Imagine a jokey, superficial performance in a film such as *Ordinary People*, where the realism and emotional credibility of the characters are key to the experience of the film. Unity means the tools of directing are working together, and this is the purpose of a clear and strong director's idea, which promotes a unity of experience for the audience. A few examples will illustrate how. I have intentionally chosen two relatively simple narratives so it will be clear how the director's idea is operating.

The first example is Volker Schlondorff's "The Ninth Day" (2005). The story takes place over the course of nine days in 1942. A Catholic priest is held in Dachau, where he and his fellow priests are poorly treated but not as poorly as the rest of Dachau's inmates. He is given a leave of nine days to convince his bishop in Luxembourg to accept the primacy of Nazi rule. We learn that the priest is respected, scholarly, and pious and comes from an important family in Luxembourg. For eight days he visits with his family and the bishop's secretary. He

sees his mother's grave. Everyone pressures him to make his life easier and not return to Dachau, but in the end he does return, unwilling to yield to the demands of the Nazis.

The story is simple, but Schlondorff's director's idea turns the film into an overwhelming experience. The director's idea is that the world in 1942 became a black and white world. For most people it was black—their lives, their dignity, everything could be instantly taken away. On the other hand, there was the white world, filled with privilege, power, and seeming immortality. In the black world, violence and cruelty knew no bounds; in the white world, indulgence and selfishness knew no bounds.



To work with this idea, we begin with the text interpretation. In Dachau, the focus is on death, cruelty, torture, humiliation. In Luxembourg, the settings are Father Henri's family apartment, Gestapo headquarters, the church, the bishop's office, and the cemetery. These latter environments seem untouched by what Dachau represents in the narrative.

Two people are specifically seen as spiritual: Father Henri and a priest from Norway, who commits suicide as a result of his personal suffering in Dachau. Father Henri too suffers but he maintains his humanity in spite of the suffering. Father Henri's brother is an industrialist who offers to save Henry by taking him to Paris. Father Henri's pregnant sister offers to use all her connections to get Henri to Switzerland. In spite of the implications for each of them, the siblings need him to survive, as if he is the spiritual center of the family.

Three other characters are important: the bishop, the power of the Church in Luxembourg; the bishop's secretary, keen to accommodate the Nazis; and a Gestapo official who almost became a priest but at the last moment saw more of a future with the SS. All are believers. All of these characters care, but self-interest in whatever form motivates them. All live in the white world of power and have no understanding of true powerlessness and the black that represents life and death in Dachau. The director's idea of black and white frames the events of the narrative such that we see each event and each character as residing in one world or the other. When Father Henri chooses to return to Dachau, he is remaining spiritually intact and embracing the blackness of the world he and his fellow priests occupy at Dachau. For him to accept the blackness means to never replace his spiritual wholeness with the material

benefits of a world that is power oriented, the white world. As such, Father Henri represents the best values of the Church in the world, the spiritual values of piety and valuing others in life.

The performances are in keeping with the director's idea. The tormented Father Henri fluctuates between spiritual strength and human weakness. With the exception of the Norwegian priest, the other performers dwell in the material world where power is everything.

Schlondorff is very interesting in how he uses the camera to present the two worlds of the director's idea. The black world of Dachau is shot in telephoto lens, and the background is compressed, pushing the people in the images together such that they are less individualistic and more herd. We learn they are priests. The camera looks down upon the mass, and the camera angles rob the characters of individualism and dignity. They are victims and we watch as they are victimized. Intense close-ups bring Father Henri and the SS into emotional and cruel conflict. The intensity makes this black world threatening and devoid of humanity.



When Father Henri is in Luxembourg, long shots replace close-ups and wide-angle shots provide a clear context for the white world. The solid church, the powerful Gestapo headquarters, even the graveyard where Father Henri's mother is buried seem to belong to a different world than Dachau. Here, Schlondorff is deepening visually our sense that black and white live side by side, yet one is hell and the other is heaven, the powerless *versus* the powerful. His execution of the director's idea helps transform this simple story into an emotionally alive and vivid experience.

A second example is Cedric Kahn's "Red Lights" (2004). Again, the story is simplicity itself. A rather ordinary man has a successful wife—an attractive corporate lawyer. They have two children. The entire film is occupied with their setting out from Paris to pick up their children from a camp holiday in Bordeaux. The journey itself is the focus. The husband drinks, waiting for his wife and their journey to begin. Whether or not he is jealous and why he might be is unexplained, but he is troubled and alcohol empowers him. Driving like a wild man he becomes increasingly provocative. At his second drink stop, she abandons him for the train. He tries to catch the train but cannot. Again stopping for a drink, he picks up a young one-armed stranger who has asked him for a lift. The main character

keeps stopping for alcohol and becomes quite drunk. Road blocks set up to catch an escaped convict do not encourage caution, just more bravado. When a tire bursts, the stranger pulls the car over and takes over. He changes the tire but then drives into the woods. When the stranger becomes more threatening, the main character smashes him with a liquor bottle, batters him, and runs him over with the car. Lost and again sober, the main character has the car towed to the local town for repair. There he learns that his wife never made it to Bordeaux. He finds out that she was raped and shot on the train by the previously mentioned escaped convict. Eventually, we learn that the stranger he killed was the convict. The film ends with husband and wife reconciled and continuing on to pick up their children.



Kahn's director's idea is that violence resides everywhere in the world and arises from expected sources (the escaped convict) and from the most unexpected (the normally rather timid main character). Violence complicates everything—relationships, vacations, and more. The director's idea regarding violence begins to take shape with the text interpretation. The main character is Antoine. His frequent calls to his wife are punctuated by glasses of beer. The alcohol illustrates his frustration; alcohol and coping will be further linked as we move through the film. His wife, Helene, is clearly a strong person. Her lack of tolerance for the drinking, together with its implications for his driving, illustrates her unwillingness to be victimized by her husband's behavior (his drinking as well as the way he is driving). Antoine's driving becomes increasingly violent as his risk-taking on the road becomes increasingly dangerous. The upshot of his driving will be two consecutive incidents of flat tires (separate scenes)—consider them as foreshadows of the consequences of the violence of his behavior on the road. Finally, we have the stranger, who is in fact a violent escaped convict. His silence and his actions imply bottled up, explosive violence. Physically, he is the opposite of Antoine, which also makes him a threat.

All of the actions—telephone calls, drinking, driving, talking to doctors and nurses—seem to be filled with the potential to be unpredictable and terrifying. Kahn regards all the actions and behaviors in the narrative as actions and behaviors that have violent potential, no matter how benign they might inherently be. Kahn's goal in the interpretation of the text is to convey violence and its revelation in all things.

The performances are also keyed away from the romantic aspects of relationships and encounters. Warmth consequently is totally absent from the performances until the last five minutes of the film. The emphasis is on anger, overt and suppressed, as well as on the inability or unwillingness of the characters to help one another. Even those who are helpful (the waitress in a small café, the nurse in the hospital) seem hesitant, as if they are deciding to help or harm a character in spite of the fact that their jobs are essentially to help the other.

Kahn's camera use is interesting. The road is photographed subjectively, but most of the time the characters are observed through more objective camera placements. The subjective road represents danger and the opportunity for violence, rather than the excitement or thrill of driving. Kahn also uses the jump cut to disrupt our sense of continuity. The disruptive jump cut introduces violence into our experience of the events and characters in the film. Kahn uses the jump cut extensively throughout the film to instill the director's idea into the emotional flow of the film (the edit).



Both of these simple stories, "The Ninth Day" and "Red Lights," illustrate how the director's idea works to focus and lead our experience of the film. This is how a director's idea adds value to the narrative but most importantly how the director unifies the production.

Directors use different strategies to find their director's ideas. Of course, personality, interest, and training are contextual elements that dispose a director to a particular set of choices, but specific aspects of a particular film can be considered that will help the director move toward a clear director's idea.

In order to articulate the director's idea it is first necessary for the director to understand his attraction to a particular script. Generally, directors are attracted to a script because of a particular character, usually the main character, as well as that character's life situation and how the character has chosen to deal with it. To move toward a director's idea, it is important to fully understand whether we want our main character to be a victim or a hero. Are we interested in their psychology, their surroundings, and the sociology involved, or are we more interested in the political dimension of their story? Every story has elements of all of these dimensions. What attracts us?

A second aspect is the importance of plot in the narrative. For some directors, such as Steven Spielberg and Ridley Scott, plot is

very important. For others, such as Anthony Minghella or Steven Soderbergh, plot is far less important. If plot is critical, character flattens. If character is critical, psychology is central, and the plot becomes secondary.

The director also needs to clearly bring into the foreground his own values. What are his obsessions in life? The director's idea allows the director to highlight and articulate the values in the story that are important to him. All of us in a fashion are curious about the corners of ourselves. A director who wants to gain the audience's love will be charming and maybe funny as they tell the story. Another director might want the audience to be impressed and will seek the most complicated, challenging approach to telling the story. Yet another director will be attracted by the challenge of the project itself. The more challenging the project is, the more the director becomes vested in it. Directors of comedies want to earn the love of their audiences (think of a film such as "Meet the Fokkers"). Directors such as Steven Spielberg ("Schindler's List") want to earn both the audience's love and respect. In "2001: A Space Odyssey," Stanley Kubrick took up the challenge of dealing with human history and such philosophical issues as being and of man *versus* technology. For Kubrick, the challenge was his goal of creating a visual meditation on man and technology. These goals are important filters as directors create their director's ideas.



What I am suggesting is that the director must have a conscious personal and creative set of goals when choosing to commit to a story. I am also saying that such a commitment will require articulating how the director feels and wants us to feel about the main character.

The director begins developing a director's idea by interpreting the text. What is the basic concept or premise of the story? It is best to think of the premise in light of two opposing choices facing a main character. Love or money is the choice facing the main character in "Titanic." To be like the father, an immigrant, or to be different from the father is the premise in "Four Friends." To be an ambulance chaser for the rest of his life or to restore his dignity are the two choices for the main character in "The Verdict."

The premise is the key to both the film and to our relationship with the main character. Understanding the premise and being excited about exploring that premise lead to articulation of the

director's idea. How passionately does the director feel about the premise? How should he approach the premise? In "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," Frank Capra wanted to overvalue the idealistic option of the premise for his main character, and he wanted to demonize the other option ("realpolitique") and its consequences for personal behavior. This means that his director's idea was to overdo both options of the premise. Such an over-the-top approach has its dangers (*e.g.*, caricature and farce), but it also enables Capra to be impassioned about his populist views.

An important tool for articulating a director's idea is creating backstories for characters and events in the film. The fact that Maximus and Commodus, the main character and antagonist, respectively, in "Gladiator," were raised virtually as brothers makes their current struggle more personal and more anguished. In Robert Aldrich's "Attack," a Battle of the Bulge World War II story, the main character and antagonist have a similar linkage. Back home in the south in the United States, the antagonist's father was the political boss. The main character was a capable, ambitious young man, recognized by the local political boss. The political boss asked the main character to look out for his wayward, less capable son. Again, the tension of two sons in conflict gives this war story deeper meaning. In both of these film examples, the Cain–Abel factor became the director's idea.



Another avenue toward developing a director's idea is to work with a specific subtext to the narrative. "The Bourne Identity" is a film with a big thriller plot about a CIA contract killer who has lost his memory and is being pursued by his employer, who intends to kill him. The subtext of the film is about loneliness, the deepest kind of loneliness a human being can experience—the belief that they have been abandoned. Director Doug Limans's director's idea was to work with the loneliness not only of the main character but also of other characters in the film. Remember the death scene of the other contract killers? Each scene bespeaks the effects of loneliness on the characters.

The subtext of "All about Eve," the great film about the theater and stardom, is ambition, which takes each of the film's characters to different places. Joseph Mankiewicz used ambition as his director's idea and explored the vanity, depth, even desperation of ambition and subsequent loss of dignity experienced by each of the characters. The greater the ambition, the greater the loss of dignity.

The subtext of the "Road to Perdition," directed by Sam Mendes, is paternal love. The subtext of "Zorba the Greek," directed by Michael Cacoyannis, is *eros*, or life force. In each of these films, the directors used the subtext as their director's ideas to deepen the classic gangster film and classic melodrama. For the director, the subtext can be the most overt path to his director's idea.

A coherent character arc can also be a useful vehicle for the director's idea, but for the arc to be genuinely animated by the director's idea it must be surprising. All screen stories, at least those that are character driven, are essentially stories of character transformation. Stories of adjustment, coming of age, or loss of innocence are not in and of themselves surprising. What make them surprising is the use of deeper themes as both the director's idea and the instrument of transformation. Two examples will illustrate how this works. William Wyler's "The Heiress" is an adaptation of the Henry James novel *Washington Square*. In a nutshell, the character arc introduces a main character who is plain but wealthy. Two relationships are key: a father who is judgmental and treats his daughter harshly and a suitor who is handsome and a fortune seeker. In the beginning, the main character is hungry for acceptance but at the end she rejects her suitor because her father was right. She is initially hopeful and young but ends up more mature, realistic, and embittered. The character arc can be viewed as a loss of innocence. The director's idea here is to show how disappointment plays a major role in the lives of all the characters and how those disappointments drive the outcome of the character arc. The father is disappointed that when his wife dies in childbirth he is left with his daughter; the daughter is disappointed by the absence of her father's love and is disappointed that her father was right about her suitor.

A second example is George Miller's "Lorenzo's Oil." A married couple has a child late in life. For the husband, it is his second family, as he has two grown children from the first marriage. The inciting incident of the film is the onset of an incurable disease in the child, who is five years old. The main character is the wife, who had the child when she was forty years old. The character arc is discovering motherhood relatively late in life and marveling at the state of motherhood. The onset of the child's disease threatens to rob this mother of her newly discovered state of motherhood. The character arc ends with the boy alive but essentially crippled by the disease.

The mother is humbled but not destroyed. She has grown in her understanding of what it means to be a mother. Love was always there, but now patience, empathy, and something almost intangible or spiritual complements the sense of love she experienced at the outset of the story. The character arc is a coming-of-age arc, as the woman has matured over the course of the story. We can view the plot as the progression of the disease and the efforts of the mother and father to work with doctors to find a cure for the disease. The director's idea in "Lorenzo's Oil" is the power of the will as a force of nature. The doctors say the child will die, but the son the mother waited so long for simply cannot die. She will not allow it. The presence of will in her behavior, in her husband's efforts, in the African people among whom the son grew up is a surprising and palpable force in the outcome of the film. And will is the surprise that in the end changes the plot and allows the discovery that saves Lorenzo, the child, thus altering the character arc. The character arc and the role of surprise can be vehicles for realizing the director's idea in a film. By exploring the character arc and what will provoke change, the director can discover the device that will become the director's idea.



When the director has found an idea in the text interpretations, this director's idea can then be used to shape the performances and organize shots to serve the idea. The design of the edit will use these shots to integrate the text interpretations and performances with the director's idea. Deciding on a director's idea can only be arrived at through conscious examination of script and an awareness of the director's own priorities as a storyteller. Using text interpretation as the vehicle for defining the director's idea will further articulate what the director needs from the actors and from the camera to realize the director's idea. (See the appendix at the end of the book.) Now that the director's idea has been conceptualized, it is time to consider how directors deploy these ideas, but first we must define what constitutes competent directing, good directing, and great directing.