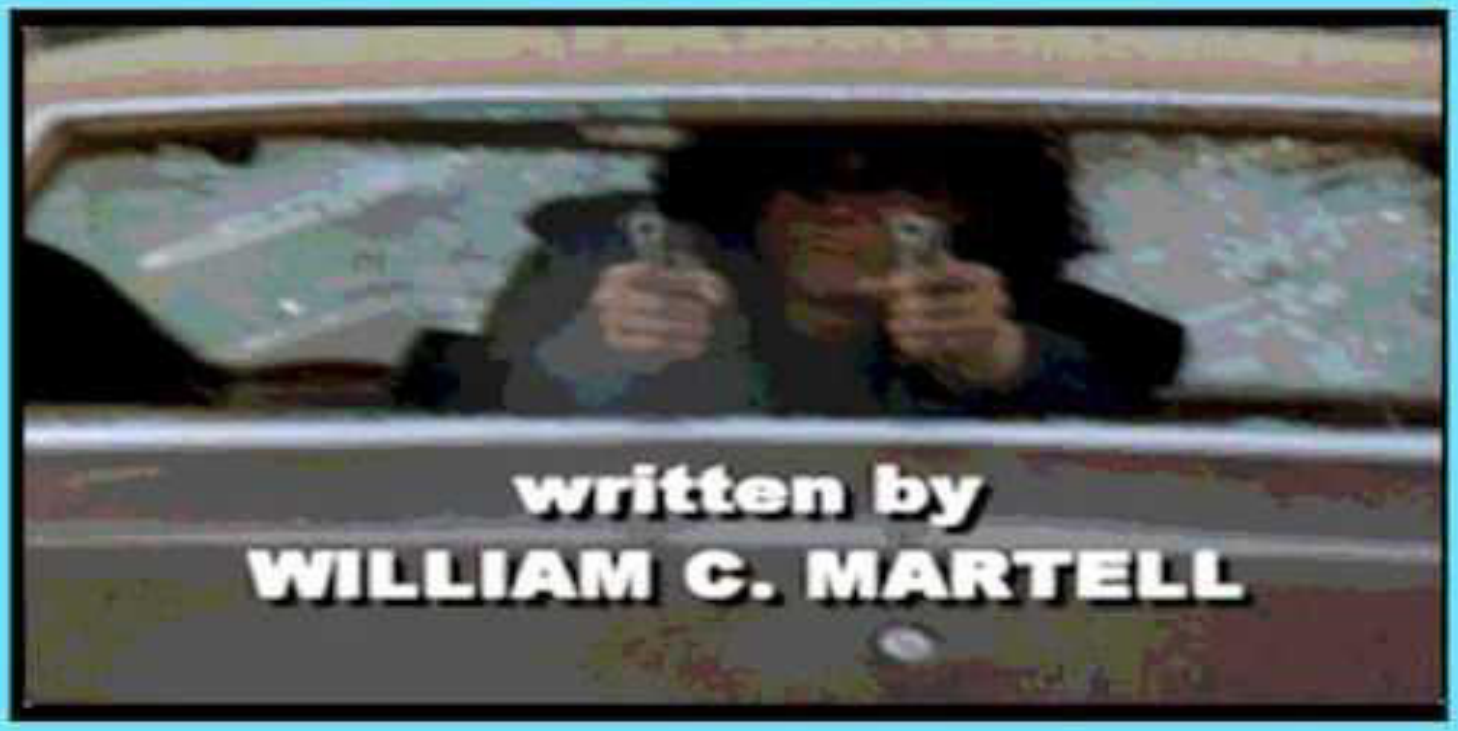
"THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING is the best book on the practical nuts-and-bolts mechanics of writing a screenplay that I've ever read - Ted Elliott, co-writer "Pirates Of The Caribbean", "Shrek", "Mask Of Zorro"

THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING

FULLY REVISED AND EXPANDED!
NEW CHAPTERS * NEW MATERIAL



A step-by-step guide from Ideas through Final Draft, Rug Pulls to Popeye Points to Weapons For Weirdos from the writer of "nineteen" produced screenplays.

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THE SECRETS OF
ACTION SCREENWRITING

by
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Bill's book THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING is "The best book on the practical nuts-and-bolts mechanics of writing a screenplay I've ever read." - Ted Elliott, co-writer "The Mask Of Zorro", "Shrek", "Pirates Of The Caribbean 1-4", “The Lone Ranger”.

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"There's an art to writing for guys like Chuck Norris, and thanks to Bill Martell's book I was prepared." - Genia Shipman, "Walker Texas Ranger", "Sons Of Thunder".

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the new edition of Secrets Of Action Screenwriting. You know, I never set out to write a best selling screenwriting book that would go for $510 as a rare edition on Amazon when it went out of print. All I ever wanted to do was write screenplays. After selling a script to a producer with a deal at Paramount, I quit my warehouse job and moved to Los Angeles to begin writing full time. I subscribed to every screenwriting newsletter or magazine, including the little newsletter that would eventually become Script Magazine. Almost every article was from some guru trying to sell their book or class. When I complained that no one seemed to have any actual screenwriting experience, the newsletter gave me a regular column... without pay.

As I continued to sell scripts and have them actually get produced, my friends started giving me their action and thriller scripts to read for feedback... and I found myself typing up the same notes again and again. So I created a “master list” of notes in a red booklet. Now I could say, “Read page 12, page 17, page 32 and page 49.” When the booklet expanded to 100 pages, a friend suggested I throw a cover on it and sell it. That was the first version of this book, made at a copyshop in the early 1990s; and up until *this* version, some of the chapters and sections remained completely unchanged. If you are one of the hundred people with one of those booklets, you have a real collector’s item.

Another friend thought that little red booklet was the best screenwriting book he had ever read, and suggested I expand it and find a publisher. I wrote some new material, beefing the book up to 240 pages, then sent it to several publishers who specialized in film and screenwriting books. They all turned it down for the same reason - it focused on a single genre. One of the publishers suggested I rewrite the book so that it would be about general screenwriting and let them look at the new version. I thought they were all missing the point - the shelves were already flooded with general screenwriting books, but there wasn’t a single book on how to write a specific genre. And Secrets Of Action worked well as a general screenwriting book even though it *also* contained techniques used in the action genre. I believed in my book.

So I took the money from my next screenplay sale, found a printer, and became my own publisher. When that run sold out, I switched printers and did another couple of runs. I was the top selling screenwriting book in the Sam French bookstores - they couldn’t keep them on the shelves! Amazon sold hundreds every month, and the book ended up a featured selection of a film and theater bookclub. Other books that focused on a single genre began popping up on the bookstore shelves... many from the same publishers who wanted me to rewrite this book.

Those old chapters and sections from the original “master list” of script notes bothered me - they needed a page one rewrite. Plus, many of the film references were decades out of date. I decided not to do another print run until I’d done a complete rewrite on the book... which became difficult, because my real job is writing screenplays. For a few years this book remained out of print while I wrote scripts, did endless rounds of studio meetings and did “jury duty” on Film Festival juries around the world.

But now the time has come to revise the book, to add what I’ve learned over the past few years and examine the way the action film has evolved in the 21st Century. I have not only updated the book, I've almost doubled it in length by added new techniques and tools and digging deeper into why one film is a classic and another is now forgotten. The last version of the book was 240 pages, this version is over 460 pages!

TOOLS, NOT RULES

The purpose of this book is to give you the tools necessary to write an action or thriller screenplay, not to tell you how to write. There are places in the book where I might say "On page 25, THIS happens"... Those are guidelines, not part of some by-the-numbers formula which must be adhered to. Whether your Plot Point happens on page 24 or 26 or 32 or doesn't happen at all, depends on the individual script you are writing. Every screenplay and every story is different.

Instead of rules or formula, think of this book as a tool box. Some of the tools you may never use, other tools you may end up using constantly. One of the reasons for reading a book on screenwriting or any creative endeavor is to call attention to tools and techniques you may have never noticed before. There's a certain “Rashomon Effect” where five people might watch the same movie or read the same script and each comes away with a different technique – one of the purposes of a book is to point out the techniques I have noticed after many viewing and studying the screenplay... and explaining the way the techniques work. You may have never noticed that tool before, and it may be exactly what you need for your next screenplay.

There is only one rule in screenwriting: the script has to work. No one cares what method you used to create the script or how many “rules” you followed or broke, they only care that the script is so exciting that they can’t put it down... and they can’t wait to buy it and put it on screen. Skip the rules, use the tools to write the best script possible.

Ready to open the toolbox and build something?

- William C. Martell, December 2011, Studio City, CA.

THE VILLAIN'S PLAN

The most important element of an action film isn't the hero, isn't the sidekick, isn't the dialogue, and isn't the plot. The most important element of an action film is *the Villain's Plan*.

Why? Hitchcock said, "The better the villain, the better the picture". The Villain's Plan is the fuel for the story. The Villain brings the conflict, and story *is* conflict... no matter the genre. In a romantic comedy, if boy can easily get girl you don't have a story. In a drama, nothing very dramatic can happen unless there is a conflict. Conflict is the key to story... and that is what makes the Villain (or antagonist or force of antagonism) the most important character in your screenplay. Take your average cop show on television - it always begins with a crime, and *then* the cops become involved. No crime, nothing for the cops to do! That CSI team can not begin searching for evidence unless there is a crime. The Homicide detectives can't start questioning witnesses unless there was some crime for them to witness. The mediums and mentalists and Monks can't do anything until the villain has committed some crime. When writing your action screenplay, remember that the villain is your most important character - they bring the conflict.

Let's use the quintessential action film "Die Hard" as an example. The Hero's desire and need is to reunite with his wife and children for Christmas. Is that an action movie? If you throw in a couple of fist fights and a car chase is it an action movie? No.

But the villain's plan in "Die Hard" is to rob the Nakatomi Corporation's safe of millions of dollars on Christmas Eve. That's an action plot. There is an exciting story even without John McClane. In fact, if you were to delete all of the Bruce Willis scenes, you'd have an action film about Robbers vs. FBI agents. Maybe Agent Johnson ("no, the other one") would have been the hero. If Robert Davi's scenes were deleted, maybe Officer Powell would be the hero. But even without Reggie Vel Johnson, there would *still* be an action movie. Because the Villain brings the conflict and story is conflict. No Villain, no story!

SIZE MATTERS

If your script is about a villain robbing the First National Bank in Omaha, it's a small movie. If the villain's plan is to rob every bank in Omaha on the same day, that's a medium sized movie. If your villain's plan is to rob Fort Knox, that's "Goldfinger". The difference between a “small movie” and a “big movie” usually comes down to scale of the Villain’s Plan or what is at stake. Don't just have the villain want to kill one person, have him want to wipe out an entire city or kill someone important. The higher the stakes, the more we want our hero to stop the villain.

What are stakes? Here’s what my dictionary says:
1) Something that is wagered in a game, race or contest.
2) A monetary or commercial interest. Investment, share, or involvement in something.
3) A personal or emotional concern, interest or involvement.
4) An investment.
5) A prize or reward.
6) To risk (something) in the outcome of any uncertain venture.

The words “involvement” and “emotion” and “risk” are key to the definition of “stakes” and key to your Villain’s Plan. If your Hero has no stake in the outcome of the story, we won’t be emotionally involved in the story. If your Villain’s Plan doesn’t impact the Hero and the world around him in any way, the plan doesn’t matter and neither does the story. No stakes - no story. The greater the stakes, the greater the audience’s involvement in the story; so we usually want to play for the highest stakes possible.

An action script needs *global* stakes or *personal* stakes - or both. If the Hero doesn't stop the Villain’s Plan, it will screw up the world or screw up the Hero's life forever. The Villain’s Plan is either going to be something so big it effects the world, or that big life-altering event that personally changes the Hero’s life forever. Global stakes are external, personal stakes are emotional. A great movie has both, which is why *Die Hard* works so well.

The main difference between a “small film” and a big summer action film is what is at stake. Rob your father’s jewelry store or rob Fort Knox, kill the guy who has been sleeping with your spouse or assassinate the President, burn down your enemy’s house or set off a dirty bomb in an enemy country. When we dial the stakes down, we end up with a drama like “Before The Devil Knows You’re Dead” - nothing wrong with that at all, but it’s not really an action movie. Be aware, when you lower the global stakes you really need to raise the personal stakes as high as possible to compensate. When you are coming up with your story and your Villain’s Plan, look at the size of the stakes.

ACTIVE VILLAINS

Your Villain needs to be an active character, so his plan has to be *active*. He must want to *do something*. Rob a bank, blow up a plane, assassinate the President, take over Chicago, steal government secrets from a high security vault, make a million dollar drug deal, go back in time and kill the mother of his enemy, take over a corporation, or create an earthquake which turns Nevada into beachfront property.

If the Villain just wants to be left alone, you've got a dull film on your hands. Why? Because the Hero is the character who just wants to be left alone. Look at "Shane" or "The Gunfighter" or "Witness" or the last “Rambo” movie or just about any action film. The hero is trying to get through life without shooting anyone, then the Villain sets his plan into motion, and the hero must do something to stop him. The Villain is *active* - their plan is what kicks off the story, and the Hero is usually *reactive* (which is not the same as passive) and must stop the Villain’s Plan.

You can have the most vile, un-lovable, ugly hero in the world, and as long as the Villain's Plan makes sense and is active, we will still identify with the hero and root for him to save the day. Because the Villain's Plan is the fuel for action, not the hero's appeal. If you don't believe me, check out Lee Marvin in "Point Blank" or Mel Gibson in the remake version "Payback". These are not nice people and in any other film they would be villains! I am using the terms “Villain” and “Hero” in this book for “antagonist” and “protagonist” because there’s less typing involved... and we’re dealing with action movies. We’ll get into Bad Guy Leads - anti-heroes and anti-villain’s - in the next chapter... and why sometimes Good Guys Wear Black.

The Villain's Plan will be to achieve a specific goal by the end of the story, and only the hero can stop him. The villain is usually the driving force in an action or thriller script. Their plan is what creates the forward momentum. One of the reasons why there was no *Daredevil 2* is because the first film had a Villain who was not *active* and the film ended up ho-hum instead of exciting. Kingpin has no plan at all, so Daredevil has nothing to stop.

Kingpin wants to maintain a status quo - he wants nothing to change. That's a non-goal. It's something he *already has*, so there's nothing to pursue. Nothing active for Kingpin to do. He has already achieved his goal - which makes him *passive* instead of active. Had Daredevil been actively closing in on Kingpin - attacking Kingpin in scene after scene - then Kingpin could be *reactive*. But Daredevil isn't doing anything that threatens Kingpin. We have no direct conflict in the story!

A Villains Plan needs to be active. Not just maintaining his evil empire or hiding from authorities or anything else that is not actively doing something that the Hero must stop. What is your Villain’s Plan? How are they working throughout the screenplay to achieve it? How does the Hero get in its way?

MOTIVATIONALLY SPEAKING

The villain brings the conflict and story is conflict, so your Villain's Plan is your story. A stupid Villain's Plan makes for a stupid story. A flawed Villain's Plan makes for a flawed story. An unbelievable Villain's Plan makes for an unbelievable story. A clever Villain's Plan gives you a clever story. The more clever the Villain's Plan, the more clever the Hero must be to thwart it... and vice versa. If the audience can't believe the plan will work or that the villain can get away with it, or if they don't understand why the villain would want to do it in the first place, they'll reject your story. You never want to make things easier for the hero by creating a flawed Villain's Plan - because that ends up making your Hero look stupid.

Your Villain's Plan should be the exact thing we'd do if we were the villain, and needs to make sense given the situation. Which means your villain needs to be motivated, and their motivation needs to make sense. Be logical. Villains who are pure evil are not very believable, and not very interesting. Two dimensional characters - even if the film is in 3D - come off as cartoons. If Fred Flintstone threatened to kill you, would you be worried? Just as the Villain's Plan has to make sense or the whole story doesn't make sense, the *villain* needs to make sense.

Your villain (and Villain's Plan) even needs to make sense even if they are crazy... maybe especially if they are crazy. Both Dietrich (Collin Cunningham) in my "Hard Evidence" MOW and The Joker (Heath Ledger) in "The Dark Knight" may be insane and unpredictable, but they have a plan that our hero must stop. The Joker keeps saying that "It's all part of the plan" but is obviously out of his mind... except all of his insanity adds up to a plan: anarchy. He is a true terrorist, creating crazy situations that throw day-to-day life in Gotham City into complete chaos. And we understand that as a plan. When he pits the ferryboat full on convicts against the ferryboat full of commuters just to see what happens; he is tearing down society and civility. His plan is to make us all crazy - and he gives us many different and conflicting motivations for doing this. Though he's crazy, he has an objective that makes sense.

Even a serial killer has some sort of motivation and some sort of plan. They don't kill random people with random weapons for no reason - even Jigsaw from the "Saw" movies has a reason for making ex-drug addicts stick their hands into a bucket of syringes to find the key to some door that may lead to freedom. A serial killer is just like any other villain - they need a motivated plan that makes some sort of sense. Watch "Manhunter" or "Silence Of The Lambs" (better yet, read the books by Thomas Harris) for an idea of how the FBI uses psychological profiles to nab serial killers. The Crawford character in both of those movies is based on real life FBI serial killer profiler John Douglas, and his book "Mindhunter: Inside The FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit" (written with Mark Olshaker) is a fascinating look at what motivates serial killers. There is always a pattern and always a motivation. The "because he's crazy" excuse for an unmotivated villain just doesn't work.

UNPREDICTABLE PLANS

Though your Villain has to have a plan, it should not be predictable. The best Villain's Plans have a twist in them. They look like one thing but are actually another... and sometimes even something else after that. In "Die Hard" at first it seems like Hans is going to hold all of the people at the Christmas Eve party as hostage for ransom... and it appears as if what he wants is for some political prisoners to be released. But underneath that is his real plan - to break into the vault at Nakatomi and steal $640 million in bearer bonds. The Police plan on cutting all of the power to the tower to force Hans to give up... but that is part of Hans' plan! Cutting the power will allow him to open the vault. The plan seems to be one thing but is actually something else.

In "Goldfinger", the Villain's Plan seems to be to break into Fort Knox and steal the USA's gold reserves. Bond tells Goldfinger that his plan will not work - the time it would take to load all of that gold onto a train, and the weight of the gold, makes it impossible. Goldfinger laughs and explains that his plan was never to steal the gold - he has a dirty atomic bomb and his plan is to contaminate the gold - making it worthless... and all of the other gold in the world (including his stockpile) worth more. You never want the Villain's Plan to be predictable, you want it to be twisted and clever.

WHAT IF THINGS GO RIGHT?

The plan also has to make sense and work. A stupid villain's plan makes for a stupid movie. The plan may make sense until the hero stops the villain... but what if the hero failed? Would the villain's plan have worked? Let's say you write a thriller about a group of bank employees who decide to rob their own bank in the two hour period one day where the security cameras are being serviced and the electronic lock on the vault is off. The employee-robbers study a photo of the same man, cut from a magazine, so that when the police question them they can all describe the same robber. But one bank employee is reluctant to break the law, and locks himself in the vault. Now the others have two hours to get him out, maybe shoot him so that it looks like the fake robber shot him, and get their money. Our hero has just changed the game, and the focus of the story is now our hero in the vault. Sounds exciting, right?

But what if the hero had gone along with the scheme? Okay, they rob their own bank, they all describe the same suspect to the police, and the police are now on a permanent wild-goose chase looking for the menswear model on page 28 of last month's Newsweek. Except for one problem. How did the menswear model know that they would be servicing the video cameras at that exact time? And how would he know the electronic lock on the vault would also be off at that exact time? There had to be an inside man. So the police begin investigating and questioning all of the bank employees, and looking for anything unusual in their recent past. And even if they sweat them all and miraculously no one in this group of non-criminals slips up, they will keep watching them until someone accidentally spends a penny more than they earned, and then they are all busted. This is a stupid plan, because it *requires* the hero to lock himself in the vault and ruin the original plan. You want to look all the way down the line and make sure the villain's plan works if everything happens to go right - because the villain is *planning* on his plan working... not planning on the hero screwing it up.

PUNISHMENT FITS THE CRIME

Newton's 3rd Law is that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. That means that if the villain jay walks, the cop doesn't draw his gun and shoot him. If the Villain's Plan is to kill everyone in our hero's family, the reason can't be that the hero once splashed mud on the villain's clothes... unless you're writing a satire like "Slaughterhouse 5". The villain's actions and motivations must make sense, and he has to react in a believable way. It's okay for actions to escalate (in fact it's required), but don't try skipping from loud words to machine guns. The punishments needs to fit the crime even if the villain is dishing it out.

The Villain's Plan shouldn't be so complicated that it becomes incredible. Every once in a while I see a film where the Villain's Plan is so complex that there has to be an easier way for the bad guy to make a buck! "Law Abiding Citizen" has a bunch of story problems, including an attempt to switch hero and villain in the middle of the film (which never works), but Gerard Butler's plan in that film is just silly. He's a normal guy whose wife and child are killed and the DA (Jamie Foxx) made a deal that sets the killer free. So Butler murders the killer, then allows himself to be arrested so that he can have a good alibi when he tries to kill Foxx. Um, getting arrested *on purpose*? That does not sound like a good plan to me. But Butler has already dug a huge tunnel - complete with several rooms - so that he can get in and out of jail whenever he wants. The tunnel goes to one of the Solitary Confinement cells, and he has to kill another prisoner so that he can get sent to solitary... and by good luck, ends up in the very solitary cell that his tunnel is under. Um, since he ends up in prison anyway - and kills a guy - why not just kill Foxx *before* he gets arrested for murdering the guy who killed his wife and kid? He may have actually gotten away with that.

Beware of any plan where the villain plans to make the hero's life hell by killing the people around him... um, why not just kill the hero and get it over with? Less chance of the villain being caught killing the hero's kindergarten teacher. The closest distance between two points is a direct line - not some Rube Goldberg plan with a dozen chances to fail and even more chances for the villain to get caught. If you want revenge, just shoot the guy. Wouldn't that be easier? Quicker? Less chance of getting caught? The minute the Villain's Plan begins looking silly, you're in big trouble. If the Villain's Plan doesn't work, neither will the movie.

A great villain's revenge plot can be found in J. Lee Thompson's "Cape Fear" (1962) where Robert Mitchum's plan is simply to follow and hound Gregory Peck until the man cracks. Mitchum's plan is to never break the law, just break Peck. He stalks the family, kills the family dog (probably a misdemeanor), and the police can do nothing to stop him because he has done nothing illegal... he wants to goad Peck into crossing the line and doing something illegal, so Peck will be arrested. This is a great game of cat and mouse, where the villain is so clever we worry that he'll actually get away with it. If you haven't seen the original version of this film, add it to your Netflix queue.

The other way that “the punishment fits the crime” is critical is the crime itself. Whatever the villain’s plan is, the degree of difficulty will be tied to whatever is at stake. If Goldfinger’s plan is to rob Fort Knox, and he just shows a gate guard a fake ID and he drives in and finds the big vault of gold on “day lock” and pops it open and fills up his truck and drives off, that is not believable. Stealing $200 billion in gold needs to be $200 billion worth of difficult. You need a flying circus of hot babes in crop dusters that spew poison gas that will kill all of the soldiers, you need your own army in gas masks, you need explosives to blast open gates, you need a giant industrial laser to cut open that huge steel door... none of this is going to be easy! Getting that gold will be $200 billion worth of difficult! This is true for the over-all plan, plus anything small that happens in a scene - the risk and degree of difficulty has to be equal to the reward. If the hero lost his keys and has to break into his house, it can be easy. If he is breaking into the villain’s house, it must be difficult... or we won’t believe it. The difficulty of the task must be equal to the reward. If you make it too difficult for the villain or too easy for the hero, we won’t believe it.

SILLY VILLAINS

Your villain has committed the perfect murder in order to take over a multi-million dollar corporation from his partner. The Detective starts nosing around, and discovers some minor evidence; not enough to convict, but enough to convince him that the villain is a suspect. More evidence mounts - but still not enough to convict. In Act 3 the Detective confronts the villain, usually in these films at a dinner party or at a country club. What does the villain do? He pulls out a machine gun and tries to kill the Detective. Why? So that the Detective won't continue his investigation.

Wait a minute! If the police didn't have enough evidence before, they sure do after the villain shoots up a dinner party!

In real life the villain would probably just call his attorney, and fight it out in court... where he has a good chance of winning. How many real life crooks have we seen walk after their “dream team” of lawyers found some loophole in the law or created reasonable doubt where there wasn’t any. If the villain absolutely had to kill the cop, he would find some perfect murder scenario. Maybe siphon off the brake and steering fluids from the cop's car and arrange a meeting late one night at the end of a long, winding cliff side road. He’d find some way to kill the cop that could never be traced back to him, because he isn’t a silly villain. It's important to question every single move your villain makes, and make sure it's logical and not far-fetched or too complicated or just plain silly.

THUNDERBALL THEORY

The Villain's Plan should be threatening to others... even the people watching the film or reading your script, if possible. It's nice to have the hero save himself, but if he can save the rest of the city, too, even better. In “The Satan Bug” - a great thriller from 1965 - someone has stolen top secret germ warfare canisters from a government lab, and spy-guy George Maharis must find them before the terrorist leader (a great Richard Basehart) unleashes them on Los Angeles. If he doesn’t outwit the terrorist and find the canisters in time, millions will die. The Villain's Plan poses a major threat to others.

But, what would have happened to Los Angeles if Maharis fails? How can the audience know what this “satan bug” will do to people so that they can be properly frightened? If I say I can kill you with this ripe tomato, you have no idea how I could do that, or how painful death by ripe tomato might be. What we need is a demonstration. In “The Satan Bug” Los Angeles is the second target - the first is a small town in Florida where everyone is instantly killed by the bug. They show Maharis some raw footage of the town full of bodies as part of his briefing. Now that the audience has seen what this “satan bug” can do, they don’t want that to happen to the nice people in Los Angeles...

I call this the Thunderball Theory - in “Thunderball” Largo steals *two* nuclear weapons, so that he can test one just to prove to the authorities that he’s not kidding. The second nuke is hidden somewhere in Miami. Now James Bond must stop Largo before he kills all of the nice people in Miami. If that sounds familiar to you, it’s because it’s also the plot to “True Lies”, which also features a demonstration of the nuke on one of the Florida Keys before Ah-nuld has to save his wife and daughter and stop the villains from nuking Miami. For some reason, they always pick Miami! If your villain has some sort of high tech weapon, make sure he or she tests it so that we can see what it does. That will help us imagine what might happen to those poor people in Miami.

Another aspect of this is fulfilling your promise to the audience. If Dennis Hopper in “Speed” says he’s going to blow up that bus, the audience wants to see the bus explode. We’ve been thinking about that bus exploding for almost half the film - if it goes under 55mph it’s gonna blow - so the only way we will truly be satisfied is if it explodes. We’ve been thinking about it for too long to have it *not* explode. There was a time when an action movie could get by with the hero completely preventing the Villain’s Plan, but we live in the time of big spectacle entertainment. In “Air Force One”, we want to see the plane crash into the ocean and disintegrate. You don’t want the hero to prevent all of the excitement! We want to see things blow up on screen! So, instead of cutting the red wire (no - the green one) you might have the hero thwart the Villain’s Plan by removing the bomb from a populated area to someplace where it can still blow up real good... just not hurt anyone. The threat of an explosion is kind of a promise you need to pay off - whether it’s having the villain demonstrate the bomb, or having the bus or plane or villain explode at the end. If you promise us an explosion, we want to see it.

MULTIPLE VILLAINS?

The villain brings the conflict, and story is conflict; so if you have three villains you end up with three stories in one script. Difficult enough to tell one story in a 110 page screenplay, let alone three. This may explain why those Joel Schumacher “Batman” movies with a half dozen villains didn’t work. If you have four villains with four Villain’s Plans going on at the same time it’s like playing pinball with the hero - he just bounces back and forth between stories until the story turns to mush. You end up with a bunch of subplots instead of one main plot.

The only way multiple villains work is if there is only *one* villain’s plan or if you have a “Red Harvest” situation. But wait, how can you have five villains and only one Villain’s plan? They are either partners (which doesn’t work very well) or you have a “ladder of henchmen” that leads to your main villain.

The problem with partners is that you have a two headed villain and often this cuts each villain’s power in half - making each half as threatening. Plus we have an uneasy alliance between both villains, which may mean they spend just as much time trying to kill each other as they spend trying to kill the hero. And because we have to establish each villain and then establish their alliance, we are burning through script pages before we get around to the story. In order to keep more than one villain focused on the plan and not each other, it’s a good idea to have one of the partners be in charge. In “The Dark Knight”, Salvatore Maroni (Eric Roberts) and Two Face (Aaron Eckhart) may partner with The Joker, but we know who is really in charge... it’s all part of the plan.

Movies like “Point Blank” and the original “Get Carter” and “The Limey” and “Columbiana” create a “ladder” of henchmen that the hero climbs to get to the main villain behind it all. Though those are all revenge movies, the “ladder” also works in other kinds of action movies where the hero may think Mr. Fairfax is the villain, but Fairfax is only working for Mr. Carter, and when Carter ends up working for Mr. Bronson... and each character we think is the villain is just a rung of the ladder - an employee of someone else. Eventually our hero gets to the top of the ladder - the actual villain who employs all of these henchmen. We have one Villain behind it all and one Villain’s Plan, but the hero doesn’t know that as he is climbing the ladder.

Both the Unequal Partners and Ladder Of Henchmen end up being *one* villain and *one* villain’s plan when all is said and done, but the “Red Harvest” Situation really has two villains and two villains' plans. Even if you haven’t read Dashiell Hammett’s novel “The Red Harvest” you have probably seen one of the movies inspired by it: “Fistful Of Dollars” or “Last Man Standing” or “Miller's Crossing” or “Sukiyaki Western Django” or any of the others. These stories have our hero stuck in the middle between two warring groups, each lead by a strong villain. Usually both villains have the same plan - take over a city or state or planet - and our hero ends up playing one villain against the other so that they cancel each other out. Of course, he has to battle *both* villains along the way. Though the “Red Harvest” Situation is usually two villains fighting over a territory, they can be fighting over *anything* - a stolen nuke, a magic sword, a kidnapped scientist. The more original and interesting your villain’s plan, the more interesting and original your screenplay.

Without a logical, well motivated, threatening villain's plan and an interesting and active villain, you don't have a story. And without a story, what's the hero going to do? Collect unemployment?

THE HERO'S JOB

The hero's job is to stop the villain.

Indiana Jones has to stop the Nazis from getting control of the Lost Ark and winning World War 2. Batman has to stop The Joker from creating chaos in Gotham City. Those guys in “Armageddon” have to stop that big asteroid from slamming into Earth. Dirty Harry has to stop the Scorpio Killer from killing again.

Since the Villain's Plan fuels the story, the hero has to be someone who gets in the way of the plan. "The fly in the ointment, the monkey in the wrench," as John McClane says in "Die Hard". The hero can be a cop, a fireman, a private eye, a reporter, a regular guy, a pro-golfer, a lawyer, a scientist, a psychic, a sumo wrestler, or a weatherman. The more interesting the Hero’s day job is, the more interesting the character. But whatever his day job is, it has to fit in with the Villain's Plan. Your hero is connected to your villain and Villain’s Plan and the concept; so you can’t just create a protagonist character and then plug them in to the story. They have to fit.

If the villain is smuggling weapons into the country, the odds of a weatherman being the only one who can stop him are pretty slim. That’s going to seem contrived and inorganic and silly. More likely, the hero of this story is going to be in the Coast Guard, or a Customs Agent, or maybe even a longshoreman working at the docks who sees something suspicious... or someone related to one of those people. Your Hero will be someone who would logically come between the Villain and the success of their plan. Your Hero is not some random choice - the Hero is part of the story, and the story is the Villain’s Plan. So, if you have always wanted to write a movie about a sumo wrestler, you can’t just force him into the weapons smuggling story without making people wonder what the heck he’s doing there. Your best plan there would be to *start* with the Sumo Wrestler character and find a Villain’s Plan he logically gets in the way of.

The hero's "day job", personality, and emotional conflict are facets of the Villain's Plan. This is why there are so many cop and private eye heroes in old films. Cops will naturally get in the way of any criminal activity. It's called a "franchise" in the TV world. A franchise is what places a hero in the line of fire week after week. You can have a cop show or a crime lab show or a lawyer show, and you know criminal activities will be part of the story every week.

DETECTIVE DAY JOBS

My advice on hero's day jobs is to be creative. Don't make her a cop or a private eye, if you can give her a job you've never seen on screen before. In “The Ninth Gate” Johnny Depp plays a rare book dealer hired to steal a rare first edition for a client. In “The DaVinci Code” Tom Hanks plays a college professor who is an expert on codes and symbols. In the movies based on Tom Clancy novels, hero Jack Ryan is an information analyst for the CIA who always ends up in the field (where he doesn’t belong). In my “Crash Dive!” movie for HBO, my hero was a retired Naval Engineer who knew everything about how submarines work, but nothing about fighting or shooting guns... so he must use the *submarine* against the villains who have hijacked it. If at all possible, find a franchise that hasn't been used before, instead of making your hero a cop or an FBI proflier.

When a day job is over-used it becomes a cliche, even if it’s true. Yes, police detectives solve crimes... but we’ve seen that so many times it seems old. Even television shows don’t use police detectives and private eyes any more: they have Mentalists and Crime Scene Investigators and Human Lie Detectors and Blood Spatter Experts and Psychics. Movies like “Brick” and “Winter’s Bone” take all of the elements of a standard private eye story and find unique characters and unusual worlds which make the films something we haven’t seen before. Though both of those are indie films, Shane Black’s brilliant “Kiss Kiss Bang Bang” gives us a complicated version of an actor on a “ride along” who ends up in the middle of a slam-bam action private eye-type story. In my "Undercurrents" script, the hero is a yacht captain investigating a murder on his boat while they're hundreds of miles from the nearest port.

SUPERMAN VS. EVERYMAN

There are two basic types of hero characters in action films: the Superman Type and the Everyman Type. The Superman Type doesn't have to wear his underwear on the outside and probably can't fly. We idolize the Superman Type, we identify with the Everyman Type.

The Superman Type is the guy we wish we were: Tough, invulnerable, macho, action oriented. He lives in the action world, craves a good shoot out, and goes looking for trouble whenever possible. James Bond is the ultimate Superman Type. He always keeps his cool. The type of tough guys that Sylvester Stallone, Steven Seagal, Clint Eastwood and Ah-nuld always played. Jason Statham is one of the few action leads who still play this type of hero. "Rambo" fits this category, but "Rocky" doesn't. The Bourne movies give is a great schizoid hero: an Everyman who used to be a Superman Type: we can identify with him, but when trouble strikes he becomes the bad ass we wish we were. The Superman Type was most popular in the 1980s and early 1990s in films, but has since gone out of style except in B movies.

The Everyman Type is the guy we are: A normal man, vulnerable, who is forced to become involved in the action. He is a reluctant hero. He doesn't go out looking for trouble, but trouble seems to find him. These are the kinds of guys Matt Damon and Will Smith and Denzel and Russell Crowe usually play. The Everyman Type hero has become more popular over the years, to the point of completely eclipsing the Superman Type. This probably began with Bruce Willis in the first "Die Hard", but now even superhero characters are played as Everyman Types. “Spider-Man” is a troubled teen who must learn that with great power comes great responsibility, Christian Bale’s Batman is a tortured soul trying to do the right thing by doing the wrong thing, and all of those X-Men and X-Women are regular folks who are cursed by super powers. Average people, just like you and me, who are thrust into danger and have to learn how to survive... while wearing tights and a cape. Lately, Superman Type superheroes like both Hulks and “Superman Returns” and “Green Lantern” haven’t seemed to do well with audiences. Everyman type superheroes like “Captain America” seem to be what audiences would rather watch... and that doesn't bode well for the new “Superman”.

The great thing about Everyman Heroes is that the roles allow for more depth and character, and that means a non-action actor like Jake Gyllenhaal can step into the role. More casting options gives your screenplay a better chance of making it to the screen. With the exception of Jason Statham we seem to have a real shortage of tough guy actors these days. There don’t seem to be any new Lee Marvins and Jimmy Cagneys and Charles Bronsons in the pipeline right now, and audiences seem to prefer the more vulnerable and identifiable action leads. Because that might change while this book is on your shelf, let’s talk a bit about...

BAD ASS HEROES

Though they'd probably rather die than put on a pair of tights, the Bad Ass Hero is part of the Superman Type. A fantasy character who will take on an entire gang with his bare hands and never show a trace of fear or self-doubt. You know all of those Chuck Norris jokes? Those are all about him being a Bad Ass Hero. These are super heroes in the real world - and we wish we were them.

A Bad Ass Hero might be surrounded by a dozen bad guys and make a little speech or explain exactly how he's going to whop all of them at once, then spring into action and kick all of their asses and stroll away. That's what Billy Jack and Steven Seagal used to do. Other Bad Ass Heroes are men of few words - they skip the speech and just kick everyone's ass, then grab a burger and a beer. These guys are the blue collar version of James Bond - they're tough, they say clever things we wish we could think of ("Go ahead, make my day"), they're ultra-confident, they are never afraid (or never show their fear), and they never show any sign of weakness or show pain. These are the kind of guys who get shot and take it like a man. Men of violence who *hurt people*. Even though Seagal swiped his character from "Billy Jack", but did a great job with it. Seagal *breaks people's bones* in fight scenes - he's savage.

One element of being a Bad Ass Hero is not being overly fancy - if the martial arts looks too much like ballet, they aren't a bad ass anymore. Seagal did that Bad Ass Hero speech thing - where he gives his super confident warning about how, exactly, he will beat the crap out of the ten guys surrounding him. No fear - he has it all planned out. He doesn't do any fancy moves, he *hurts them* in the most direct way he can. He's a Bad Ass.

Liam Neeson is a Bad Ass in Luc Besson & Robert Mark Kamen's "Taken", Denzel is a Bad Ass in Gary Whitta's "The Book Of Eli", but for whatever reason Mel Gibson softened the lead character in Brian Helgeland's "Payback" and turned him into an everyman... which went against the grain of the story. The key to a Bad Ass Hero is mystery - not knowing too much about him or her, which would make them human (and not superman). The Man With No Name drifts into town and shoots a lot of people. Where did he come from? Why is he doing this? What's his name? The more we remove the mystery the less of a fantasy figure the Bad Ass Hero becomes. It's okay to know that Dirty Harry's wife was killed by a drunk driver - that is more a "character shading moment" than a motivation for Harry to stomp on the Scorpio Killer's wounded leg. Maybe her death is what caused him to lose his last trace of humanity? A Bad Ass Hero is *not* human, they are supermen (and women) who don't wear their emotions on their sleeves and don't seem to feel pain or anger or kindness. Like Chuck Norris, they just kick ass.

KRYPTONITE

One important thing to remember when creating your hero, even if he's a Bad Ass, is that they can't be invincible. I read a script where the hero shot six armed bad guys in the opening scene. Great, but where does it go from there? In the final scene where the hero and the villain face off in town square (it was a western) I already knew the hero was the quicker draw and the writer hadn't established any special skills or tricks for the villain. Where was the suspense? Where was the conflict? Why should I care? The script was boring and predictable, because the hero could not be beaten. He was too Bad Ass!

Remember, villains must always be stronger or smarter than the hero. In the good James Bond films, the villain is a father figure to Bond. He talks condescendingly to Bond. When Bond points out that flaw in Goldfinger's plan to rob Fort Knox, Goldfinger already knows you can't transport that much gold by truck in a single day... In fact, Goldfinger's plan hinges on it. Bond is no match for Goldfinger at this point.

He's also no match for Odd Job. In the Bond films, the lead henchman is physically stronger than Bond. We'll talk more about henchmen in a later chapter, but it's important to note than in every good James Bond film, the villain is smarter than Bond and the lead henchman is stronger than Bond. Bond is clearly the underdog... even though he is a Superman Type.

The Hero needs to be the underdog or the movie will be over in 5 minutes... or boring for the next 105 minutes. If every time the hero gets surrounded by badguys, he can easily kick their asses... boooring! The villain need some way to defeat the hero. Superman is stronger than anyone else in the world, but his nemesis Lex Luthor always manages to find a big chunk of Kryptonite before he embarks on one of his schemes, making Superman vulnerable. Every Bad Ass hero needs an Achilles heel or someone bigger and stronger and meaner they eventually have to fight against (like the late great Robert Tessier) or some plan by the villain that makes the outcome of the struggle unpredictable. If your Bad Ass Hero is the fastest draw in the west, there needs to be some legendary retired gunfighter who was twice as fast and shows up at the end. Our fantasy of being the ultra tough guy stops working if there are no challenges. Figure out what the "kryptonite" is and then start building its legend in your story so that the audience worries your hero might have to deal with it... and then their fears come true.

Your Hero probably isn't stronger than Villain, they are just more dedicated and more willing to take risks for what they believe in. If your villain isn't stronger than your hero, there's no challenge, no suspense, and no reason for the audience to buy a ticket in order to find out what happens next.

MIRROR IMAGES/FLIP SIDES

Heroes and Villains are frequently linked. Belloq tells Indiana Jones: "You and I are very much alike... Our methods are not different as much as you pretend. I am a shadowy reflection of you. It would take only a nudge to make you like me; to push you out of the light." and in "The Empire Strikes Back" (also written by Lawrence Kasdan) Darth gives a similar speech to Luke.

Heroes and Villains linked this way are called "Flipsides". This device goes back as far as "Manhattan Melodrama" (1934) where the gangster and the District Attorney were childhood friends. Heroes and Villains often share the same destination, but are traveling separate roads. "Strangers On A Train" actually begins by showing us two sets of train tracks merging together, then shows us two sets of shoes walking from opposite directions to the lounge car. Both men share the same desire, to kill a relative; but Bruno (the villain) will act on his desire while Guy (the hero) realizes that murder is impolite.

Hitchcock uses flipsides in many of his films. In "Frenzy" the hero, Richard Blaney, shares the same initials as the villain, Bob Rusk... But the initials are flipped. Like "Manhattan Melodrama", Rusk and Blaney are childhood friends... only one of them is a serial killer and the other is the police's prime suspect... And the only one who can stop the killer from striking again.

I used a similar device in my script for "The Base", about a disgraced Marine named Ronald L. Murphy given the assignment of infiltrating a secret society on a Marine Base. The secret society is run by the charismatic Sgt. Marty L. Rackin. Hero and villain share more than the same initials, both are searching for father figures, both have troubled pasts, neither is good at following orders, both have trouble with authority figures. Once undercover, Murphy becomes Rackin's best friend... practically his brother. They are flipsides. When Murphy discovers that Rackin's secret society is running drugs on base (and worse), he must turn against his own surrogate brother, betray him, in order to complete his mission. Too bad they changed all of that before filming it!

TO DESTROY HIM

I MUST BECOME HIM!

Even if the hero isn't the villain's flipside, the hero often must become the villain in order to conquer him. A by-the-rules cop has to go renegade ("The Big Heat") or a meek everyman must become a warrior ("Straw Dogs"), the hero usually crosses the line into the villain territory before he can vanquish him. Often there is a physical transformation as well. In Oliver Stone's "Platoon" Charlie Sheen's face becomes scarred throughout the film, until he resembles Tom Beringer (the villain). In "Apocalypse Now" and "Predator" the heroes paint themselves to resemble the villains before they go into battle against them. In "Predator", the creature chameleons to look like the forest; and before the final battle Ah-nuld coats himself with mud and leaves, becoming almost invisible in some shots. In "Face/Off" John Travolta must not only take Nick Cage's face to vanquish him, he must also live Nick Cage's life!

Christopher Nolan's "The Dark Knight" is a great example of a hero who must become the villain in order to conquer him. The Joker is an anarchist with no pattern and no motive except destruction. Alfred tells him a story about a bandit in Burma who threw away whatever he stole, "Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn." The Joker is such a man. Batman asks how they finally caught the bandit. "We burned the forest down." They burned his world. Both Batman and District Attorney Harvey Dent become villains in the course of the story, and do terrible things to stop The Joker. At one point, Dent says, "You either die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself become the villain." Heroes and Villains are often very similar, and the little things that make them different are the most critical parts of their characters. What are those differences in your story?

OPPOSITES REACT

Sometimes it's not the similarities between heroes and villains, but the differences that are important. In "Die Hard" Bruce Willis is a hard working blue collar every day guy, and Alan Rickman is a suave tailored over educated snob. There is an underlying theme of working class struggle in "Die Hard" which links it to the social message films Warner Brothers was famous for in the 1930s, like "Captain Blood". When Willis and Rickman tangle at the end, it's working stiffs like you and me against a profit hungry corporate raider (literally). In this case you are showing the difference in values between your characters and this will tie directly into your theme (the point of your story or aspect of the human condition you are exploring). If your protagonist is logical and level headed and your antagonist is angry and emotional, that difference is secretly what your story is about. If you have a hero who forgives and a villain who holds a grudge, that’s the aspect of the human condition you are exploring. This is why you need to consider the relationship between hero and villain carefully.

Analyze the similarities and differences between your hero and villain. They are the two most important characters in your script. You should know as much as you can about them before you begin writing. If you haven't spent the time developing their relationship and characters you may end up with an unsatisfying action script... And audiences won't care about the cool fight scenes.

IT TAKES TWO TO TANGLE

One of the most common questions I get is, “Can my Hero be my Villain?” That question can be taken two ways: in some sort of weird split personality thing the hero discovers he’s the villain at the end, or can the hero be a bad person?

Let’s begin with the first version: aside from this being the #2 screenplay cliche (after some form of “it was all a dream” - Chuck Norris waking up next to Suzanne Pleschette or Clint Eastwood in the shower fantasizing) it’s almost impossible to pull off on screen. An action film requires physical action, and how do the hero and villain fight if they are the same person? “Fight Club” turns them into two different characters, our hero and Tyler Durden, so that they can actually fight on screen and can have big dramatic battles along the way... but when it is exposed at the end that they are the same dude, you wonder how our hero could punch himself so hard - and in places where he couldn’t actually reach on himself. And that’s the one that worked!

I'M THE BAD GUY?

The problem with Hero Is Villain is that it usually out-clevers itself. In order to hide that the hero is also the villain, you have to do some sort of “cheat” to create the fight scenes and car chases and shoot outs and other physical action. This sort of thing can be done in a novel where you can trick the reader into believing that the same person is two different characters, like in William Goldman’s novel “Marathon Man” where Doc and Scylla end up being the same person in a great twist... but in Goldman’s screenplay version that twist is dropped completely. The characters are fused into one, because if we see Scylla The Assassin (played by Roy Scheider) and then see Doc The Nice Businessman (played by Roy Scheider), even the dumbest guy in the audience will figure out they are the same person. The amount of “cheats” required to make Hero Is Villain work almost guarantees that it will not work. Plus, why go through all of the trouble of having the villain pretend to be the hero? It’s kind of a cheap trick just to create a mind blower twist at the end. Oh, let me note that “Fight Club” also began as a novel, where this sort of thing works.

Add to that, the audience does a “skin jump” into the protagonist of your script. For two hours, they “become” the hero and live the adventure of your story vicariously. Movies are the grown up version of “let’s pretend”, and we may not strap on a cap gun and plastic badge, but we still imagine that we are the hero up there on screen. If we have been the hero for 105 minutes and then you suddenly tell us we are really the villain, we are not going to like that... and probably end up hating the movie. There are a couple of movies that pull this off other than “Fight Club” - “The Verdict” (1946) and the best mystery film ever made, “The Last Of Sheila” (1973).

Both films have *two* lead characters - a Holmes and Watson - so that when one is revealed as the villain, we are still able to identify with the other... and the betrayal we feel is the same betrayal that other character feels. In both cases it’s the genius Holmes-like character who is revealed to be the killer and the Watson-like character (who is easier for us to identify with) who figures it out at the end.

In “The Last Of Sheila”, Richard Benjamin’s screenwriter is the Holmes-like character who figures it all out with the help of James Mason’s director... But Mason has one problem with Benjamin’s explanation and is playing around with forensic evidence... and realizes that the only other way it adds up is if Benjamin is the killer. So we have *partner* detectives for the entire film, and at the end the story passes the lead from the partners to Mason, so that we are identifying with him when it’s revealed that Benjamin is the killer.

Both films also have a strong antagonist who is not the killer. This gives the team someone to fight against, so that we can have physical struggle and dramatic scenes along the way. In “The Last Of Sheila”, James Coburn’s producer character is a complete jerk - and his cruelty lingers in scenes where he’s not on the screen. Because his cruel game leads to the murder, he is a great antagonist before the murder... and after. Mason can't have a conflict with the actual killer during the story, so we need an adversary to battle... and that means an antagonist who is not the killer.

The three keys to “detective is the killer” plots are:

1) Partners, with the Watson character as our identification and the Holmes character as the killer.
2) A strong antagonist who is not the killer, but who the team can tangle with throughout the story giving us physical and dramatic conflict.
3) The killer is revealed at the very end, after the baton has been passed to the Watson character.

HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Another sort of Hero Is Villain deals with stories where the Hero has a dark past - they *used to be* a villain - and that past catches up with them in the story, forcing them to decide what color hat to buy. Movies like “Salt” with Angelina Jolie, “Unknown” with Liam Neeson, and “A History Of Violence” with Viggo Mortensen show us characters who used to be villains but are now heroes - and play the hero role in the story. Deciding if these characters are heroes or villains may be confusing at first, but look at what they do *in the present day story* - Evelyn Salt may be a Russian sleeper agent, but in the story she fights the spy ring she is a part of. This version of Hero Is Villain works really well, creating a flawed protagonist dealing with not only their dark past but the temptation to return to it. Probably has its roots in those retired gunfighter westerns.

BAD GUY LEADS

The other version of the question can be translated to: Can the protagonist be a criminal? The answer to that is: Hell yes! I've been using "Hero" and "Villain" in this book, but really we're talking about protagonist and antagonists... and there is no moral or legal requirements involved in being a protagonist, you just have to be the lead character. There are many action films with Bad Guy Lead characters: heist movies, prison films, gangster films, Film Noir, revenge films, hit man movies, and probably a dozen other subgenres. We often have dark fantasies and wish we could do very bad things for two hours, and when the lights come up we are not wanted by the law in seven states or dead on the street in a pool of blood.

A potential issue with Bad Guy Leads and other anti-hero movies is loss of audience involvement. Even if your lead is a vicious killer, the audience needs to become involved in your story and care about the outcome. Two great tools you can use to accomplish this are *Understandable Motivations* and *Values & Moral Codes*.

UNDERSTANDABLE

We don't have to "like" a protagonist, but we usually need to understand their motivations. Don't assume the audience will just go along for the ride, take us inside the story so that we understand the protagonist's motivations. This is easier with a straight ahead revenge film like "Colombiana" or "Faster" or "Get Carter" or the 70's crime film "The Outfit" where Robert Duvall gets out of prison and goes gunning for the mob boss who ordered his brother's murder. When your brother is murdered you do something about it... something violent. But your protagonist doesn't need something corny like a sister who needs an operation to make them "likeable", Tony Montoya in "Scarface" (either version) is a immigrant to the United States just trying to make it to the top, just trying to live the "American Dream", and using chainsaws and machineguns to achieve this. We may not agree with his methods, but we understand his motivations - we all want a better life for ourselves and our families. If the audience understands why the protagonist is doing these terrible things, they may not like them but they will hang out with them for a couple of hours.

Professional criminal leads like Roberts DeNiro in "Heat" and Duvall in "The Outfit" are anti-heroes - protagonists on the wrong side of the law. Bad Guy Leads. Once they have broken the law, even if it's for a good reason, they are on the wrong side of the law... Bad Guys. Nice guys follow the law, Bad Guys break the law. So we are rooting for the bad guys, they are our protagonists and we want them to achieve their goals.... though they usually either end up dead or without their money. DeNiro gets killed at the end of "Heat", as do most of the anti-heroes who go up against the authorities. When they go up against the mob, they usually get to keep the money - but there is some other cost to them.

I don't know of any anti-hero movie where the anti-hero becomes a hero - once they have crossed that line, no matter what excuse or justification doesn't make what they have done right - stealing money for their sister's operation is still stealing money. The strange side-effect of trying to redeem an anti-hero is that it weakens the character and the story - if the protagonist's goal is to rob an armored car, having them decide that goal is wrong makes the character's existence wrong and the story so far wrong. At no time in "Heat" does DeNiro decide robbing banks was wrong - that would weaken his character and remove the conflict from the story. Same with Ben Affeck in "The Town", he is a bad guy who has no regrets. Do you really think Affleck is going to go straight after falling in love with the hostage? That would kill the story and weaken the characters.

VALUES & MORAL CODES

Usually how scripts with Bad Guy Leads work is the protagonist may be bad, but the antagonist is worse. That's easy to understand when Duvall is taking on the mob in "The Outfit", or the guys in "5 Against The House" (1955) are taking on a mob-run crooked casino... but when the antagonist is The Authorities (Cops, FBI, etc) they still need to be *worse* than the protagonist. Usually this is done by giving the heist guys a code of conduct that the cops do not have. This can be subtle in more dramatic movies like "Heat" where DeNiro says you should not make attachments to civilians, and should be able to just leave your life behind when the heat is on you. But what brings down DeNiro and all of the other guys is their inability to do this - Val Kilmer goes home to his wife because he loves her, DeNiro wants to take his girlfriend along when he splits. Meanwhile Police Detective Al Pacino who walks away from his wife and daughter in the hospital in order to capture DeNiro. The film compares the moral code of the Bad Guy Leads to the cops pursuing them, focusing on loyalty to family and loved ones.

This is easier to see in films like Walter Hill's classic action film "The Driver" (1978) where Ryan O'Neal is a getaway driver for armed robbers, and has rules: He doesn't work with trigger-happy lunatics. He doesn't work with robbers who kill innocent civilians. It's kind of like in "Reservoir Dogs" when Pink asks if they killed anybody and White answers "Only cops", "No real people?" "Just cops." O'Neal's getaway driver doesn't work with killers or screw ups or people who use guns instead of brains. He's the Bad Guy Lead, but has a clear moral code: shown when he refuses to work with a bunch of gunslinger idiots. The antagonist is Bruce Dern: a cop who will stop at nothing to catch O'Neal... and *breaks any rule* to catch him.

Dern is a character similar to Dirty Harry, but we accept a cop who throws away the rule book when he's going after a criminal who has no rules like The Scorpio Killer. But in "The Driver" we have a cop who breaks the rules to go after a crook who sticks by his own rules. Dern ends up springing a bunch of gunslinger idiots from jail and actually sets up armed robberies with his inside information. The gunslingers kill a bunch of innocent people, just so Dern can catch O'Neal. Dern is obsessed, driven, maybe even crazy in his zealous pursuit of O'Neal. The protagonist may be breaking the law for a living, but antagonist will sacrifice innocent people to catch him. Even though he may wear a badge, he's worse. That's why we often side with the armed robbers in these films - there is a dark fantasy element (we all want to do the wrong thing) and the antagonists are worse. So when you have an anti-hero as the lead, remember you need a kind of "anti-villain" as the antagonist - often a ruthless authority figure without any sort of moral code. Make sure you *demonstrate* the differences between your protagonist and antagonist so the audience understands why the guy with the badge is wrong and the guy with the gun is right.

The big selling point for "Heat" was the Pacino/DeNiro scene where the protagonist and antagonist come face-to-face. One of the ways to create the kind of big dramatic scenes that will interest actors is to have a strong conflict between protagonist and antagonist and give those two characters some scenes where they face each other, then let the conflict boil over into drama. The best scene in "The Outfit" has Duvall and Robert Ryan at a horse auction having a very tense conversation about who will kill who, each threatening the other. It's like the "Heat" diner scene: protagonist and antagonist facing off... anti-hero and anti-villain close enough to kill each other.

Your protagonist doesn't have to be a good guy, and your antagonist doesn't have to be a bad guy; but audience identification and the "skin jump" have to be taken into consideration whenever you have a Hero Is Villain scenario... or you'll lose the audience.

HERO VS. VILLAIN

Your hero and the villain will usually confront each other at least three times in the course of a script. A set up in Act 1, where the hero gets stomped. A second meeting in Act 2, and the final confrontation in Act 3, where the hero kicks butt. Because the villain brings the conflict, if the hero and villain *don't* bump into each other a few times, there isn't going to be much action in your action screenplay. The villain might send his henchman to stop the hero, but unless you want a bunch of completely contrived action scenes the hero must keep bumping into the villain or one of his/her henchmen. This is why we need an active villain (or force of antagonism) – to keep that conflict coming!

The Act 3 confrontation is often a "high noon" where the hero and villain actually face off against each other. In Westerns and Samurai films, there is usually a highly stylized scene where the hero and villain size each other up before drawing their weapons. "Die Hard" uses this device: there is a moment where Rickman and Willis just look at each other and laugh. Then the shooting starts.

“High noon” scenes can be quite chatty at times, with bits of last minute exposition peppered in between gunshots or conversation that illustrates the differences in moral code between explosions. Though a little of this is fine and helps to create suspense by extending the final big action scene, be careful that you don’t end up with a long speech or extensive dialogue scene with just a little bit of action. As we know from “The Incredibles” the sure-fire way to get the upper hand on a villain is to get them “monologuing”. The reason for the “high noon” scene is obvious - we’ve just spent 100 minutes watching the villain and hero prepare for a battle to the death, and now we want to see that battle. If you end up with more talk, less shooting, the audience may end up disappointed.

In many action films, the hero has a “payback line” in the high noon confrontation. A payback line is a snappy line uttered by the villain to the hero in their first confrontation, which the hero "pays back" to the villain in the final confrontation.

"Die Hard" even uses a payback line in the middle of the script. After the terrorists blow up an LAPD tank, McClane grabs a walkie talkie and reasons with Hans to let the tank pull back. Hans says, "Thank you Mr. Cavalry, I'll take it under advisement", then blasts the tank again, killing the survivors. Later, when McClane drops explosives down the elevator shaft, he says "Take this under advisement, dickweed."

Audiences love payback lines. The original “Assault On Precinct 13” is payback line city! Almost every line gets thrown back in someone's face later in the film. The more clever the line, the more they'll cheer. The payback line illustrates that the hero has now gained the confidence and control to vanquish the villain.

DESTROYING THE VILLAIN

Remember, the *Hero* must vanquish the Villain. The sidekick or love interest or some total stranger can't do it, it's not their job. And the Villain can't trip and fall off a cliff or over the side of a building into wet cement. It's the hero's job. In "hoist by my own petard" cases, the hero must contribute to that hoisting. The villain can't trip and fall in the path of the "laser beam designed to destroy Cleveland", the hero needs to push him. Though it may seem like a great idea to have the villain suddenly realize the error of his ways and throw himself in the way of that laser beam designed to destroy Cleveland, that is anti-climactic and makes the Hero a pointless character. If the hero doesn't destroy the villain, why are they even in the film? He just stands there and watches as *the Villain* resolves the conflict. Who needs Peter Parker if Doc Ock is there to solve the problem?

By the end of Act 3, the hero has probably taken a few beatings from the villain or their henchmen. There's a kind of karma thing that happens in a story – a balance. Just as the punishment must fit the crime in other aspects of your screenplay, the same is true for the fate of the villain. As writers, we are a civilized, kind hearted, nice group of folks... but by the end of the film the audience wants blood! They want vengeance! They want the hero to inflict as much pain on the villain in one scene as the villain has inflicted on the hero over the course of the film. They want the villain completely destroyed... and the instrument they will use for that vengeance is the hero, their identification character. So, even if your hero is a pacifist monk who preaches non-violence, he's got to be the one to destroy the villain! Which “Rambo” movie was that?

The bigger the villain's plan, the bigger the film... And the better the villain's death, the more satisfying the ending.

That audience doesn't want to see the villain just get arrested and go to trial - we know that real life villains get off every day. They hire their dream team of lawyers and are on the street in no time – and that is *not* a resolution. (Unless the point you are trying to make is that villains never get their just deserts, like in Robert Towne's “Chinatown”). The audience also doesn't want to see the villain sustain critical wounds and die sometime much later in the hospital. These are anti-climactic... ending with a whimper when we want to end with a bang. Would you have enjoyed “Star Wars” if instead of the Death Star blowing up, they'd just pulled the plug? Kind of difficult to cheer that. So we want the villain's end to be just as amazing and exciting as the Death Star blowing up, and the most satisfying villain's deaths involve exploding the villain into a million pieces. Gross, sure! But ask anyone who's seen "Transporter 3” or “Leon: The Professional” or schlocky 80s action flick “Wanted Dead Or Alive” or the Brian DePalma “X-Men” predecessor “The Fury” - exploding villains are great! No chance that guy can hire a sleazy lawyer or get up and tear off the kevlar vest. That villain has been dealt with.

Let's take “Leon: The Professional” by Luc Besson as an example. Villain Gary Oldman is the ultimate corrupt cop, and has murdered Natalie Portman's entire family one day. She hides in the apartment of professional hit man Jean Reno who trains her how to kill so that she can get revenge. But things don't go exactly as planned, and even though all of Oldman's henchmen are killed, he manages to walk away unharmed. Reno makes sure Portman escapes, but Oldman spots him and opens fire – shooting him again and again. Reno goes down! Oldman straddles him, gun aimed at his head – about ready to blow Reno's brains out. But Reno smiles and puts something in Oldman's free hand, “This is from Matilda.” Oldman opens his hand to see... a grenade pin. Pulls open Reno's coat and underneath: a dozen grenades, pins pulled! He manages to say, “Shit” before being blown into a million little pieces. When I saw this in the cinema, the audience cheered like a Roman Coliseum crowd. In fact, the last time I saw it in a cinema – at the New Beverly revival house in Los Angeles – the crowd cheered when Oldman was blown to hell.

The audience wants to know that the villain really is dead. That means he either has to be exploded, fall off a very tall building or out of a plane, or shot up by gunfire. Too many times we have seen "dead" villains come back to life for a few minutes of "schlock shock" action. Audiences know that if the bad guy isn't in pieces, he isn't dead. That doesn't mean you can't have an end where the villain just ends up in handcuffs, but that's not

going to be as satisfying as the ending where he or she is exploded real good.

Try to come up with a clever way for the hero to vanquish the villain, but make sure you aren't stretching credibility. The hero's job is to vanquish the villain, and your job as a screenwriter is to come up with a fun, interesting, but logical way for the hero to do his job. Once the hero's job is over, he can go back to his peaceful life as a pacifist monk; knowing that his physical and emotional conflicts have been solved.

Emotional Conflicts? I thought we were talking about bad asses? We'll cover emotional conflicts in a moment, but first we need a story idea, right? We have our hero and our villain, but they need a story so they can battle it out.

KILLER CONCEPTS

Once you have your hero and villain, your action film is going to need an idea, but not just any idea... you want one that rocks.

Most of you probably know what "High Concept" means, but for those of you who don't: High Concept is *story* as star. The central idea of the script is exciting, fascinating, intriguing, and *different*. High Concept films can usually be summed up in a single sentence or a single image that entices the audience to buy a ticket. In this case, "High" does not mean "High Brow" or "High Intelligence", nor does it mean something that only sounds good when you're stoned. "High" means big, exciting, larger than life. The average movie costs over $106 million by the time it reaches the screen (2010), which means just to break even it must attract a large audience. The audience won't know how great your characters and dialogue and scenes are until *after* they've paid the price of admission. That makes the concept one of the most important elements.

A thief who can enter your dreams and steal all of your secrets. A man with amnesia searches for clues to his identity and discovers that he's a political assassin the government wants dead. A bomb on a city bus will go off if the bus travels under 55 mph... and rush hour has just begun! After superheroes are outlawed, a super-family tries to blend into typical suburban life... until an enemy from the past resurfaces and attacks the city.

If you can't distill your story into thirty words or less with an exciting central idea, you have a problem. Once the film is made, the studio's advertising department will have to come up with a 30 second TV spot and a catchy tag line for the poster. When your film shows on HBO or Showtime, TV Guide will have to come up with a one sentence description that will make viewers tune in. With only 30 seconds or a handful of words, the most the audience can get is the concept - the basic idea of the story. Even if you are writing an art house drama your story will be distilled into that logline that sums up the whole story. When we sell our screenplays there is no star attached - it’s a “naked script”. Which means the *idea* needs to be the star of the film. Foreign audiences make up 67% of a film's earnings, so your story should have an idea clear enough to be understood regardless of language. If you can't see that exciting 30 second spot, there's little chance anyone will want to see your film.

HIGH CONCEPT = STORY AS STAR

Here are some examples of High Concept:

A meek office worker discovers that he is the son of a super-assassin when he is recruited to use his inherited skills to take down a super-villain who is assassinating the assassins. ("Wanted")

In the future, the police force uses psychics to arrest perpetrators *before* they kill, and the next killer has just been identified as the Top Cop on the force. ("Minority Report")

An FBI Agent uses high tech plastic surgery - becoming a terrorist leader in order to infiltrate his terrorist group and stop them from blowing up Los Angeles. ("Face/Off')

An AFT Agent uses a time machine to piece together clues to a terrorist act that killed hundreds... and falls in love with one of the victims. Can he prevent her death? ("Deja Vu")

An anti-social cop tracks a serial killer who is knocking off people from a newspaper's list of World Class Jerks... which includes the anti-social cop! ("The Dead Pool")

A computer programmer discovers that the real world isn't real at all, and that we are all slaves to a computer system known as The Matrix. ("The Matrix")

A housewife discovers that her meek computer-geek husband is actually an international spy like James Bond. ("True Lies")

Cowboys discover a lost valley filled with dinosaurs, and bring some back for a wild west show. ("Valley Of The Gwangi")

These are all big ideas, unique ideas, weird ideas. The poster for "Valley Of The Gwangi" shows cowboys on horseback herding and roping a T-Rex. When you see the poster, you almost do a double take. Cowboys? Dinosaurs? In the same movie? You want to know more. You want to see the film without knowing anything else about the story. That's High Concept. Of course, that didn't work so well for “Cowboys & Aliens”, so maybe you should just leave the cowboys out of it.

I'm not even bringing up the boys bitten by genetically altered spiders and boozy arms dealers with heart defects who create flying armored suits and scrawny kids turned into super soldiers with the help of a special serum, or scientists who turn into big green monsters when they get angry. I think the reason why comic book heroes have almost taken over the action genre is that they are "name brands" that the public is aware of, plus their stories are always high concept. Even if you've never heard of James "Logan" Howlett, the idea of a guy on the run who discovers he was given rapid healing powers and a metal skeleton with razor-talons as part of a government experiment is interesting and different. No one wants Action Plot 53B, they want to see something they *haven't* seen before. Something unique and unusual.

Take a look at *your* script idea. Just the idea – not the story or characters. Is your concept distinctive and interesting? Is it easy to understand? Do you think millions of people all over the world will stand in line to see your idea? If you tell the idea to your friends, do they want to know more? Do they want to read your script? The idea behind your script will create the film's identity, so it must be memorable and interesting and unusual. Your script has to be something special.

TYPICAL GENRE FILM

One of the problems when writing in the action genre is that almost everything seems to have been done before. The first fiction film ever made, "The Great Train Robbery" (1903) was an action film. Every year there are around 75,000 script projects registered with the WGA, and add to that all of the scripts that registered with copyright instead, and all of the projects based on novels, comic books, video games, true stories and other source materials where the underlying copyright is used as protection. How do you make sure your script stands out when all you have is a logline?

The standard F.B.I. Agent chases serial killer or detective solves mystery story is just going to get lost in the shuffle. Even television episodes need something unique to separate them from all of the other episodes of that crime show. A movie script can't just be a standard cop story. You need some weird twist that makes it special. "Deja Vu" by Terry Rossio and Bill Marsilii takes the cop-tracks-mad-bomber story and twists it with a rip in time where agents can see exactly four days into the past... and the events leading up to the explosion. The story itself is similar to the classic cop film "Laura" where the detective falls in love with the beautiful victim as he investigates the crime, but here we can actually send AFT Agent Doug Carlin through the rip in time to save the woman he loves and prevent the tragedy. Note that not only are the stakes raised from its 1940s predecessor - instead of one victim, we literally have a boat load - there is also that high concept twist that makes it like no other action movie that has come before. Even though Mark Verheiden's "Time Cop" also uses time travel to twist the action genre, the way it is used is different. Both films have radically different concepts, even though both utilize time travel.

A high concept doesn't require science fiction or fantasy elements, those are just the easiest ways to twist a story into something unique. Sometimes we can find an original element that just adds a fresh coat of paint to an old idea.

Even with big stars Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman, "Seven" was sold with ads which described the seven deadly sins. The sins were the concept that sold that script (before those two stars were hired). We have forgotten the sins, and most of us are guilty of at least one of them. Our two detectives were guilty of a couple. Coming up with a unique type of serial killer and involving the protagonists helps make this idea fresh... but now it has been done. The number of scripts that can do the same thing are limited - even if all of those scripts have entirely fresh serial killer ideas. Whether the killings are inspired by the Seven Deadly Sins, the Ten Commandments, the Twelve Days of Christmas, we still end up with cops or FBI agents chasing a serial killer - and we've seen a hundred times before. The *concept* is the same, the changes are only cosmetic.

COUSINS

Someone once said that there are only seven basic stories, and Polti lists only 36 Dramatic Situations... there is no #37. This means your big idea isn't likely to be something that we've never heard of before, but an interesting and unique variation on some story we have heard. The same, but different. Hollywood isn't really looking for something *completely* different – that might be weird – they are looking for something that is “the same but different”. Something similar to a massive box office hit, but different enough that people won't think they have seen it before.

Cornell Woolrich has a novel called "Black Curtain" (filmed as "Street Of Chance") about an amnesia victim trying to uncover his past, who uncovers the frightening fact that he is a murderer.

In the 1970's, novelist David Ely came up with a Cold War variation. The mild mannered amnesia victim was brainwashed to forget that he used to be a government assassin. Now as he tries to uncover his past, the CIA is out to kill him.

"Total Recall" makes it science fiction. The amnesia/brain wash victim goes to Mars to uncover his past, and finds out he was an interplanetary spy (and his own worst enemy).

Shane Black takes it back to earth in "The Long Kiss Goodnight", but makes the amnesia victim a June Cleaver like mom and housewife, who has to protect her daughter when she uncovers her past as a government assassin.

The Bourne movies have given us the gritty version, with Jason Bourne as the amnesia victim whose search for identity uncovers that he was one of several top secret government assassins involved in regime changes around the world.

“Unknown” has Liam Neeson as a man who wakes up after a car crash in a foreign country and *does* remember who he is... but his wife and colleagues don't remember him! Much like in “Total Recall” he discovers that he may be his own worst enemy.

And now they are remaking “Total Recall”!

All are variations on the same idea, but given a new twist. Again, these are cosmetic changes, and our goal is to come up with a fresh concept rather than just twist an old one. Odds are that there are a dozen people who have done with the same twist on the same old idea as you did. So really dig for the fresh idea. Most new writers end up writing the first idea they come up with instead of the *best* idea they can come up with. Don't be afraid to come up with 100 ideas in order to find the great one... and throw away the other 99 ideas. Really spend the time to find an original action idea before you spend the time to script it. After you have 110 pages of hard work is no time to discover that your idea is stale.

THE TWO EWES

Not some farmer's fantasy, but the two critical elements in a high concept. Many writers equate "high concept" with "lowest common denominator", but I like to think of it as more of a "prime number". A good concept should be both UNIQUE and UNIVERSAL, just like a prime number. A high concept isn't so dumb that everyone can get it, it's so Universal that everyone understands it. Either we know what that experience feels like, or it's an experience we've all fantasized about. The weirder the idea, the more it has to be grounded in universal human emotions or behavior.

If an idea is Unique, but no one can relate to it; it's not a great idea.
If an idea is Universal, but we've seen it a million times before, it's not a great idea.

Your idea needs to be different. Growing up with James Bond and Nichols & May, I came up with a great script idea: "That's my son, the spy." Even James Bond has a mom, right? Well, this idea became garbage as soon as they made "Stop Or My Mom Will Shoot". The ideas are too similar. Now with “Burn Notice” my idea is *really* dead. There can't be any other film with the exact same idea as yours. If something is similar to yours, find the way to twist it into something unique... and keep twisting until no one would ever think your idea is the same as the other one.

A dozen years ago when I was selling specs and writing scripts for HBO and other cable nets on a regular basis, I came up with "Black Thunder" about the ultimate Stealth Fighter Plane - push a button and it's *invisible*. Terrorists steal it. How do you find an invisible war plane... before it finds you? ;

Though Clint Eastwood's "Firefox" was about stealing a high tech plane from the Russians, there had never been a movie about someone who steals a plane *from us* and we have to get it back. Our own weapon used against us. This was a minor twist on the idea itself... which meant I needed the high concept idea of the invisible plane to turn it into something really unique. The RAM-skins used in traditional Stealth fighter planes are a "passive system" - they don't create invisibility, they just absorb radar beams. Well, if there's a passive system, why can't there be an *active* system? A system that could bend light around an object... making it invisible? I created the phrase "active stealth" to describe this system... which a dozen years later is science fact. Several groups of scientists are experimenting with bending light to create invisibility... just as I described it in the script. "Black Thunder" was a unique combination of ideas that sold, was made... and then remade about a decade later. In between the two versions, the big budget flop "I Spy" swiped the active stealth plane plot that I created! If your initial idea isn't high concept enough, find a way to twist it even more.

The Universal element of "Black Thunder" was sibling rivalry. My hero Vince Conners had been trained by legendary test pilot Tom Ratcher... along with another pilot named Rick Jannick. Conners was the son who could seemingly do no wrong, Ratcher was the stern father figure; and just like Caleb in John Steinbeck's "East of Eden", no matter what Jannick does he manages to screw up. Conners hates him, because he's a "skydiver" - he crashes planes. Both "sons" are fighting for the love of their "father". The sibling rivalry between these two is the emotional core of the story. It gives the high concept story an emotional conflict that is universal. All of us understand sibling rivalry and wanting the approval of our parents.

Your high concept needs to be both unique and universal.

ONE IS NOT ENOUGH

But one idea does not a script make. Your script needs to be filled with fresh new ideas. Keep that imagination going to create all kinds of cool things that fit within the framework of the concept. "Minority Report" *starts* with the cool high concept of police using psychics to see who will commit murder in the future, so that they can be arrested now and prevent the crimes. Then we have the cool idea of retina scans as the common way of identifying people, "Eye-Dent". No fingerprints, no driver's license, no passwords. Everything is done with your eyes.

Plus we have the cool idea that the Eye-Dent system is used commercially - you can't walk into The Gap without being recognized and receive a personalized sales pitch from the audio-video system... kind of the way Amazon selects books that might interest you. *Plus* you have the cool mouse-free computer that you conduct like a symphony. *Plus* the police have those cool jet packs and zoom after criminals. *Plus* the police have interesting new non-lethal weapons; from "sick sticks" that make the criminal vomit, to the sonic pistols that knock the criminals down with sound. *Plus* everyone drives mag cars that zoom down the highway at top speed - bumper to bumper - and even zoom sideways down the sides of buildings! *Plus* those cool robot-spiders the police use to search every nook and cranny of a building before they go into it. *Plus* those hologram home movies that give you the feeling of having the past right there in the room with you. *Plus*...

One idea isn't enough. You've got to have a dozen neat little ideas *plus* good writing *plus* a great high concept. That's what will make your script attractive to producers. An idea they've never heard of and a script which keeps surprising them with more cool ideas. That takes imagination and creativity.

Even with all of these neat little ideas, remember the focus of the script is the Big Idea, the high concept. You don't want to confuse your audience with a bunch of unconnected ideas. Make sure your dozen fresh small ideas are somehow related to the Big Idea. All of the Small Ideas should share your Big Idea's DNA. Every idea should be organic to the story so that you could clone your script from the elements in each scene.

"Minority Report" is a good example of small ideas revolving around the high concept of Police using psychics to see future crime. The Eye-Dent system is all about *seeing* and one of the ways police identify criminals. Because there are retina scanners all over the city, you can't really escape the police... unless you either remove your eyes or get an eye transplant. All of the cool new equipment that the police use serves the story - it's not just tacked on, we only see these cool new devices when the police use them to capture the criminals. Each small idea supports the concept and is part of the big idea. Instead of distracting from the Big Idea, the small ideas augment it and heighten it.

Use as many small fresh ideas as you can, to make your script constantly different and exciting. One good idea is a great start, but you've got to keep them coming. Don't worry about running out of ideas, and don't save a great idea "for the sequel". If the first script doesn't get sold and made, there will be no sequel!

Having a high concept is no guarantee that your script will be any good (that's why the book doesn't end with this chapter), but it will help your script sell, and help it weave its way through the mine-field of development and production... where that high concept will interest the audience in the film enough to buy a ticket.

To show you the power of a good high concept, look at "Jumper"... a story that didn't work with a great high concept (a guy who can teleport chased by a secret society). This story (a novel) was sold, scripted, cast with Samuel L. Jackson as the villain, made, and released as a big event film on the basis of its concept alone! The trailers didn't focus on the stars, they focused on teleportation - the high concept. Imagine how salable a *good* script with an interesting high concept would be!

That is your mission should you decide to accept it!

THREE ACT ACTION

William Goldman says the most important thing in screenwriting is *structure*. Even "soft stories" like romances and coming of age dramas require good structure. So it shouldn't be any surprise that hard, plot-driven action and thriller stories also need good structure.

But too much importance is attached to the Three Act Structure. For some strange reason there is an entire cult of writers who believe that the Three Act Structure is responsible for the destruction of creativity, the shackling of artistic expression and the downfall of American cinema. Folks - it's just a *tool*! It's like a hammer - you use it to build a story... but you still have to build the story. Three Act Structure *isn't* the story - just that tool, just the foundation you build your story on. A building can have a great foundation but be ugly or impractical. You can take that great foundation and create a building with no doors, or use sloppy craftsmanship. The foundation is not the building...

But a building with a weak foundation is probably going to collapse no matter how well built it is, no matter how beautiful it is. That Three Act Structure thing has been around for over 2,400 years (Hollywood didn't invent it, not did Syd Field) - it's just a tool to make sure your story makes sense and has a conflict... rather than being just a collection of scenes that don't add up to anything. It serves a basic story purpose - to focus the story and give us a beginning, middle and end. I think it's so basic that every story - from nursery rhymes to short stories to poems have some version of the basic three act structure. So here's the simple version, no jargon, no theories, no bull shit:

Act 1: Introduces the conflict.
Act 2: Is the conflict & escalation of the conflict.
Act 3: Resolves the conflict.

Easy as that. You have a character... they are faced with a conflict. Your character struggles with the conflict, and it keeps getting worse. Eventually your character figures out how to resolve the conflict, the end. That's just a basic story. The Three Act Structure is a tool that makes sure you have a basic story. It doesn't do anything else. The Three Act Structure does not cure male pattern baldness, it will not make you attractive to the opposite sex, it will not make you rich and famous... you need a great story and some great writing. Many screenwriting books have some sort of page number formula for writing a great screenplay, I don't have one of those. You are the writer, the person in charge of your story; so I'm just going to give you the basics on structure and let you write your own story in your own way.

BY THE NUMBERS?

Act One introduces the conflict... and just about everything else! You have about a quarter of the screenplay to introduce your lead character, their emotional conflict and the physical conflict, plus the world of the story and the antagonist (villain) and any other major characters. Once Act One is over, your lead will be involved in escalating conflict, and there won't be time to plant emotional conflict, explain motivation, or add character information. You need to get as much information in that first quarter of the screenplay as you can.

If you can't show your actual villain this early in the script (because it is a mystery, or you have a great twist, etc), introduce him by proxy through a *Henchman* so that we can still have direct conflict with the lead character. The Henchman symbolizes the villain, and does his bidding. By the end of Act One, we should have some understanding of the *Villain's Plan* so that we know what is at stake. In "Lethal Weapon", the Villain and his Henchman are introduced in the first act, and their plan (to smuggle guns) is exposed. You may want to hold back all of the details of the Villain's Plan to use as a twist and to escalate the conflict – like in “Goldfinger” where we think the plot is to rob Fort Knox but is really to explode a dirty bomb and contaminate the gold. But we need to have some idea of what they are up to by the end of Act One.

FIRST TEN PAGES

Or maybe seven pages, or eleven pages, or two pages... but the beginning of your screenplay needs to hook the reader and viewer and involve them in your story. You don't need to open with an explosion or car chase, but you need something exciting and interesting that will get your story off to a great start.

“Face/Off” uses the opening minute or two to set up the hero's emotional conflict – Sean Archer and his son at the play ground, Castor Troy with a sniper rifle tries to kill Archer but gets his son instead. That “breaks” the protagonist, so that he will have to spend the rest of the film putting himself back together so that he is emotionally capable of taking down Troy.

“The Matrix” opens with Agent Smith and the police going to capture Trinity in the hotel room, the amazing rooftop chase filled with “that's impossible” moments, ending with the huge truck smashing the phone booth Trinity is making a call in... but she has vanished. An exciting and clever way to introduce the villain and the strange world of the story.

You don't want a car chase or shoot out that has nothing to do with your story – you want an exciting scene that helps set up the rest of your story. I have a Blue Book on the first ten pages with all kinds of tips and techniques, but you need to hook those readers right away and never let go. For those of you who think this is modern MTV Hollywood nonsense and long for the days when you could take your time to set up your story, I give you this quote from Edgar Allan Poe: "If the writer's initial sentence isn't effective, then he has failed in his first step." He said that back in the 1800s. Nothing has changed since then – your first sentence, your first scene, your first *word* needs to draw in the reader.

THE CONFLICT ACT

Act Two is all about conflict. Act One ends with the Hero and Villain on a collision course. Some major event will occur which will completely involve the hero in stopping the villain and *lock* them into the conflict – no chance to avoid the conflict or escape the conflict. If they are not *trapped* dealing with that physical conflict, you haven't entered Act Two, yet. One of the most common structure problems is a “false act two” that may be filled with action and excitement, but it's all surface mayhem – the protagonist either isn't directly involved or can walk away at any time. Make sure they have no choice but to struggle with the conflict. In "The Big Heat" (1953) the villain plants a bomb in the Hero's car. The hero's wife and daughter borrow the car and BOOOOOOM! End Act One.

Act Two can't begin until the conflict fully involves your protagonist. Usually in an action script, the hero gets in the way of the villain's plan. Act Two begins when the villain tries to remove the hero from his path - that's conflict. The hero and villain tangle through Act Two, the villain trying to get around the hero - but the hero just keeps getting in the way. Because Act Two is the conflict act, a conflict is the fun stuff in an action film, it tends to be about half of your screenplay. We'll look at some of the ways Act Two can work in our next chapter on plotting. But we can't get to Act Two until the hero is *locked* into that conflict and has no choice but to deal with it.

In “Die Hard” Act Two kicks in when McClane kills his first terrorist... and ends up with the detonators. Hans *needs* the detonators. His plan will fail if he can't get those detonators back. So McClane has gone from being a stray party guest to a *major problem* for Hans. McClane is right in the path of Han's plan - there's no way to escape - it's like a freight train headed at him at 90 mph. Now Hans sends the guys out to find McClane and get the detonators back. Act Two is a dangerous game of hide and seek, with machine gun battles when McClane and the badguys cross paths. Conflict, conflict, conflict!

Often for the first half of Act Two the Hero tries to solve the physical problem while avoiding his emotional problem (his fears). He slaps band aids on the problem and tries the quick fix. But none of this works, and he falls deeper into the Abyss.

Often there is a *Midpoint* where the hero realizes that he can't solve the physical problem without confronting his emotional problem. He or she reaches an emotional crisis, because their entire life is based on avoiding the emotional problem (his fears).

The last half of Act Two often thrusts the hero into increased danger from the physical conflict (car chases, shoot outs, fist fights, sharks, asteroids, androids, whatever). There are a few close calls where he's almost killed. Finally he reaches his "Popeye Point", where he's had alls he can stands and he can't stands no more. Remember in the old “Popeye” cartoons when Popeye was forced into a corner by Bluto and it looked like he would lose everything, he'd pull out a can of spinach, pop it open, eat it... and suddenly get super strength and save the day. Same thing usually happens to the hero in an action movie – they reach the point of no return where all is lost... and that is what prods them to deal with that emotional conflict they've been avoiding for the whole movie. Dealing with the emotional conflict is like popping open that can of spinach, and now they have the power to resolve the physical problem, which gets us into Act Three.

Because we've already talked about “Face/Off”, let's use that as our example: When Sean Archer finally realizes that the best way to be a good husband and father is *not* to ignore his family by tracking down the villain who shot his son, and goes to his wife and daughter to apologize and make amends (difficult because he's wearing the villain's face) he becomes whole again, and with the help of his family can finally take down the villain. In “The Matrix” Neo comes to accept that he *is* the chosen one and turns to face Agent Smith. In a thriller story (covered in my Thriller audio class) the protagonist is back against the wall, sometimes symbolically killed; and realizes to survive they must stop running and turn and fight the antagonist. Once that happens, we are ready to enter Act Three...

RESOLUTIONS

Act Three begins with our hero as a new (whole) person and ready to lead the charge against the villain. Often in action films our hero usually gears up for battle to show that he is ready to take on the Physical Conflict head on. I call this the “gun worship scene” even though guns aren't always involved. In “Commando” and “Rambo” and “Colombiana” and “The Expendables” and “Predator” and “The Wild Bunch” and almost every other action film I can think of the hero dons their warpaint and loads and checks their guns and straps on their knives and prepares for that big battle. In my “Grid Runners” film for HBO I had a scene where martial arts star Don “The Dragon” Wilson does a kata to prepare for the big battle. No guns, no knives – he makes sure his deadly feet and hands are ready for action.

From that point on, Act Three in an action film is often non-stop action. A car chase leads to a shoot out leads to a fist fight leads to another chase leads to a shoot out. Often in Act Two, the villain chases the hero... but in Act Three the hero chases the villain. Watch the last 30 minutes of "Lethal Weapon" it is a *roller coaster* of action scenes from the escape until the final shoot out. Act Three of the Chuck Norris flick "Code Of Silence" is a huge shoot out in a warehouse, with Chuckles against an army of bad guys. The warehouse shootout runs about 25 minutes, and is filled with twists, turns, and reversals. Act Three of any James Bond movie usually has Bond and a small group of commandos raiding the villain's secret stronghold. There is a huge gun battle, ending with the villain's escape. Bond battles the lead henchman (who's usually a musclemen), then catches the villain moments before he can escape. Bond and the villain face off for a "High Noon" style confrontation. The villain and Bond have usually tangled twice before: In Act One, where they played golf, and in Act Two, where the villain completely *stomped* Bond and left him for dead. Can Bond possibly win the rematch in Act Three? Well, he has so far in 22 films.

A great example of non-stop Act Three action can be found in "Shaft's Big Score!" (1972). The final 30 minutes of the film is wall-to-wall action with only *one* line of dialogue: "He's got a boat!".

Act Three begins with the funeral of a black gangster, which turns into a huge machine gun fight when the Mafia shows up. The machine gun fight evolves into a car chase, as Shaft tries to catch the Mafia hit men. Then the tables are turned on Shaft, as a helicopter attacks his car. There is a car/helicopter chase, which ends when Shaft's car crashes on a pier. Shaft grabs a boat, and we get that one line of dialogue because the chase is back on. The boat/helicopter chase is pretty hairy: Shaft speeds under some low bridges to shake off the chopper. Finally Shaft runs the boat aground, where it explodes! Now Shaft is being chased on the pier by the helicopter. He plays hide and go seek on the pier with the helicopter, and some Mafia guys on foot. Then Shaft hides in a dark warehouse.

But the helicopter flies *into* the warehouse!

There's a neat *indoor* helicopter chase, then Shaft runs up some catwalks. The Helicopter chases Shaft along the catwalks, and they exchange gunfire. That's when the Mafia foot soldiers find him. There's a fight and shoot out on the catwalks. Shaft kills the foot soldiers, then tries to escape the helicopter. But he's trapped! Shaft and the helicopter exchange gunfire, until Shaft hits the gas tank. BLAAAM!! The helicopter explodes into a million pieces... The cops arrive (too late to do anything, as usual) and silently congratulate Shaft. The End.

Though your screenplay will probably have more than one line of dialogue in Act Three, you want to try and avoid introducing new information or new plot material. This is the resolution of the conflicts, not introduction of new conflicts. If you end up with a short Act Three that could be because you either your conflict didn't escalate enough (so it is too easy to resolve) or that it was too simple in the first place and the audience has been wondering why your hero didn't just put an end to it an hour ago. Usually after things have been spiraling out of control for all of Act Two, it's not going to be easy to get things resolved in Act Three.

ESCALATOR OF DOOM!

It's important to keep your conflict escalating in Act Two, so that things keep getting worse (and more exciting). After adapting some scripts written as features to TV and writing some TV movies, I came up with a way to keep the story a real page turner by having a plot twist and cliff hanger every 15 pages (more or less). In the TV movie world this is often done to keep people from changing channels during commercials, and it has the same effect in features – an escalating conflict keeps the audience from leaving the cinema... and readers turning those pages. Every 15 pages things get worse – much worse – building both conflict and threat to the boiling point!

Because the poster and trailer will give away whatever your high concept is, try to get to those things in the first 15 pages or so. You don't want to waste the audience's time setting up things that they already know. They've seen the dinosaurs or time travel or dream manipulation in the trailer or on the poster already. If you hold the high concept for the end of Act One, you'll just make them wonder if they are in the wrong cinema and maybe even make them angry. Do you really want a mob armed with nacho sporks and bendy drink straws chasing you? Okay, that *does* sound kind of cool... but it will be more difficulty to sell your next script if you were sporked to death.

IN my HBO World Premiere Movie “Crash Dive” the terrorists take over the 688 class nuclear submarine on page 15 of the sales draft. Concept established, I ratchet up the stakes every 15 pages from that point on. Just when you think things couldn't get worse... they do!

A spec script of mine that got me lots of studio meetings (without an agent or manager – people passed it to their best contact) and keeps almost getting made every year, “Altitude” uses the escalator of doom. Though every ten pages (give or take) there is an action scene of some sort, every 15 pages there is some sort of additional twist. Here's the extended “sales” logline and then a breakdown that focuses on the twists:

ALTITUDE
The Chicago to DC shuttle is hijacked... a bomb attached to an altimeter will explode if the plane flies below 20,000 feet. Disgraced bodyguard Jason Bolt must organize the passengers against the hijackers as they circle Washington National Airport... but what if the bomb is nuclear, and the target is DC? Is this the second wave of terrorism? Or a group of clever thieves cashing in on 9-11 paranoia to cover a daring mid-air heist? "The Taking of Pelham 1-2-3" meets "Speed" in an airplane... one plane you don't want to miss!

Pages 1-4: Open with action *and* character – Threat Management specialist Jason Bolt is protecting a whistle blower, screws up, they are attacked in a nice action scene and the whistle blower killed.

Pages 5-8: Six months later: Bolt's life is a mess, he breaks up with his girlfriend because he has lost the ability to trust. Theme and character arc set!

Page 9: Bolt boards a plane to Washington, DC to testify before Congress on why he screwed up and got his charge killed.

Page 15: Airplane is hijacked, bomb is attached to altimeter... are these terrorists or something else?

Page 30: Bolt is forced to kill one hijacker, will he be discovered? His hand is stained blue from drowning the hijacker in the plane's chemical toilet.

Page 45: The bomb is NUCLEAR!

Page 45: The overly zealous Homeland Security guy has scrambled fighters to shoot the plane out of the sky and kill everyone onboard.

Page 60: The fighter planes get ready to shoot them down!

Page 60: The plane is circling the White House... Is the President (and the rest of US Government) the target? No time to evacuate them fast enough to avoid a nuclear explosion!

Page 60: Bolt discovers the hijackers are definitely not terrorists... but involved in a daring mid-air heist of something onboard the plane... what?

Page 60: No help is coming. The Bolt must take on the hijackers alone – is he up to it? Of course not! Midpoint... even though it's a little more than halfway. Page numbers don't matter.

Page 75: Good news: Bomb is not nuclear. Bad News: The bomb can not be defused! (the guy Bolt killed on page 30 was the bomb expert!) The bomb WILL explode.

Page 75: We discover the villain's true plan: To steal bribe $ from a mob courier on the plane and *explode* the plane to cover their tracks. The thieves *plan* to kill everyone onboard!

Page 90: The pilot is killed, a hole is blown in the side of the plane, a few passengers get sucked out. The bomb is about to explode, the villains are parachuting out.

Page 105: Hero kills last hijacker/thief, tosses out bomb (it explodes outside the plane), the plane lands safely, the end.

These are just the twists, *not* the action scenes. There is an action scene about every ten pages. There are emotional scenes, too (yes – in an action screenplay). You may notice that it's not *exactly* every fifteen pages and the midpoint isn't *exactly* in the middle – numbers don't matter. What matters is that your screenplay is exciting and unpredictable and more exciting with every page. When the stakes go up every 15 pages, the script continues to "evolve", constantly changing audiences expectations. Escalating the conflict so that there are *six* exciting plot escalations in Act Two. Keeping the viewer on the edge of their seat. Story is conflict. Pacing is conflict happening on a regular basis. Make sure you have enough things happening, enough conflict, for the running time of your film. Physical conflicts. Emotional conflicts. In an action screenplay there will be action scenes, in a thriller screenplay there will be suspense scenes, in a comedy screenplay the conflict produces humor, in a romantic comedy the conflict keeps the couple apart. The three act structure is all about conflict.

Screenwriter and director Billy Wilder was a complete slacker – he was only nominated for Best Screenplay Oscar eight times and only won six Oscars – said this about the three act structure *years* before Syd Field wrote his book:

Act 1: You get your cat up a tree.
Act 2: You throw rocks at him.
Act 3: You get him down from the tree.

And here are Ten Screenwriting Tips from Billy Wilder:

1) The audience is fickle.
2) Grab 'em by the throat and never let go.
3) Develop a clean line of action for your leading character.
4) Know where you're going.
5) The more subtle and elegant you are in hiding your plot points, the better you are as a writer.
6) If you have a problem with the third act, the real problem is in the first act.
7) A tip from Lubitsch: Let the audience add up two plus two. They'll love you forever.
8) In doing voice-overs, be careful not to describe what the audience already sees. Add to what they're seeing.
9) The event that occurs at the second act curtain triggers the end of the movie.
10) The third act must build, build, build in tempo and action until the last event, and then – that's it.

Don't hang around.

In an action screenplay, Act One sets up the conflict, Act Two is the Hero on the run (physically or emotionally) as the conflict escalates, and Act Three is when the Hero turns and fights. You want to keep the action and story speeding relentlessly toward the ending like a freight train! Then the Hero and Villain face off and BANG! BANG! BANG! The Villain is killed and the Hero and Love Interest can walk off into the sunset together. Okay, but how do you *plot* that?

PLOTTING MURDER

Screenwriting books usually talk about story, structure, characters and all kinds of other elements; but the actual plotting of a story seems to be absent in every book I've ever read.

Yet, in many scripts that I have read the big problem is often the plotting - the scenes are in the wrong order, the story doesn't make sense, none of the pieces add up to a whole, or (most commonly) the story is based upon a bunch of crazy coincidences and is completely unbelievable and unrealistic. With today's films focusing on concept and character, plotting has become a lost art. Some of the worst development notes I've ever received were from folks who had no idea how plotting works. So now that we have our concept and character and understand the basics of structure, let's take a look at plot.

WHAT IS PLOT?

Plot is what happens. Many people confuse plot with story, and that often leads to story problems. Plot is one element of story. When people tell me about a movie, they usually relate the plot - they tell me what happened. They might mention the characters or the emotional elements, but mostly they take me step by step through the events of the story as they happened. Plotting is how one scene inevitably connects to the next scene, how all of the parts create the story. The scenes come in a logical order. The foot bone connects to the ankle bone; the ankle bone connects to the leg bone; the leg bone connects to the knee bone; the knee bone connects to the thigh bone, etc. When you are building your script's skeleton (structure), it's critical that each part connects to the next part logically. If your leg bone connects to your elbow bone, you're in a heap-o-trouble!

Plotting is the ordering of scenes. It's that simple and that complicated.

A couple of years ago, I was up for a rewrite job on a caper script for a producer with an MGM deal. He knew there was something wrong with the script but didn't know what. So, here's the story:

A professional con man is approached by his best friend since childhood. These guys have known each other for over 20 years. The friend meets a guy who will pay handsomely for a painting that hangs in an art museum. If they can steal the painting, they'll be rich. Only problem is, neither one knows how to do it. So our con man hero goes searching for a professional thief. He talks to a bunch of qualified thieves, eventually finding a beautiful cat burglar who is interested in the scheme. Of course, our con man hero falls in love with her. It's a movie, after all. So the con man and the cat burglar fly off to the exotic foreign land where the museum with the painting is... because it's a movie. In real life the painting might be in New Jersey. In a movie it's someplace exotic. Of course, they end up sharing a hotel room. The next day they go to the museum, the con man convinces the museum curator that they are wealthy, and the curator gives them a private tour. Now, during the private tour the con man manages to get the museum curator to point out every single alarm device in the museum and spill the beans about an upcoming day when all of the security cameras will be shut down for maintenance. I found that a little hard to believe... bad plotting. But, it gets worse.

So, our con man hero and the cat burglar babe break into the museum on security camera maintenance day and steal the painting. They get in and out without leaving a trace - a perfect robbery. They get back to the hotel where the hero's childhood friend is waiting for them... with a gun! Seems the hero's oldest friend has decided to suddenly double-cross him. But wait, there's more! The cat burglar babe is the friend's lover. They've been an item secretly for several years. And the backstabbing pair is stealing the painting for... the museum curator! That's why he went out of his way to tell them about the security devices and alarms. He actually turned off the security cameras and a couple of high-tech alarms he didn't think the pair would be able to get past on their own.

Okay, do you see the problems? Of all the cat burglars in all of the world, how did our con man hero happen to pick the one who was sleeping with his childhood friend? If the friend knew the cat burglar, why did he need the con man? The con man doesn't know how to break into the museum! If the museum curator was behind it the whole time, why did he need anyone? Why not just switch off the alarms and take the painting home with him? Okay, if he needed someone to blame, he could just drop evidence on the museum floor after he has the painting. The plot completely falls apart!

ONION PLOTTING

Though all of the incidents in that script made sense as they happened, by the time we went through all of those “clever” plot twists, the story made no sense. That’s because a story has layers, like an onion. As we peel back the layers, we get closer and closer to the truth underneath. As writers we have to know what’s below the surface. That’s why we outline - so we know what happens on every level of the script, not just the surface. We'll look at outlines in the next chapter, but it's always best to plot your script from the inside out. If the museum curator was behind the theft on page 97, he was behind it on page 10... and didn’t need the childhood friend, the con man or the cat burglar babe.

Stories are about revealing information, and that means you have to know what the underlying truth is and build your story from there. In a way you’re going to plot your story several times: once when you create the core story, and once for each level where information is revealed until you come to the surface of the story. Your surface plotting has to make sense and hang together as much as every layer beneath it. Every time we pull back a layer, the story must still make sense. The plotting must still hold up. If you’re making up the story as you go along, either you end up with a story that’s all surface where nothing is revealed or you run the risk of revealing things that just don’t make any sense.

It’s important to know every level of the story when you are writing the screenplay. In the movie "Ghost", on the surface of the story Sam (Patrick Swayze) has a girlfriend named Molly (Demi Moore) and a best friend named Carl (Tony Goldwyn). One night Sam is shot by a mugger and dies... becoming a ghost. But when we peel back layers, we discover Sam’s killer has a key to his apartment... and Sam’s killer was paid by somebody to steal something from Sam... and Sam’s killer is now coming after Molly... and the guy who paid Sam’s killer is... Carl! What’s more, Carl has been using the bank where they work to launder money. That scene a couple of minutes into the film where Carl asks Sam for his secret computer code? - part of the money-laundering scheme!

When Bruce Joel Rubin wrote that scene, he probably already knew what was lurking in all of those layers down at the core of the story. He had to create the core and then build layer after logical layer until he came to the surface. Though these things might happen in rewrite if you don't outline, the problem – just like in time travel – when you change some element in the past of your script you end up changing everything else... and that means a ton of rewriting and then more rewriting and then more rewriting – and we are talking major “everything must go” rewrites! The layers all have to make sense, and each layer is what creates the next layer. Early in the film when Sam thinks it’s just the mugger breaking in to loot his apartment, that makes sense. Later in the film when Sam discovers Carl is behind it all, that also makes perfect sense. Every layer makes sense.

Plotting works layer by layer. You have to know what’s true at the core and build from there. Starting at the surface usually results in a script that doesn’t make any sense by the time you get to the end. That’s why outlines are a good idea.

TENNIS PLOTTING

Another way to make sure your plotting works is to think of your story as a game of tennis. The ball doesn't just hop over the net on its own... somebody has to hit it - same thing with a story. Things don't just happen on their own. They happen because someone causes them to happen. After that, another character reacts to that event, and that reaction knocks the ball back over the net so that the other player must react to it. The ball isn't going back and forth on its own. Characters are hitting it!

Usually, the antagonist serves. He creates the problem that the protagonist must solve. In Graham Yost's "Speed", Howard (Dennis Hopper) rigs explosives to the cables of an elevator. He blows up the elevator cables, sending a car full of people into free fall... until the emergency brakes catch them... but Howard has explosives attached to the brakes, too; and he demands $3 million or he'll send the elevator car full of passengers crashing to the basement. That's his serve.

Jack (Keanu Reeves) and the SWAT team show up to prevent the elevator car from falling. The ball is in their court, and they have to hit it back. Jack and Harry (Jeff Daniels) volunteer to check the explosives on the elevator. They discover it's a very professional job - no way to disarm the bomb... but Jack has an idea. He takes the cable from a window-washer platform and attaches it to the elevator... the ball has been knocked back into Howard's court.

Howard hears them do this and blows the elevator brakes. The elevator falls... knocking the ball back into Jack's court.

But the elevator is stopped by the window-washer cable. Jack and Harry save the passengers. They realize that Howard blew the brakes in response to their attaching the window-washer cable... which means he's in the building. Jack and Harry figure out he's in the freight elevator and climb down to attack - knocking the ball back to Howard's side of the net.

Howard captures Harry, reveals that he has explosives strapped on his body and a pressure-release trigger in his hand. He will explode himself, Harry and the whole building unless Jack drops his gun and allows Howard to escape - knocking the ball back to Jack.

Jack shoots Harry in the legs making him a hostage that Howard must carry. How can Howard escape while carrying a guy? That knocks the ball back into Howard's court. Howard lets go of Harry and escapes... only to explode in the building's garage.

You might think that Jack has won this round, but the explosion is Howard's return volley. He has faked his own death in order to get away.

Now, if we were to look at the motivation for Howard's elevator plan, we'd find out that he was a 30-year veteran of the Atlanta PD bomb squad who was injured in an explosion and has been denied his pension. He wants $3 million: $100,000 for every year he spent on the police force... every year he wasted in service of a police force that didn't appreciate him. "I got a medal and a pink slip." So Howard's "serve" is motivated. That serve is in reaction to another action. We could trace back the actions and reactions behind being denied his money if we wanted - there would be a reason. Everything has a reason - there is no coincidence in this story.

Howard still needs his pension, and now he's mad at Jack for screwing up his plan. He spent two years setting up that job and wants the money due him. He sees Jack getting a medal on the news and decides to hit the ball back into Jack's court...

By planting a bomb on bus #2525 that will explode if the bus goes below 50 mph... he calls Jack to tell him about it. Again, this is a logical reaction to Jack's foiling the elevator plan. He not only wants his money, but he also wants revenge against Jack for foiling his elevator plan. The ball is back in Jack's court. Jack hops on the

bus to save the passengers and foil Howard's new bus plan.

On the bus there are many times where they hit the ball back and forth to each other. Jack gets the injured driver off the bus, and a passenger tries to get off at the same time... so Howard sets off an explosive charge near the doors and kills the passenger. Howard's bomb will explode if the bus goes below 50 mph, and rush-hour traffic threatens to slow them down so Jack takes the bus off the freeway and onto the L.A. Airport runway where there is no traffic. Howard has a timer (attached to his gold watch) that will blow up the bus even if it continues circling the runway at 50 mph - ball back in Jack's court. Howard seems to know exactly what is going on in the bus. Jack searches and discovers the hidden cameras on the bus. Jack has a video loop made of the passengers on the bus to fool Howard so that he can offload the passengers - ball back in Howard's court. Back and forth - each one knocks the ball back to the other. Each event is in reaction to the one that comes before it. Nothing happens by coincidence. It's all a result of cause and effect.

Here's where plotting often breaks down in bad scripts - after the initial "serve" the protagonist or antagonist quit playing for a while, and the ball bounces back and forth on its own. That's impossible, and we know it. Or, the ball is hit to some other player on some other court; and even if the ball is hit back to our court and our protagonist, it isn't really part of the game, is it? When something (good or bad) happens without reason, it seems impossible. It's that ball bouncing back on its own. Or, the protagonist swings his racquet and misses, but the ball hits a bird flying over the court and goes back to the antagonist's side of the net. That just doesn't seem within the rules!

We want the ball to bounce back and forth between the antagonist and protagonist – the Hero and Villain - each reacting to what the other has done.

If the antagonist has a gun to the protagonist's head and suddenly the police show up to save the day, that's not real. Nothing has caused the police to show up. If the protagonist tells the police that the antagonist will soon put a gun to his head, that's unreal - how can the protagonist know exactly what the antagonist will do? Everything that happens has to be logically motivated. Everything is a reaction to some action that happened previously. You need to be able to trace back the reactions to actions and those actions need to be logical... something the audience might do if they were the character. Howard may be a mad bomber, but he's got a logical reason for everything he does. He wants the money he thinks he deserves and will blow stuff up until he gets it. There are reasons behind his actions. Nothing is a coincidence.

MacGUFFINS

The MacGuffin is a physical device that drives the story - the thing that everyone is after, and screenplays using this type of plot device are some form of quest, or maybe a game of hot potato or keep away. The Maltese Falcon is probably the most famous one, but the Lost Ark is also a good example. The term comes from Alfred Hitchcock who once defined a MacGuffin as a device for capturing the indigenous lions in the Scottish Highland... but there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands... hence, no such thing as a MacGuffin! Except, there's a MacGuffin in almost every Hitchcock movie.

“North By Northwest” has two MacGuffins - the little pre-Columbian statue that villain Van Damm is determined to buy at the auction (because it is filled with top secret microfilm) and the CIA spy George Kaplan who everyone has confused protagonist Roger Thornhill for. So we have a double MacGuffin – Thornhill must find Kaplan, and Kaplan is chasing Van Damm to get the pre-Columbian statue and microfilm.

The MacGuffin drives the story - where would “The Maltese Falcon” be without The Maltese Falcon? It is the most important element in the story... but Hitchcock noted that even though it drives the story, what it is doesn’t matter very much. In “North By Northwest” we have that pre-Columbian statue, and inside is a roll of microfilm. Van Damm is smuggling this microfilm out of the USA - and delivering it to the Soviets. The CIA must stop him and recover that microfilm and Thornhill ends up being the guy in the middle. So the fate of the free world rests on who ends up with the statue and the microfilm that is inside it by the end of the movie. The film is all about that microfilm! It’s what Van Damm has been up to since the very first frame and why he has been trying to kill George Kaplan... the only man who can get Thornhill off the hook. So the microfilm is *really* why they are trying to kill Thornhill.

What is on the microfilm? It doesn’t really matter. What matters is that we will lose the Cold War if Van Damm delivers the microfilm to the enemy. And that’s why the MacGuffin is both the most important element in the story (it drives the story, and who ends up with it is what the story is *about*), but also unimportant (as long as we know people will kill for it, who cares what it really is?). The scene where the Professor tells Thornhill what's on the microfilm takes place on the tarmac of an airport (Northwest Airlines) and you can’t hear a thing that is said because a plane is taking off.

CIA spy George Kaplan, the MacGuffin that Thornhill is chasing? Doesn't exist. He's a decoy set up by the CIA to keep suspicion away from their real agent who is in deep cover.

Rare coins, rare books, murder weapons, plans to the Death Star, the letters of transit in “Casablanca”, the identity of Rosebud in ”Citizen Kane”, the ring in “Lord Of The Rings” and all kinds of things that both good guys and bad guys must posses which propels the plot forward are MacGuffins. In Hitchcock's “The Lady Vanishes” the MacGuffin is a *tune* that is really a code. In “The 39 Steps” it's a formula that Mr. Memory has memorized. The more interesting and unusual your MacGuffin the better!

I think you can still have the MacGuffin be the thing that drives the story and yet not really care what’s on the microfilm, but we live in a post CSI world where people like to know the details. Today, they would want to know what’s on that microfilm. The cool thing about a MacGuffin is that it makes a dandy high concept substitute. If the *MacGuffin* is some high concept device, then you can have a standard non-high con action movie. “Raiders Of The Lost Ark” is a non-high concept action-adventure story... but the Ark can level mountains, and whoever controls it will win the war. Is that *lightning* shooting out of the Ark?

So, these days, I would make the MacGuffin something exciting and cool rather than just a plot device - because it adds production value. I have an unpublished novel from decades ago about good guy spies and bad guy spies all trying to get their hands on this lost microfilm. Could have been anything, but I decided it was the plans for the “freon bomb” that flash freezes anything in a 5 mile radius. The opening chapter had a test on a tropical island which froze chimpanzees so that they shattered when touched. That raised the stakes and made the story more interesting than “just microfilm”. One of the great things about making the MacGuffin

something specific is that you can create some great high concept element that will raise the stakes and elevate the excitement of your screenplay. If everyone is after something, it's a good idea to make it valuable.

Whether you think of your story like a game of tennis or as an onion or as a quest for some MacGuffin, you need to make sure that your plotting works. That means planning your story from the inside out, knowing every layer and every level of truth and making sure that each makes sense. The greatest characters and the most clever dialogue in the world won't save a story that's full of coincidence or doesn't add up by the time the film is over. Plotting an action screenplay may be difficult, but it doesn't have to be murder... though many action screenplays may contain a murder or two. Now that we know how structure and plot work, how do we put that all together into a story? Well, our next step is to come up with an outline that takes pacing into account.

TIMELINING

Action film producer Joel Silver says: "You've got to have a 'whammo' every ten minutes; an explosion, a car chase, a fight scene, to keep the audience interested." Silver believes this is the most important thing in action film, and he's probably right.

Silver has made the most successful action films ever – from “48 Hours” to “Commando” to “Predator” to “Die Hard” to “Road House” to “Lethal Weapon” to “Executive Decision” to “The Matrix” to the new “Sherlock Holmes” movies – and I had to leave out most of his hit action films for space! Let's just say, the dude knows what he's talking about.

This may seem like some crazy Hollywood concept, but it's just basic *pacing* - a word that has been around since the 14th century. Pacing and tempo are basic elements of music and dramatic works, and when I wrote an article on pacing for Script Magazine a few years ago I decided to use romantic comedies as examples to show that a steady pace is important in all genres. Joel Silver's “every ten pages whammo” was true for all of the popular rom-coms that I timed for the article. According to Merriam-Webster pacing is “the rate of movement; especially : an established rate of locomotion”. Pacing and Timing are critical to all genres, but especially action films. Long slow spots and an abundance of static talk scenes will sink your script before it ever gets made. Action scripts contain action scenes and you've got to keep those car chases and shoot outs coming, or the audience will get up and leave.

Our job as screenwriters is to rupture bladders.

The audience has just spent $7 on a king sized Coca-Cola with free refills, which is almost empty about halfway through the film (they started drinking it while watching all of those ads before the movie). Now they're looking for that dead spot in the story so that they can run to the bathroom. That part of the film where nothing interesting is happening and doesn't seem likely to happen for a couple of minutes. Just long enough to race to the restroom and race back. Our job is to make sure there are no dead spots, no slow spots, no time to race to the restroom... so that there is at least one messy bladder explosion at every showing of our film.

The pacing of your script is critical. We have all seen movies that had those dull sections where nothing seemed to be happening, and we've all seen movies that just dragged along. Though a compelling story might make a slow paced film tolerable, it's still a slow paced film. Pacing is one of the most important elements of a screenplay, yet you seldom see it mentioned in screenwriting books or screenwriting classes. What *is* pacing?

Pacing is the frequency of exciting events in your screenplay (or in the movie). The more exciting events, the faster paced your screenplay. The fewer exciting events, the slower paced your screenplay. Pretty simple.

For the most part, the exciting events will be what I call the "genre juice" - those juicy genre scenes that people buy tickets to see. Those scenes that make it into the trailer. In a comedy, those are the comedy set pieces. In action they are the action scenes. In a thriller they are the suspense scenes. Though we all want great characters and a great story, the reason why we go to a comedy film is to laugh - so the funny scenes are critical. You need enough funny scenes in a comedy so that those folks who bought that $7 soft drink can't make a dash for the restroom because they don't want to miss all of those funny things that they know are coming, because the film so far has been filled with funny scenes. We pay to see a comedy film because it's funny - so the script better bring that funny and keep us laughing. If you have a comedy script with five funny scenes out of 50-60 scenes, that's not very funny. Nothing to keep you from visiting the bathroom or the candy counter or even playing that game on your cellphone.

TACKED ON PACING

There are two ways to insure that your script is well paced:

1) Include the pacing in your outline/plan so that it becomes part of the structure.
2) Edit and rewrite your script once it is finished to improve pacing.

If you include the pacing in your outline, you have "built in pacing", if you try to create pacing after the fact you may end up with contrived pacing... plus a whole lotta rewriting! I have seen many action films where it seems like someone just threw in a gratuitous car chase because the pace was lagging. That's usually what happens when pacing is an after-thought the scenes stuck-in during rewrites stick-out like a sore thumb! That is why I prefer to build my action scenes (or whatever the "genre juice" is) into the outline, so that they are part of the story itself. The juice scenes become part of the story's skeleton, not something I stick on in a rewrite that wasn't part of the original story.

It also helps to think about the “juice scenes” when you are looking for story ideas and thinking about characters. Though a car chase is an exciting scene that may be in the trailer and may get the audience to pay for the ticket and may keep them from making that mad dash to the restroom, it is also a *character scene* and a *story scene*. Your protagonist is in trouble and must make life or death situations in a car chase, so think of the “juice scenes” as character scenes as well. They aren't just something to keep the story exciting, they are also scenes of conflict that will expose character. That's another reason why those pasted on action scenes (or comedy scenes or romance scenes or suspense scenes) do not work - they are not part of the protagonist's emotional journey and not part of the story. You want to build the “juice scenes” into your story so that the hysterical comedy set piece is a required part of the character's story and can not be removed. Any scene that *can* be removed, *should* be removed... so any scene you can just tack onto your script is a scene that doesn't belong in your script. You want to make sure that all of those exciting "juice scenes" are integral to the story.

HEART BEAT

Pacing is the heart beat of your screenplay - it's what keeps your story alive and moving. Pacing has nothing to do with the depth of your characters, the amount we care about them, or the emotional resonance of your story. All of those things are important, but have nothing to do with pacing. You can have the greatest characters in the greatest story in the world, but without a regular heart beat it will die on the page. Slow paced scripts about fascinating characters are still slow paced - but we may stick around longer to see what happens to them.

Pacing is the frequency of exciting events (heart beats) in your story as well as the spacing of those events. You want to have enough heart beats to keep yourself alive, and you want those heart beats to come on a fairly regular basis. Irregular heart rhythms are NOT a good thing. Not enough heart beats is also NOT a good thing. You don't want all of your heart beats to come at once, then go 30 minutes without any heart beat... if one extreme didn't kill your story, the other extreme is sure to.

Is there a rhythm to the placement of the scenes (or are there long dead spots where nothing exciting happens)? Does the action or suspense or humor snowball and intensify? If your action screenplay becomes *less* exciting as it progresses, you're in a heap-o-trouble. Pacing should intensify, not grow limp. Remember, our job is to rupture bladders. The more the audience has to go to the bathroom, the more we have to do to keep them in their seats.

TIMELINING

How can you make sure you have a “whammo” or heartbeat within every ten minutes of your film? You build the pacing into the screenplay through a technique I call "Timelining". It's basically a modified beat sheet designed to take pacing into account.

Some people use 3x5 cards to outline their scripts, but you have no idea how many minutes/pages each card represents. So I use a “Timeline” - a 'beat sheet', which lists critical scenes, except it's broken down into five minute/page increments. The average script is a page per minute of film, and even though that is just an estimate it is a good enough guideline for use in an outline. It may not end up perfect, but it keeps us in the right range. If you use 3x5 cards or some other form of outline, that's fine – but make pacing a consideration. If you want to try “timelines”, here is how that method works:

Start with a standard piece of eight and a half by eleven lined paper. On the top of the page, write the title of your script. You can just write "Title:" for now. Neatly number by fives, each line on the left hand side. Start with 5, end with 110. But between 30 and 35 skip a line, and do the same between 80 and 85. In those spaces, write "end Act 1" and "end Act 2" and draw a little box around them. Now CIRCLE numbers 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 95, 100, and 105. Those are your 'whammos'. Put a little star next to 55. That's your midpoint, and will probably be an emotional turning point for your lead character.

Now you can look at the *heart beat* of your script without turning pages or trying to figure out how much time a 3x5 symbolizes. You know that each line is 5 minutes of screen time and 5 pages of script. You know that within every ten minutes something exciting is going to happen until Act 3, when your heart beat increases (as it does when you get more excited) and your screenplay has more script action. You know that this film will mean at least one messy bladder explosion in every cinema.

Now all you have to do is fill in the blanks...

BRAINSTORMING

Grab a note pad and write "menu" at the top. Now number the lines from one to five on the left hand side and start brain storming scene ideas for your script. When you get five of them, keep numbering as you go. Write down character scenes, emotional scenes, plot scenes, romance scenes, and action scenes.

Don't censor yourself. If you come up with an idea, write it down. This is brainstorming – it's not about whether the idea is “good” or not, it's a volume business! If you get 27 ideas, flip to a new page and come up with some more. If you get 25 ideas, number the next line 26... You'd be surprised how that blank line will jog another idea from your mind. You want to come up with as many ideas as you can!

Don't begin numbering up to 27, because you'll probably choke up. How can anyone come up with 27 ideas? It's impossible. But anyone can come up with one idea at a time... and they add up.

Remember that you'll need at least a dozen action scenes. Try to come up with more, so you can choose the best. Here's where you try to come up with those "action scenes you'd like to see". A *rooftop* car chase? Write it down! A “high noon” style shoot out in mid air between two ejected fighter pilots? Write it down! A fist fight on the roof of a speeding truck? Write it down! You'll need big action scenes and little action scenes. That way you can "build" your script to bigger and bigger climaxes. Let your imagination run wild – you want to try to find the action scenes we have never seen before. The more ideas you have, the more you can choose from. You should always end up with a numbered empty line at the end of your menu.

Once you have your “menu” of ideas, it's time to pare them down into the best scenes. Try to find the theme or nexus which ties your action scenes to your plot and character scenes. You may come up with a kick-ass motorcycle chase, but it might not fit in with the rest of the story... so it's outta there! We don't want to use some action scene just because it's “cool”, we want it to be part of the story.

Once you have your best ideas, it's time to decide where to put them on your time line. It's best to start with your plot scenes, then add the character and emotion scenes, and save the action scenes for last. This way, the action serves your plot and character, not the other way around.

The average screenplay has about 60 scenes, so your average scene is going to be around 2 pages. Hey, some may be shorter than that, some may be longer than that- it's just an average. But that means every line on your time line will probably have 2 or 3 scenes. You may end up with some extended action scenes – the car chase in “Bullitt” is *ten* minutes long! One five minute segment where the hit men chase Bullitt through San Francisco's hilly streets. Then Bullitt turns the tables on them, and chases the hit men for five minutes on country roads... Until the hit men run into a gas station. BLAAMM! The ten minute car chase ends with a bang. That scene is 7.5 pages in the screenplay, by the way. Though that scene is longer that 2 or 3 pages, it's also the big centerpiece action scene for the film, and I have never heard anyone complain that it was too long. The only real rule about scene length is that it can't overstay its welcome – if you have a 5 page *dialogue* scene and it is tense and riveting, that's all that matters. But a 5 page scene is a freak, so make sure the scene really does work at that length and can not be improved by trimming it down.

When you fill in your action scenes, remember that variety is the spice of life. Don't put two car chases or two shootouts right next to each other. In fact, car chases probably need to be separated by at least 30 minutes, unless you're doing a sequel to Walter Hill's "The Driver" or a “Transporter” sequel. You don't want to be repetitious. One exciting shoot out after another can get boring! The key to a great action script is a balanced diet. Some fight scenes, some car chases, some shoot outs, some adventure oriented scenes (mountain climbing?)... A little of everything and not too much of one thing all at once.

Try to *build* the action scenes from small to large. If you start with the end of the world, you have no place to go! Try to make each action scene either bigger than the one before it or more personal. Have you seen "To Live And Die In L.A."? It has this killer car chase in the middle of the film... which is followed by a bunch of

smaller action scenes which seem more suited to Act One than Act Three. Be careful not to use an "Act One Action Scene" in Act Three, or an "Act Three Action Scene" in Act One. Save the best for last, if you can. You don't want the audience to be disappointed by the next action scene, and the best way to do that is to make each action scene *better* than the last. This is where last chapter's plotting lessons come into play – you want your story to grow organically from the concept, and use the outline as your first creative step. The charcoal sketch an artist makes before they break out the oils and brushes.

Another important element to consider in your timeline is how the action scenes relate to your protagonist. You want the action in Act Three to be *more personal* than the action in Act One. "Lethal Weapon" is a great example. In Act One, the action scenes are more plot related – deal with the death of his friend's daughter. But in Act Two the bad guys begin shooting people Danny Glover knows, and by Act Three, they have kidnapped his daughter. Each action scene should draw the protagonist *deeper* into the action until the protagonist's life is on the line.

ONLY A MODEL

Timelines are also a valuable tool in studying existing films. It's important to study films and see how and why they work, in order to learn how to improve our scripts. So I suggest timelining some existing films to use as 'models'. Often comparing similar films to see what they have in common and what elements are different. I think studying films is an eye opener – I had no idea how many scenes were in a film and how short those scenes were until I began watching films and timing them out.

Though when I first began timing films it was with a watch and flashlight in a dark cinema, the easiest method now is just dropping a DVD or BluRay into the machine and writing down the time on the monitor. I usually note the amount of time the credit sequence takes and subtract that from the times when I'm finished. I make a “beat sheet” listing all of the plot, character, and action beats in a film... but I also list the time when these events occur. I usually write when a scene ends: Car chase on street/23 (minutes into the film). Now adapt your beat sheet onto a timeline, by placing everything within 5 minute increments.

One of the things you'll probably notice is a phenomenon I call "Chapterizing". Strangely enough, things will often actually happen within five minute blocks. For instance, in Richard Price's "Sea Of Love", 35 minutes into the film Al Pacino and John Goodman begin setting up dates with potential suspects. During the five minute segment from 35 - 40 minutes, they set up the dates, go to the restaurant and meet date #1, date #2, and date #3. Exactly 40 minutes into the film, Pacino meets date #4... Ellen Barkin. She is the lead suspect *and* Pacino's romantic interest in the film.

That five minute "chapter" of "Sea Of Love" covers setting up the dates and meeting 3 suspects who we *know* are not the killer. The next five minute "chapter" gives us 2 minutes of Al and Ellen, and 3 minutes of tracking a grocery delivery boy who becomes a prime suspect.

Exactly 45 minutes into the film, Al bumps into Ellen by accident, and they decide to go on a date. That 5 minute block concerns the things leading up to the date, and the date itself. 50 minutes into the film, the date 'ends' with Al and Ellen making love.

I don't know why films tend to "chapter out" like this into 5 minute segments. Maybe that's the way they were outlined, maybe that's the way they were edited. But it's a weird phenomena you can use to your advantage, by trying to find the "chapter title" of each five minute block. "Al and Ellen go on a date". "Al tries to propose marriage and blows it". This will help you focus on what is the central idea of each sequence. Instead of aimless scenes which don't seem to build anywhere, we know from the time they set up the dates that they will find a suspect. Each event in the five minute segment takes them CLOSER and CLOSER to finding that suspect. The sequence ends when they've found her. If it helps you to think of your story in 5 page sequences, go for it! If that gets in your way, don't do it – there are no rules! It's all about finding the methods which create the best results.

I suggest making timeline models of your favorite action films, to give you an example of how they're paced. You may find certain patterns in these timelines. For instance, there tend to be two basic ways that buddy cop films work: "Red Heat" and "48 Hours" are almost identical when broken down. Sometimes finding patterns is a great method to discover what normally works in a subgenre, other times it's a great way to find the cliches so that you can avoid them or subvert them. Knowing how a genre or subgenre works is a great tool to have in your toolbox.

By timelining existing films, you will get a feel for what makes them work. Once that pacing becomes part of your subconscious, you can throw away your timelines and abstracts and write from your heart. Think of timelines as bicycle training wheels: for a while you need them just to keep balance, but soon you've learned to balance on your own and no longer need them. After a while, you'll be able to say "This needs a whammo", and write in the scene. Until then, using a timeline is a valuable tool in keeping the pacing of your action scripts tight...

And exploding a few bladders while you're at it.

ORGANIC ACTION

There are four ways you can write a screenplay - from the inside out, from the outside in, only the outside and only the inside. And that is the order of preference. The best method is to start with character and then find the high concept external conflict that will force the character to deal with their emotional conflict. You can also begin with your high concept and find the character with the emotional conflict that will be best explored by the physical conflict. Not good at all is a script that is only external conflict with no character and no drama. Worse is a screenplay that is only emotional conflict and no external conflict – we can't really see emotional conflict without some external conflict to dramatize it, so that ends up a dull movie that doesn't explore character at all... unless there are big steaming piles of exposition telling us what the character is feeling.

Wait... did you say *emotional conflict*? Aren't we talking about action movies?

Film is a dramatic medium, and as I've said a million times – car chases don't buy movie tickets, people do... so make sure your screenplay is about the people. Emotional conflicts are what makes our characters come alive and they help the audience identify with the protagonist. If your protagonist doesn't have emotional problems, there is no way for us to see their emotions... and they may come off like a robot. Remember, in “Terminator 2” even robot Ah-nuld has emotions. He knows why humans cry. We need both physical conflict (car chases, fist fights, explosions) *and* emotional conflict... and they need to be connected.

In my 2 day class I have a technique called “The Thematic” that shows you how to find interesting characters and scenes and dialogue and just about everything else based on the theme – the point of your story or element of the human condition that your screenplay is exploring... yes, we are still talking about action movies. My theory is that everything in your screenplay is there to explore the theme – so it is all connected. One of the ways to find your theme is through the protagonist's emotional conflict.

Just making a detective an alcoholic is meaningless (and cliché) unless the case sends him into bar after bar where temptation awaits. The emotional conflict needs to be connected to the physical conflict – not two separate stories. You don't want to graft some emotional problem on from the outside – if you begin with concept or external conflict you want to really dig in and find the emotional conflict that is already part of the story.

WHAT IS STORY?

My definition of story: A story is when a character is forced to solve an emotional problem (why we care) in order to solve an external problem (the conflict we see - cool idea plus explosions) in order to prevent a catastrophic event from occurring (stakes)... often by a specific deadline.

Character and concept are connected, as is everything else in the screenplay – the subplots and the scenes and the locations and the dialogue. All of the pieces are part of one story, and that is what I call “organic screenwriting”. It's all grown from a story seed – where the emotional conflict and external conflict are connected. Nothing is grafted on from the outside, nothing is just some random scene or idea glued onto the story just because it sounds cool. If you have a scene that is *only* character or *only* action, it's best to find a better scene that is both character *and* action. We've all seen movies where it seems like three assistants with three different screenplays collided on the way to the copy machine, and each picked up 110 random pages and then someone filmed it. We don't want our screenplays to be like that. We want them to *make sense*.

This “making sense” thing is not a new idea. About 2,400 years ago Aristotle came up with the Three Greek Unities: time, location, event (action). Though time and location we can play around with in film, the Unity Of Event (action) is still important – a story is about *one* thing happening. Not a bunch of different things that happen to a single character, but one big event that happens to your protagonist. Protagonist with a problem. Who is your protagonist and what is their problem? One of the odd issues that pops up in some screenplays is the protagonist is some sideline character who isn't really involved in the problem... and the screenplay seems blah even if there are lots of explosions. You don't want to use some peripheral character as your lead, or force some lead into a story that doesn't have anything to do with them. You need to create the right lead for the story or the right story for the lead. It all has to be part of the plan!

ORGANIC EXAMPLE

In Werb and Colleary's script for “Face/Off” the central conflict (where the external conflict and emotional conflict intersect) is FBI Agent Sean Archer's relentless pursuit of the man who killed his son... at the expense of the rest of his family.

Family is at the core of the theme, and most of the action scenes have a family-based component in them, whether it's Archer rescuing his daughter from the Villain, or Archer rescuing the Villain's son in the middle of a massive shoot out, or the henchman taking a bullet so that his sister (Gina Gershon) can live. Every character and most of the scenes in the film reflect Archer's central conflict concerning family... and job vs. family specifically. *All* of the characters are defined by decisions they must make between job and family.

The *External Conflict* is that villain Castor Troy has hidden a bomb somewhere in Los Angeles and Archer must “become” Troy (through a face transplant – sci fi when this film was made) in order to fool Troy's brother Pollux into telling him the bomb's location before it explodes. The conflict escalates when Troy escapes and “becomes” Archer and takes over his life, and the investigation. Where Archer sacrifices family for career, Troy is a family man who is devoted to his brother and only works when he's having fun. These two have opposite priorities – and through the shoot outs and speedboat chases, the film will explore issues of work vs. family. That is what the story is about underneath its skin.

The *Emotional Conflict* meets the External Conflict when Troy escapes and takes over Archer's life... and becomes a better husband and father than Archer has been since his son was killed!

Instead of going to his wife and daughter for help, Archer continues his relentless pursuit of Troy. Seeking out the terrorist's henchman (Nick Cassavettes) and girlfriend in an attempt to destroy Troy. Continuing his mistake of thinking destroying the man who killed his son will bring his family together. The more Archer ignores his Emotional Conflict through denial, the bigger the External Conflict becomes. Troy takes over his family and takes over his job and sends Archer on the run – the two men have switched places. Archer must deal with his family problems in order to regain his identity and bring down the terrorist. He must resolve his Emotional Conflict in order to resolve the External (plot) Conflict. Become himself inside before he can regain his identity outside.

The film ends with Archer and his family back together raising Troy's son as a surrogate for the son he lost.

THROUGHLINES & YOU

Some of you may have seen “Face/Off” and are wondering what the fistfight on the out of control speedboat at the end had to do with the bomb Castor Troy planted somewhere in Los Angeles... Hey, aren't these just a bunch of unrelated action scenes stuck together to make a film? I'm so glad you asked that! Whenever you come across some film that seems to have one or two plots, or maybe a protagonist who changes their goal, it's always a good thing to take a step back to see if there is a larger goal that includes both of the smaller goals.

In “Face/Off” the story is not about Sean Archer trying to find the bomb in Los Angeles, it is about Sean Archer trying to get revenge against Castor Troy for killing his son. The opening scene is Troy trying to kill Archer and accidentally killing his son by mistake. That sets up the central conflict – it is what makes Archer a broken man *and* hell bent on revenge. The story is not about the bomb, it's about Archer trying to avenge his son – which ends in that face off on the out of control speedboat. The other conflict elements, be they bombs or kidnapped daughters, all flow from that central conflict. They are *sub-conflicts* that are directly connected to the main conflict. Nothing grafted on from the outside, but grown from the central conflict seed.

A “throughline” is the spine of your story – the thing that connects all of the story elements. When you get into a development meeting on your screenplay, you will hear that word *a lot* - and the reason why are all of those movies that really are just a bunch of random events connected because they happen to the same character. Because those kinds of films tend to confuse viewers, producers try to avoid making them... while give you a list of unrelated cool scenes they want you to write into the screenplay. Hey, part of writing screenplays is to create the silk purse that they can turn into a sow's ear. But we need to *begin* with the silk purse – and that means all of our story elements need to be connected.

The throughline is usually going to be connected to either the External Conflict or the Emotional Conflict – if there is a giant asteroid heading towards Earth or a giant shark eating people in Amityville, the throughline will be resolving that conflict. But when the throughline is tied to the Emotional Conflict you have to be careful that there is a visual goal and visual resolution to the Emotional Conflict as well as “steps” leading to the resolution that we can see, so that the audience knows we are making progress. If the Emotional Conflict is “invisible” (not dramatized and visual) and/or *internal*, the audience may feel like the story is spinning its wheels or just a bunch of unconnected scenes. Usually this is not a problem with an action film, but this was the issue with “The Black Dahlia” – the throughline dealt with the emotional conflict and was completely internal so it often seemed like a bunch of unrelated scenes and subplots.

EMOTIONAL CONFLICT?

"Wait a minute!" some of you are saying. "*Emotional* conflict? Hey, we're talking about action pictures, aren't we? We don't need no stinking emotional conflict!"

Emotions are what make our characters human and what allows the audience to identify with them, and care whether they live or die. Without an emotional conflict the hero becomes two dimensional. Cardboard. The audience will have trouble identifying with them, and find the over-all conclusion of the film less satisfying. Instead of emotional the story becomes mechanical. Sure, you might be able to get away with not having an Emotional Conflict with the 'Superman Type' lead character, but why would you want to?

The most common way Emotional Conflicts are explored in film is through a Character Arc – a gradual change in the protagonist which takes place during the film due to the external conflict (plot). In “Witness” John Book (Harrison Ford) begins as a violent Philadelphia cop and through his association with the Amish gradually becomes a man who would rather use reason than violence. He learns one of those Hollywood valuable lessons. Now, you probably didn't even notice the Character Arc in “Witness” because it was shown through the actions of the protagonist and there wasn't any big speech or swelling orchestral music. You never want to use a sledge hammer to slam home your point or emotional conflict, you want to be subtle... make it almost invisible. We want the audience to *experience* it, but not necessarily think about it. Feel it – we are talking about emotions, right? Feelings.

Yes, in an action film.

As a challenge, I've taken a violent existential revenge film from the 1960s, John Boorman's "Point Blank" starring Lee Marvin. Okay, this is also my favorite film, so I've seen it a million times. The lead character, Walker, has no first name, almost no dialogue and shows no emotions... But he has an Emotional Conflict!

The External Conflict: Walker, a career criminal who cooks up a large scale robbery with the help of his wife and best friend. After pulling the heist, the wife and best friend kill Walker and split with the cash. But Walker rises from the dead, tracks them down, and kills them and anyone else who gets in his way. A cold hearted vengeance machine. Many people die.

The Character Arc: Before the robbery, Walker is a playful, fun, character. We see him flirting with his wife, joking with his best friend. He's alive.

After he's shot, he becomes cold and brutal. Dead inside. Unfeeling and uncaring. He hooks up with his wife's sister (played by Angie Dickenson) and uses her to find both his wife and best friend. After both are dead, Angie accuses him of being dead inside. Of not caring or trusting anyone.

The Emotional Conflict: Walker has his vengeance, but still isn't satisfied... he wants his cut of the robbery money, and drafts Angie to help him. Angie fights him, and Walker finally realizes he will have to trust her and care about her, or she isn't going to help him. He must heal himself and stop being dead inside in order to achieve his goal. They actually go on a date in the film...the scene where he isn't killing people or trying to find people to kill.

Conclusion: After he rejoins the living and learns to love and trust again, he is emotionally whole and has the strength required to get his cut of the money... But realizes he can be satisfied without it. He's alive again!

Walker is forced to confront his Emotional Conflict (being dead inside) in order to solve his External Conflict (getting vengeance and his stolen money back and killing a lot of people).

Character Arcs don't have to be “learning a valuable lesson” - often they are about honest character who become dishonest or in the case of “Straw Dogs” a reasonable non-violent person who becomes a violent

bad-ass... and maybe loses a piece of his soul in the process. “Unforgiven“ opens with Clint Eastwood as a reformed gunman who has given up violence, and tracks his arc step-by-step until he ends up a violent drunken killing machine. So the “valuable lesson” in that film would be that sometimes you just have to reject morality and kill a bunch of people.

And Character Arcs aren't always about characters *changing* - no transformation is required! Usually a Character Arc is about a character *changing back* - and “Face/Off” is a great example of this. Archer is a good husband and father until his son is murdered by a bullet meant for him, and from that moment on he loses his way – he becomes all about revenge instead of family. The film doesn't show us him changing, but shows us him realizing the wrong turn he made and getting his life back on the right track. Because people seldom change in real life, it is more realistic to show your character get knocked off course and have the story force him to find his way again. The great thing about this is that you can use the event that screwed up your hero's life as a story point – either opening with it as “Face/Off” does of revealing it later.

There are two basics endings to a story – protagonist solves the problem, or problem solves the protagonist. You can have a tragedy where the character arc turns the protagonist into a monster or where the protagonist loses... as long as that is the point of your screenplay. You want to make sure the things that happen in your screenplay are there for a reason.

NO ARC?

A Character Arc is only one kind of Emotional Conflict – and not a requirement in your screenplay. But you usually do need some sort of Emotional Conflict in order to humanize your protagonist. Though Indiana Jones does have a subtle Character Arc in “Raiders Of The Lost Ark” (the most curious man in the world who puts treasure before people and plans to con Marion out of the headpiece... and by the end will shut his eyes tight and protects Marion – putting people before treasure) most of the Emotional Conflict in the script focuses on his rocky relationship with Marion. She is his ex-lover and there is a major unresolved conflict. But he is forced to work with her and deal with that conflict. The big emotional scene in the story is when Indy thinks he has killed Marion and gets drunk. His actions caused her death. He is responsible for killing the woman he loves. Even if the story ended with Indy's eyes wide open, the scenes between him and Marion would provide enough emotional content for us to care about the character and *feel something* rather than just watch the movie.

Although this is counter intuitive, a hero with a flaw they are struggling with is more interesting and involving than a “perfect” hero. Peter Parker in “Spider-Man” is responsible for the death of his Uncle Ben, and that guilt is what makes him easy to identify with. We have all done things we regret, we all have made terrible mistakes, none of us are perfect – and those flaws help us identify with a character. But even these flaws and issues need to be connected to the physical conflict in some way, not just tacked on to make your hero more interesting.

Never forget that movies (even action movies) are *emotion pictures* - designed to make us feel something. If people are shooting at the hero, we need to care whether he or she lives or dies or the scene doesn't matter. An emotional conflict humanizes the character and makes them into more than just cannon fodder.

THEME AND NEXUS

Your big action conflict and your emotional conflict will be connected, and so will everything else. Stories are not random incidents. My “Thematic” theory connects all of the pieces of your story – from Character Arc to Act Two scenes to Actions and Visual Motifs to Specific Words and Phrases used in dialogue. I call the connection between all of these elements the Nexus... where theme touches everything.

“Minority Report” is the ultimate Nexus film - thematic words and phrases pop up in much of the dialogue and are often part of the action. The screenplay by Scott Frank and Jon Cohen is based on a Philip K. Dick story where in the future, psychics can see crimes before they are committed, and the police arrest them. But when the psychics see the city's top cop, John Anderton, committing a future murder, he starts to wonder if the precog's vision is 20/20... while he runs for his life. So we have our man on the run and psychics who can see the future - and our theme is going to explore this idea of destiny and seeing the future.

THE EYES HAVE IT

The film starts out with the precogs seeing a murder that has yet to be committed. One of the first lines of dialogue is future killer Howard Marks saying "You know how blind I am without my glasses."

One of the first images we see is Marks' son cutting the eyes out of an Abe Lincoln mask - scissors poking through the eyes!

It's explained that "Precogs can see a murder four days out."

The reason why Howard Marks is going to kill his wife and lover? He forgets his glasses, goes back home for them, and discovers his wife in bed with another man.

People in the future are identified by iris scans - called "Eye-Dents".

Not only do the police use iris scans, but they are used by advertisers to personalize video billboards and used to collect tolls on the subway.

Anderton may be the top cop in the city, but he's also a drug user. A drug dealer who recognizes him as the Police Chief pulls off his glasses to expose empty eye sockets and says "In the land of the blind, the one eyed man is king."

Danny Witwer is an *observer* from the Justice Department. That's a great one, because he could have been just an Agent with the Justice Department, but they found a way to put the eyes in there.

"We see what they (the Precogs) see."

Witwer claims he has a warrant, "Show it to me."

One of the Precogs, Agatha, grabs Anderton's arm and says: "Can you see?"

By the way, the three precogs are named after famous mystery writers – a Scott Frank touch, I'm sure. Anderton's mentor, Lamar, tells him to watch out for Witwer because: "The eyes of the nation are on us right now."

Once Anderton is accused of a future murder, he begins to question the very idea that precogs can see the future. The story itself was designed to explore the theme.

On the run, Anderton plays hide and seek in a Lexus car factory with Witwer.

Anderton goes to Dr. Hineman, who helped create the precogs. After hopping her fence, he's stung by some plants. The name of the plants? "Doll's Eyes". Again, they could have been called anything, but Scott Frank went for the thematic name.

Hineman tells him the precogs are basically crack babies who "Closed their eyes and dreamed only of murders."

Her advice to Anderton? "Sometimes in order to see the light you have to risk the dark."

Anderton realizes that no matter where he goes, they will find him – thanks to the Eye-Dent system. The solution? Get an eye transplant!

The crazy eye transplant doctor tells him that the nurse "Only has eyes for you."

Anderton's ex-wife is a photographer who has "A good eye" according to Witwer.

She tells him, "I left him because every time I looked at him I saw my son." She could have said "He reminded me on my son" but there's no looking and seeing in that sentence.

Anderton's son is kidnapped at a public pool, and he screams "Have you seen my little boy?"

The police have these little mechanical spiders that scan your eyes, and there's a great scene where Anderton tries to evade them.

In order to break into the police station and kidnap the precog Agatha, he uses his old eyes at the retina scanners. Nice plan if it works, but Anderton drops his old eyes and they go rolling down a hallway toward a drainage grate! He has to chase his runaway eyes - another thriller scene that uses eyes!

You can make your own joke about rolling his eyes... But I kind of rolled my eyes when the retina scan still worked in this film. Even at McDonalds they take your employee ID out of the system after they fire you so that you won't have access to the cash drawer. This was the *police station* and a *murderer*.

Now we get a funny "new eye gag" that's all about how seeing maybe shouldn't be believing - Anderton walks into the Gap and is identified as "Mr. Yakamoto" due to his new eyes. He holds up some clothes to a woman about Agatha's size - eyeballing the fit.

The reason why he kidnaps the precog? "Agatha, I need to see... to see what is going to happen to me."

When they're trying to evade the police at a shopping mall, Agatha talks Anderton through it. "Can you see that umbrella? Take it!" She could have just said "Take the umbrella".

"You see a woman in a brown dress, she knows your face."

When the police finally spot Anderton and Agatha, they don't say "I've got them" they say "We've got eyes on him."

The story also deals with perception in many scenes. Balloons obscure the Anderton and Agatha at the mall. The umbrella they grab comes in handy when it starts raining and *everyone* has an umbrella... making everyone look alike. In the precog vision of the crime there's a third man looking through the window... and that guy turns out to be a picture on a billboard across the street. Often what is seen in the story isn't really what is happening - the same way the precog's vision of Anderton committing murder isn't exactly what happens in the story.

When they drive in the countryside, Agatha looks out the car window and says, "Can you see it, it's beautiful."

After Anderton is captured, the prison warden, Gideon, describes what happens when you're put in the stasis prison: "They say you have visions. Your life flashes before your eyes and all of your dreams come true."

Okay, some of you are probably wondering if screenwriters actually go to all of the trouble of making sure they use the word “Observer” instead of “Agent” because it’s thematic. I can’t speak for everyone... but *I* do it. Every single word in my screenplay is important, and I give every individual word a certain amount of thought. If there is a better word, that’s the word I want to use. I will make a list of thematic words and phrases and find a way to naturally fit them into the dialogue (if possible). Obviously, Scott Frank also does this - we get words and phrases and actions and situations about sight in “Minority Report” so that the theme is in every scene... but invisible and unobtrusive.

USING YOUR NEXUS

In my script, "The Last Stand", an accountant for an Oakland, CA criminal organization turns state's evidence. After testifying, he goes into Witness Relocation, and begins a new life with his wife and son in suburbia. Three years later, the mob finds him, and asks him to go back to Oakland for a "mob trial". If he doesn't go peaceably, they'll use force.

The accountant must turn against one *family* (the mob) to protect another *family* (his wife and son). Throughout the script are various scenes and examples of "Protecting The Family". All of the characters are defined by their families. The mob is a family. The police are a family. The FBI is a family. Each family tries to protect its members.

The accountant TAKES THE STAND to testify against the mob. The mob wants him to come back to Oakland to TAKE THE STAND in a mob trial. And when he refuses, he has to TAKE A STAND against the mob's violence. His home becomes the LAST STAND (like Custer's) in his gun battle with the mob. In fact, the hero has TAKEN A STAND to protect his FAMILY. It all ties together.

I made lists of words and phrases which described the emotional conflict and a list for the physical conflict. Then I looked for Nexus words and phrases. The dialogue is peppered with double meaning lines: People who talk about the external conflict, but describe the emotional conflict. Every scene in the script has to do with the hero and his family. Some scenes are the "mob family" and some are the wife and son. Everything in that script is telling one specific story.

PLOT SEEDS

Because your action conflict and emotional conflict and theme and everything else is connected, you can use the place where all of these things intersect as a “plot seed” to grow a story. You can begin with the theme or the emotional conflict or the character and find a high concept that best explores it. My “Thematic Theory” is that once you have any one element you can use that as a seed and find the other elements... and grow a script. So if you begin with your protagonist's emotional conflict (which may be *your* emotional conflict) you can find the most exciting physical conflict that will force him or her to deal with that emotional conflict. That physical conflict gives you clues to your villain... because all of these elements are connected way below the surface. The audience may never see the connections, but they are there. You are telling *one* story instead of just stringing together a bunch of random incidents that happen to the same person.

In "Breaking Through, Selling Out, Dropping Dead" (one of the best common sense books on the film biz), William Bayer explains why some films are hits and others are flops: "A hit film explores the subconscious fear or desire currently held by the audience." Zeitgeist (the spirit of the times). Though none of us has a crystal ball, we all live in the same world and have many of the same problems and concerns in our lives. We are all connected.

We can use this connection to find stories that tap into that zeitgeist and touch many... and become popular hit films. After the financial crisis hit in October of 2008, we were all worried and felt powerless – big banks were being bailed out, companies like GM were being bailed out, but nobody seemed to care about the regular guy. Then, at the beginning of 2009 a French film starring an Irish dramatic actor came out and became a massive hit. Why was “Taken” so successful? It was about a guy who had something valuable taken from him (his daughter) and instead of rolling over, he kicked some ass! The bad guys thought he was powerless, but didn't know he was an ex-spy who had been pushed to his breaking point and was about to push back – hard. The villains were rich foreigners who were buying women as sex slaves – like those bankers with their huge paychecks. “Taken” tapped into our feelings at that specific time, and that is why it became a hit... while “A-Team” (also starring Neeson) was a flop later that year. We were frustrated and wanted to *do something* - and the film allowed us to vicariously kick some ass and take control of our lives. One of the great aspects of the film is how *in control* Neeson's character is – he allowed us to fantasize that we were in control... and the film was an unlikely hit.

By being aware of the world around us, and the conscious and subconscious fears and desires and needs of the population, we can use that as the “plot seed” to create a story that resonates with the ticket buyers and becomes a huge hit. The tool we use to take a small fear or desire and turn it into a blockbuster is...

MAGNIFICATION

Magnification takes a minor problem that we've all experienced, and exaggerates it all out of proportion.

Begin with the plot seed: that fear or desire or need that you feel and believe the general population also feels. What makes you angry? What stirs your passions? What makes you emotional? That's going to be the core of what you write about. Start with that thing that gets you fired up, then craft a story around it. Find a protagonist that has to deal with that problem. Because it's a movie and not reality, make sure that this is the worst case of that thing that gets you fired up that ever was – and something that we are all fired up about (the zeitgeist element). A friend of mine was mad at her HMO - they had lost her records so when she showed up for an appointment (after taking the day off from work without pay) they told her they couldn't see her - could she come back two weeks from Wednesday? Well, she made a doctor's appointment because she's in pain now.

HMOs are impersonal. Medical insurance companies don't pay for all treatments, and make you jump through hoops for the stuff they do pay for. Industrialized medicine cares more about the bottom line than the patients. Let's use that to create our story. Because we're making a movie, we need to make sure our story is about the worst thing that can happen - we're going to magnify the story into a life or death situation.

Let's say your child needs an operation - but that operation isn't covered by your medical insurance. Your child will *die* if he doesn't get this operation! What would you do? Let your child die? We've just taken a small, personal problem that we can all understand - how HMOs and medial insurance companies don't seem to care about people - and magnified it into a life or death situations where a child might die. We have taken one of life's small frustrations and turned it into a problem big enough to fill the screen. Do you let your child die? Or grab a gun and demand that the doctors perform the operation whether your insurance covers it or not. When we magnify the problem, everything else becomes larger as well... and more exciting.

Now let's make it even worse... Because you are holding people at gunpoint, the police send in a SWAT team. Now let's create a moral decision (because if your hero is 100% right, you have a dull story): Would you kill someone so that your child can live? If one of those SWAT cops aims at you, will you put down his gun... or start a shoot out so that your child will get the operation? I think that's a fairly exciting scenario. You're still going to debate the impersonalization of health care, but you have magnified the situation into a tense hostage situation.

You may recognize this as “John Q” with Denzel Washington as the father who holds a hospital hostage so that his son can get the operation that isn't covered by his medical insurance. But anyone could have come up with “John Q” - even though it's a life or death situation, the idea is fairly tame. But what if the story were about androids dealing with their warranty? What if the "lifetime warranty" is for the life of the human owner, not the lifetime of the android? Or what if.... Heck, there are a million ideas - just grab one. Make sure it's the kind of idea that's amazing on its own. You need to have a wild idea... that you are passionate about... and that taps into that zeitgeist.

Using the organic method, your plot seed grows into an exciting, heart pounding thriller which addresses a major fear in the subconscious of the audience. Because it addresses this subconscious fear or desire, it becomes a huge hit, and makes millions of dollars. With Magnification you can use a problem we've all dealt with in an entertaining, larger than life story.

As writers it is important for us to open our eyes to the world around us and tap into the real life emotional conflicts people are dealing with in order to create screenplays and movies that connect with people on an emotional level. Even action movies are about *people* - people with problems – people with problems that they may solve using rocket launchers and machine guns. Make sure the human element is built in to your story, not pasted on from the outside... or missing. Car chases don't buy cinema tickets, people do.

ACTION SCENES

So we have an amazing high concept, a great protagonist, an exciting emotional and physical conflict which are connected and we've plotted out an outline of some sort... all we need are some of those big action scenes and we've got a screenplay. But do you really need to write them? Doesn't the stunt coordinator or Michael Bay come up with that stuff on the set? Plus, writing anything other than "Armadillo-Man fights the Giant Gila Monster and kills it!" will knock your page count way over 120. We don't want that. So, why even bother writing an action scene?

Well, that "page per minute" guideline is there for a reason, and unless your action scenes are going to only take a second or two of screen time, they need to be on the page. When they budget and schedule a film, they break it into eighths of a page, and your "Armadillo-Man fights the Giant Gila Monster and kills it!" is probably a sixteenth of a page at most... yet will take longer to film than any other eighth of a page in the script. That completely screws up the scheduling. You want to give them a basic idea of how long each scene is so that they know how long they should schedule filming it. The car chase in the script for "Bullitt" is seven and a half pages long - and is a great scene in the movie *and* the script. If your big summer blockbuster script is 110 pages without the action scenes, how many minutes will that translate into *with* the action? How many four hour summer movies are there?

Another basic reason is that an action script is, well, an action script. If you were a producer, would you buy a comedy script that left out the jokes? There are comic actors like Robin Williams and Jim Carrey who do great improv work, but leaving all of the protagonist's dialogue blank because "Jim will probably improv something really funny here" is not the best way to sell a comedy script. Just as you want the reader to laugh out loud at your comedy script, you want them to get excited by your action script. If you leave out the action scenes, you are leaving out the best part!

So let's take a look at action scenes – what are the elements we need for a great action scene?

HIGH CONCEPT ACTION

No one wants to see an action scene that they have seen before. We want to create new, fresh, imaginative scenes. So, just like with the idea for our screenplay, the gold we are panning for is a *high concept scene*, like the *bullet time* from “The Matrix” or climbing the side of the Dubai's Burj Khalifa skyscraper in “Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol.” Something wild and interesting that amazes the viewer. Since action films have been around since the birth of cinema, audiences have seen just about every variation on a car chase or shoot out over the years. Part of our creative duty is to come up with something they have never seen before.

“Wanted” (screenplay by Michael Brandt & Derek Haas and Christ Morgan) is filled with wild scenes that skate right up to the edge of credibility without crossing over into completely silly. Almost every action scene in that film is fresh and original (for film), beginning with tracing a multi-stage bullet backwards to the assassin, miles away, who fired it... using a *telescope* to find his target! Later there’s a grocery store shootout that features a periscope gun that can fire *over* and *around* things - a cool idea! In the parking lot, Angelina Jolie doesn’t tell James McAvoy to get into her sports car, she slides the moving car towards him with the door open so that he is knocked into the passenger seat, then speeds away - door closing in the process. That one goes right up to the edge of credibility, but the film’s tone is playful, so we laugh rather than roll our eyes. You have to be careful to stay within the parameters of the reality you've established in the screenplay – what works in a “Wanted” car chase doesn't work in “The French Connection” car chase.

One of the great things about “Wanted” is that it is grounded in real emotions - McAvoy’s father was the assassination victim, and he is given a tour of his father’s room at the top secret assassin facility... and given his father’s gun. The film isn’t just a bunch of clever action scenes strung together, the story deals with our hero’s relationship with his father. Movies, even action movies, are about *people* and emotional situations.

Bending the bullet like Beckham, the limousine sun roof assassination, driving a car *into* a speeding train, climbing up the train car-by-car after it derails on a bridge, the explosive rats (fed peanut butter laced with explosives and let loose into the villain’s fortress), and the amazing 360' bullet that circles the room killing anyone in its path. These are all cool action scenes unlike anything from any other movie. If we can’t find that high concept scene gold, we need to come up with something that makes the action scene different, and make sure there are enough differences to make this scene original and exciting, as well as emotional and character oriented. You don't want to write the usual car chase when you can write the unusual and original car chase – whether that is by giving us gritty realistic elements we have never seen before or a cool and clever idea for an action scene that we have never seen before.

ACTION IS CHARACTER

The James Bond movie “Casino Royale” (screenplay by Paul Haggis and Neal Purvis & Robert Wade) completely reinvigorated the series (before “Quantum Of Solace” killed it off again – we'll see if “Skyfall” brings it back) by returning to the type of innovative and brutal action contrasted by beautiful surroundings that made the Connery films popular. “Casino Royale” had the gloss and wit and travelogue elements we expect from a Bond film, which “Quantum” lacked. Yes, “Casino” has some major act three story issues – but let's just look at the action scenes.

One of the basic tools of the screen, and screenwriting, is *contrast* - a bull in a china shop is interesting, exciting and even involving... a bull in a rugged field is not. The reason why there are so many “fish out of water” stories on screen is because the contrast and conflict between character and environment is a great way to explore character. That is why Michael is the lead character in “The Godfather” movies, not Sonny or Fredo - Michael is the honest college boy war hero in the violent crime family. Fish out of water. In “Casino Royale” M calls Bond a "blunt instrument" and that's exactly what he is - a sledgehammer slamming anything that gets in his way. The first action scene in the film is designed to *show us* who Bond is - an amazing foot chase where Bond pursues a parkour trained Bomb Maker.

An earlier sequence opens with a young boy racing across rugged terrain and through an encampment with a bottle of Coca-Cola for an African military leader. This explains where the Bomb Maker gets his running skills - a way to show character backstory through the actions of another character.

The foot chase in the next sequence is an exciting set piece, but it is also a *character scene*. When a surveillance is blown by another agent, the Bomb Maker runs and Bond gives chase. Early in the chase, the Bomb Maker gracefully dives through the rusted out shell of a car in the jungle, which Bond runs around. This shows us the Bomb Maker’s parkour skills, which will be a high point of the rest of the chase.

At the end of the jungle, the Bomb Maker comes to a chain link fence and vaults over it in one beautiful fluid move. Bond commandeers a bull dozer and smashes through the fence, crushing everything in his way and even taking out part of the building under construction. The Bomb Maker scampers up a girder of the building, Bond runs up a ramp created by a small construction crane. As the chase continues on the skeleton of the building, the Bomb Maker continues to gracefully vault and spin and climb; while Bond gives chase with complete focus - not caring about anyone else. When the Bomb Maker climbs cables up to a giant building crane hundreds of feet above the ground; Bond jumps on a winch, *kicks* a lever, drops a load of pipes on anyone unlucky enough to be below, and the winch zips him up to the crane.

What does this tell us about Bond? He is more concerned with the pursuit than injuring others. He is resourceful. He is a man of swift and brutal action. He is driven. This shows us his character through his actions - he is not the Roger Moore Bond in the white tuxedo who never gets his hands dirty, nor is it the Pierce Brosnan Bond who is suave and sexy but still a man of action. This is brute force incarnate. This version of Bond is a sledge hammer who will destroy anything that gets in his way and cares about nothing. A couple of scenes later M will say, “I would ask you if you could remain emotionally detached, but I don’t think that’s you problem, is it, Bond?” This action scene has shown us the answer to that question... and by illustrating that he cares about no one except his quarry, the action scene also sets up Bond’s character arc for the film. He will learn to care about someone other than himself... action scenes are character scenes.

BACKGROUND TO DANGER

Location can be an important element in an action scene. We have seen fights on rooftops before, but have we ever seen a chase *up* a building? By combining parkour and the building under construction, we not only get something we have never seen before, but an amazing *visual* behind the fight scene as they battle hundreds of feet above the ground. This location also adds extra levels of danger - we not only have an exciting chase and fight scene, Bond might lose balance or be pushed over the edge and fall to his death... plus we have all of that dangerous heavy equipment the Bomb Maker can be used as weapons. Find a unique location for your action scene that provides a second level of danger *and* provides an interesting background to your fight or chase scene. If you've seen this location in a film before, find someplace else.

One of the problems with the action scenes in "Casino Royale" is that they may take place at *interesting* locations, they are not exactly unique locations. The building site itself is something we have seen before. Compare this to some of the strange locations in Jackie Chan's Hong Kong movies – like the fight in a wind tunnel from "Armor Of God 2" or the underwater shark tank fight scene in "First Strike". If you can find a location that has never been used in a film before... and write an action scene that takes place there... you have a two-fer! You don't want to use the cliché "spark factory" (a Roger Ebert term for that factory that seems to produce nothing but sparks in action movies), find the most interesting and amazing location you can for your action scenes. The other possibility is a completely normal location – something that is part of every day life – and throw in your big action scene! But be careful not to use some every day location that has already been used in some other film. Why common locations work in action scenes is that the action is *unexpected* - but if we've seen some other movie where they used the same (or a similar) location the audience may expect it.

LIVING ACTION

For an action scene - or any scene for that matter - to be exciting and involving, it must be alive. The scene must be constantly changing and evolving and surprising us. Though the fight scenes in “Watchmen” were brutal, they did not engage or interest the audience because the outcome of the fights were predetermined and the fights were just a brutal exchange of punches and kicks. We want every punch to have an emotional affect on the reader and the audience. Some of the techniques we can use to make those kicks count are *Reversals*, *Twists* and *Ironic Twists* - and we will take a quick look at all of these in this chapter and a closer look in a later chapter.

A Reversal is like a good news-bad news joke, and here’s an example from “Casino Royale”.

On the crane hundreds of feet above the ground, the Bomb Maker has nowhere else to go - and faces off against Bond. The bad news is: The Bomb Maker pulls a gun and aims at Bond’s face. The good news is, when he fires, the gun clicks dry... Out of shells. The bad news is, the Bomb Maker throws the gun at Bond’s face. The good news is: Bond *catches* the gun and throws it back - all in one move. Amazing reflexes! The better news is: The gun hits the Bomb Maker’s face, almost knocking him off the crane!

Reversals make a scene exciting to watch - not just a bunch of kicks and punches, but an involving scene where we fear for our protagonist’s life, then find hope when he turns the tables, then return to fear when the antagonist counters. This creates constant change in the potential outcome and excitement for the viewer and reader. From sentence to sentence we don’t know how the fight will end. Every punch and kick has *meaning*...

You don’t want to describe every single punch and eye-gouge, only the ones that change the story. A punch that doesn’t shift the balance in the fight is unimportant. The punch that knocks our hero to the ground and makes the reader feel that all hope is lost is part of the story. Your fight scene will be all of the actions that spin the outcome in a different direction, and none that maintain a status-quo.

A twist in an action scene is like a reversal times one hundred - a completely unexpected change in the scene that changes the way the story in a way the audience could never have predicted. Marion Ravenswood is blown up in the back of a truck, Marion Crane is murdered in the shower, our hero cuts the red wire instead of the green wire and the bomb timer *speeds up*! After a twist, nothing is the same in the story.

One of the keys to a good action scene is to have more than one thing happening, and to have several different directions for the scene to go. If you have a fallen gun or some other weapon at the location that the protagonist or antagonist can be trying to get their hands on *during* the fight, you have added a potential change in the outcome of the fight. Remember - each character involved in an action scene needs to have some plan of action, not just for the whole scene, but for each point in the scene. One moment it may be going for a fallen gun, another moment may be trying to save a supporting character in trouble. In the crane scene, Bind has to worry about fighting the Bomb Maker *and* not falling off the crane... oh, and he wants the Bomb Maker *alive*! That limits what he can do within the fight scene.

TOUGH DECISIONS

Another way to keep your action scenes alive is to make sure the protagonist has a difficult decision that will change the outcome of the story. Just like any other scene in your screenplay, if you can remove an action scene and it does not change the story, you *should* remove it. My favorite action scene in “Hellboy 2” movie was the big battle on the streets with the Elemental. It was not only an exciting scene, it has a major decision for Big Red that creates a *haunting* ending instead of a happy one.

Action scenes need an emotional component, something that turns the car chase into a scene we *care* about. Though we care about our protagonist, most people care more about those they love than they care about themselves. Parents put themselves in harm's way to protect their children. One way to give your action scene maximum emotional impact is to put someone the protagonist cares about in danger. Though “Hellboy 2” does put his love Liz in danger several times; in the Elemental Battle, Red rescues a baby at the start of the action, and must protect that baby throughout the big battle scene. This not only works as part of the over-all emotional story for Red, it also shows two sides of his character at the same time - he's tough, violent, angry... and compassionate and protective.

This scene forces Red to make a big decision that not only changes the course of the story, but changes the course of the *world*. This is the *last* of the Elementals... Can he kill the last of its kind? This gives us a no-win situation: if he kills the Elemental, he has destroyed a treasure and destroyed a part of nature. The world will never be the same. But if he doesn't kill the Elemental, he may be killed himself. So a selfish hero must choose between himself and the planet... and finds himself unable to make that decision. Which prolongs the battle... and causes more destruction in the city... and puts that baby in more danger. This is not an easy choice and once Red finally makes his decision, he isn't happy with what it. He's the monster. He's the villain. This is not a safe scene where there is an easy decision, this is a tough decision and that makes for a *great* scene. This decision changes the course of the story, and changes Red’s character forever. But at least he saves the baby.

Decisions are also used as the core to the action scenes in “The Dark Knight”. The Joker loves to create situations where people must make impossible choices... designed to bring out their evil instincts. There's a scene in the film where Batman on the Batcycle is racing down the street at the Joker, who steps into the middle of the street and yells, “Hit me!” Forcing Batman to either decide to run over and kill the Joker in cold blood (making him just as bad as the villain) or swerve away and lose control of the Batcycle and crash (making him vulnerable). When the Joker kidnaps both Harvey Dent and Rachel (Dent's fiance and Bruce Wayne's ex-girlfriend) he has each on opposite sides of Gotham City in warehouses with ticking bombs – Batman must choose which of the two he will rescue... and the other dies. Of course, the Joker has swapped locations so that Batman goes to rescue Rachel... but finds Harvey Dent. The big set piece with the two ferry boats – one filled with criminals and one filled with commuters – each has the ability to blow up the other's boat, and if neither is blown up by midnight the Joker will destroy both of them.

“Dark Knight” is filled with decisions that constantly change the direction of the plot, and the action scenes are filled with decisions that change the direction of the scene: Gordon has his SWAT Team in position, but Batman wants a few minutes to recon the situation first – does Gordon give him the time? And once Batman *takes it* and the clock is ticking, he is faced with dozens of decisions which lead to him double crossing the SWAT Team after he discovers the hostages have been dressed to look like the bad guys... and the bad guys are pretending to be the hostages. Look at all of the decisions that must be made in your action scenes and make sure that these are actual decisions that change the direction of the scene and the story... and don't make them “no brainer” decisions – because then the Scarecrow (from “The Wizard Of Oz”, not “Batman Begins”) could be your hero. You want a hero with a brain... who must use it to make difficult decisions.

SUPERIOR ANTAGONIST

Though we talked about superior villains in the Villain chapter, a big mistake in some action scenes is making your protagonist too powerful. You want the person the hero is fighting to have the advantage. There is a reason why kryptonite exists - without it, Superman would win every fight and the fights would be predictable and dull. In every James Bond movie (except “Quantum”) the villain has a henchman who is physically more powerful than Bond, which makes Bond an underdog. Even if your protagonist is a superhero, he must be out-matched or the action scene will not be exciting. In “Casino Royale”, Bond is constantly placed in situations where he is at a disadvantage...

After getting slammed in the face with the gun, the Bomb Maker *hops* from crane to crane to building rooftop to escape. When Bond tries to do the same, he slams into the crane wrong... injuring himself. Bond is no match for the Bomb Maker. That makes the scene more exciting than if Bond were the man with superior skills. How can Bond possibly capture this man?

As the chase continues through the building, the Bomb Maker comes to a wall... and gracefully jumps through a narrow vent at the top, landing on his feet on the other side. A man can barely fit through that vent, yet we see this action on screen - no special effects. Bond comes to the same wall... and *smashes* right through the sheetrock!

The actions are all designed to show Bond’s character, and to contrast his methods with the Bomb Maker’s. Bond is a sledge hammer. Every action scene in your script is there to explore and expose character. Look at your action scenes - what do they tell us about the character? Action *is* character.

EMOTIONAL ACTION

Another element that improves an action scene is the addition of an *emotional* element. You've seen a million car chases, and you'll see a million more. It's one machine chasing another... how can you possibly make that emotional? Finding the emotional conflict within the physical conflict transforms the cliche car chase into something exciting and imaginative.

In “True Lies” the theme is trust, and the emotional conflict revolves around Ah-nuld lying to his wife Jamie Lee Curtis about almost everything: his job, his identity, his true self. The only thing that *isn't* a lie is his love for her... But when you spend your entire marriage thinking your husband Harry is one guy, and find out he's the total opposite guy, it's difficult to trust him ever again. So James Cameron came up with action scenes that *demonstrates* this emotional conflict and with no shortage of excitement.

A great example is the scene where Jamie Lee Curtis is in an out of control limousine on a bridge with a premature end speeding to her death. Her husband Ah-nuld is in a helicopter zooming overhead trying to save her. For Jamie Lee to survive, she must *trust* Ah-nuld by climbing out of the sun roof of the limo and grabbing hold of his hand as he zooms past in the helicopter. She has to put her life entirely in his hands. Meanwhile Ah-nuld must dangle out of a zooming helicopter, risking his life to save his wife. He is demonstrating that he will risk his life for her love... but it's also an edge of your seat action scene with explosions and out of control cars... and a nuclear weapon about to explode on the island the limo is zooming away from.

There is a strong emotional component at the center of this action scene: This is the woman he loves - the most important person in his life. What if Ah-nuld can't reach her? Or can't grab tight enough to her arm? Or drops her? What if Jamie Lee can't reach his hand? Or can't hold on? There are *emotional* consequences for failure. Big emotional stakes in an action scene. Every time he reaches down for her hand and their fingers don't quite touch is a big emotional moment! By adding the emotional component the action becomes even more exciting – it's not just a car and a helicopter and some stunts – it's a character who must save the woman he loves from *death*. This is a scene that explores the theme of the script, is filled with emotions, and is also pretty darned exciting. Most of the action scenes in “True Lies” explore some aspect of trust - the action scenes are critical to the story!

For another example, the scene in “Raiders Of The Lost Ark” where Marion has been kidnapped and put in a wicker basket and Indy is chasing the basket to get her back. If he doesn't rescue her, the Nazis will probably torture her for information about the Ark. There's a great rif on the Hitchcock "Redcap Spin" scene from “North By Northwest” where Indy is popping the tops off wicker baskets looking for her... and finally chases the basket she is in down an alley where it is tossed in the back of a truck filled with explosives... which Indy causes to wreck and *explode*. Killing Marion. The woman he loves. He caused her death. That's an intense and emotional action scene. Always be looking for an emotional component in your action scenes – they make the scene more exciting and involving.

THEMATIC ACTION

An action scene can also be used to explore character arc and thematic issues. My “Black Thunder” film for the Showtime Network explored the theme of concealment for the purpose of deception, and I used that as the core of my action scenes. They all had a concealment/deception element. My “Sleeper Agent” script is about planning vs. improvisation – so every action scene compared those two approaches or forced the planning character to use Improvisation and the improv character to plan. Because my “Past Lives” screenplay deals with communications issues, I made that part of the suspense scenes as well. Using an action scene to explore your theme insures that you aren't knocking the audience over the head with whatever message you might have, and adds an additional layer to the scene.

“Hanna” has a big fight scene near the end where Hanna's father (Eric Bana) takes on the lead henchman, and this scene could have taken place anywhere – but the story is about a girl leaving the things of childhood behind, so the scene takes place on playground equipment. Swings become weapons and a carousel figures into the end of the fight scene. The final confrontation between Hanna (Saoirse Ronan) and the evil Marissa (Cate Blanchett) takes place in a Grimm's Fairy Tales amusement park which is closed for the season. They are surrounded by fairy tale castles and creatures... and even Hanna's weapon seems like something from a fantasy story. Using theme in your fight scenes adds an extra layer of story and helps to connect the character to the action.

Look at the scene from “The Matrix” where Neo is at his office and Agent Smith and a dozen cops come to arrest him. Neo races to the empty office, goes out the window to the ledge, starts climbing around the building... but reaches a point where it becomes difficult and just quits... and gets captured.

We learn from that action scene that Neo doesn't believe in himself and when the going gets rough he quits. That is Neo's character arc in “The Matrix”, he must learn to believe in himself. This action scene is critical to the character, to the story, to the character arc and emotional conflict, and it shows the theme. Without that action scene we don't get any of that information: cut out the action scene and the story makes no sense.

Later there's a scene where Morpheus fights an army of police while Neo and the others crawl through the inside of the walls to escape. It's a long fight scene - and every minute is critical. Because this is the scene where we *see* how much Morpheus believes in Neo - he sacrifices himself. He must keep getting back on his feet and getting knocked down until Neo is safely away...

But Neo hesitates. Neo knows he's not the Chosen One - he knows that Morpheus is going to be killed for no reason - because Neo is a fraud and wasn't strong enough to tell Morpheus what the Oracle said. But when Neo hesitates inside the wall... Morpheus has to get back on his feet and get pummeled even more! So Morpheus believes in Neo, but Neo's lack of belief in himself is getting his friend hurt. The more Neo hesitates, the more Morpheus gets beaten up. That's theme and story... in an action scene. You can't remove that without losing critical information that the audience needs. And it's also critical character information. It shows us how much Morpheus believes in Neo. An action scene needs to be more than just a shoot out or car chase or giant explosion – including character arc or thematic material adds depth to your scenes.

MOTIFS IN ACTION

Connected to theme and story in action scenes is the use of motifs – often part of the world the story takes place within. “The Transporter” movies are about ex-Special Forces soldier Frank Martin who transports valuables from point A to point B in his customized BMW. He is meticulous – needs to know exactly what the cargo weighs, and has three rules which he never breaks (our criminal with a code of honor). The films take place in the world of automobiles, and many of the action scenes in the first film are centered around cars. But not just chases – there's a great fight scene in a pool of motor oil that is like a greased pig chase. Like a Jackie Chan film, the action scenes often use props and other elements found at the locations... but these locations are also car related, as are the weapons found there. In another car related movie, 2011's “Driver”, the protagonist doesn't attack the villain with a gun, he hits him with his car. These are all tools that you can use to add another dimension to your action scenes and make them character and story specific. You don't have to use them all (that might be too much) or even use *any* of them – but it's nice to know these tools are available.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Every scene in your screenplay needs to move the story forward and change the direction of the story. If things are the same at the beginning and the end of an action scene, it can be removed without impacting the story - and it *should* be removed. Just like any other scene in your screenplay, there will be a goal, a conflict, and something at stake.

Later in "Casino Royale" we get a great action set piece at Miami Airport where Bond must prevent a new prototype jetliner from being destroyed so that the villain LeChiffre can make a killing in the stock market by selling short. This set piece also provides us with some great lessons on constructing an action scene. Bond follows Carlos the terrorist-for-hire to Miami International Airport, where Carlos changes into a police uniform, steals a gun, and sets off the fire alarms - creating panic.

Carlos is Bond's only lead to the "ellipses" conspiracy. Bond's goal in this part of the story is to follow Carlos up the food chain to discover who is behind the conspiracy and what their plan is. Remember, it's usually not the protagonist's goal that drives the story, it's the antagonist's goal - the Villain's Plan. The antagonist brings the conflict. This also applies to scenes as well as the overall story. The protagonist can either be struggling against the conflict to achieve their scene goal, or they can *be* the conflict - struggling to prevent the antagonist from achieving their goal. In a great scene, both. What is Carlos' goal in this scene? What is at stake?

M calls Bond to tell him the Skyfleet S570 prototype is being unveiled at the airport - the largest passenger jet in the world. Then we see this massive plane being towed out of the hanger - we need to *see* what is at stake in the scene. Bond's goal is to prevent Carlos from blowing up the plane... and find out who is behind this conspiracy. When Carlos steals a police car in the fire alarm panic and speeds across the tarmac, Bond gives chase on foot.

FOUND WEAPONS

In Trevanian's novel "Shibumi", the protagonist is trained in a fictional martial art known as "Naked Kill" - the ability to turn *anything* into a weapon on the spot. That fake martial art has popped up in other books, comics, and I decided to use it in a screenplay called... "Naked Kill" - which features an action scene where the protagonist is au-natural and must use anything she can find in her bedroom as a weapon. In Jackie Chan's Hong Kong movies, he regularly uses everything from shopping carts to horse shoes to a length of rope to construction scaffolding as weapons. Anything at the location can be used as a weapon, and Chan loves to find the least likely item and use it in a fight scene. So I want you to look around the location where you are reading this and find a couple of weapons and figure out how to use them. Next time you are in a Starbucks or a grocery store or an office - look for the potential weapons in the room. When I once did the live class version of this book at the Williamette Writer's Conference the students we took a "field trip" to the hotel restaurant and they had to tell me all of the available weapons on how they would use them in a fight scene. It was fun, and might come in handy if you're ever in that "Bourne Identity" scene where the killer breaks through the window and you have to fight him with whatever you can find in your office – that pen through the hand *had* to hurt!

In "Casino Royale" everything at the airport becomes part of the action scene. Carlos kills a fuel tanker truck driver, attaches a detonator to the fuel tank - which can be triggered remotely from his cell phone, then drives off in the truck. Turning the tanker truck into a mobile bomb! As Carlos zooms across the airport towards the Skyfleet prototype, Bond gives chase on foot. Bond runs up a passenger ramp and *jumps* onto the roof of the passing tanker truck... almost sliding off, grabbing the roof railing, hanging on for his life. Carlos weaves the truck back and forth, trying to throw him off. When that doesn't work, he steers *into* a passing plane-towing vehicle. Bond jumps off the tanker... into the path of the towing vehicle... rolls away moments before he's hit. The two vehicles spark as they scrape against each other. Reversals in action.

The tanker truck skids into a 180, and when Bond rolls to his feet, racing at Carlos, he puts the truck into reverse and backs away at high speed, shooting through the window at Bond. Always be looking for what makes your scene unique - a *truck* roaring at high speed in reverse is not something we see every day.

Carlos does another 180 to increase speed, and Bond grabs the rear ladder and climbs to the roof. Carlos drives through the middle of a train of baggage trailers, scattering the contents of a planeload of luggage all over the place (so *that's* what happened to my luggage!) almost knocking Bond off the roof. Next Carlos tries an empty people mover bus, smashing it in half and creating a giant fireball. Bond still hangs on. Every type of vehicle and device you would find at the airport becomes part of this scene. Look at the things found at your action scene location - how can they be used as weapons? We'll take a closer look at the *pieces* of an action scene, called "action gags", in the next chapter.

HERO / VILLAIN RELATIONSHIP

A great way to explore character and theme is to compare and contrast protagonist and antagonist in a *scene*. In “Raiders Of The Lost Ark”, we learn about both Indy and Belloq by showing their similarities and differences in scene after scene. Often theme is explored through the differences between hero and villain. Each has a set of values, and the story pits one theory of life or justice or morality against the other. The parkour scene in “Casino Royale” contrasts the grace of the Bomb Maker to the brute force of Bond. In the airport scene Bond is up against someone equally brutal and determined in Carlos. How can you win a fight against your equal? Always look at the *characters* in your action scenes – what are the differences or similarities between the people fighting? How does that come out in the scene? What are the advantages or disadvantages of each character's methods?

Once Bond crashes through the window into the cab of the tanker truck, he and Carlos engage in a violent fist fight in a speeding truck full of explosive jet fuel. To add to the mayhem, they are being chased by three police cars, which open fire on the tires of the tanker truck to try and stop it... and end up piercing the tank and spraying jet fuel all over the place. Bond and Carlos continue to pummel each other. The cab of the truck becomes the new location - what weapons will you find there? Every time Bond comes up with a new fight strategy or throws a sledge-hammer punch, Carlos counters with something just as brutal. Is this a fight that Bond can’t win?

So, you have a fight scene in a car – what *are* the found weapons you can use? Make a list! This is the same as brainstorming an outline – keep coming up with more and more ideas, and when you think you have found them all? Come up with five more! Look for the ideas that are not obvious – the ones you have to dig for. Also look for any weapon that has a good news-bad news element to it, something that both helps *and* hurts to create some extra conflict.

SPECTACLE

It’s a big screen, and it’s our job to fill it. We want to create action scenes that are exciting and involving and larger than life - something that amazes the viewer. Even though this has been an impressive chase scene up to this point, it has yet to provide spectacle - an event so big the screen can barely contain it. So... aside from baggage trains and people movers, what do you find at airports?

As Bond and Carlos slam each other inside the tanker truck of jet fuel, chased by police cars across the tarmac, a giant 747 comes in for a landing... on top of them! The pilots in the plane see that chase on the landing strip right in their path and pull up at the last minute... but the plane’s jet engine wake lifts one of the police cars off the tarmac and hurls it across the landing strip! There’s something you don’t see every day.

I know this sounds like a “bigger explosions” note from Michael Bay, but the landing 747 *isn't* an explosion – it's an organic part of the airport location that is larger than life and very exciting. Creativity and story logic are part of our job, so instead of the cheap spectacle, we need to find the big exciting element that *fits the story*. Anyone can make an explosion bigger – that's not the sort of spectacle we want to settle for. We want to find something that fills the screen *and* makes sense.

THEN IT GETS WORSE

As Bond and Carlos battle it out in the tanker truck, we get a great string of reversals as Bond spots Carlos' gun and grabs it. When he gets ready to fire, Carlos kicks him out the door of the truck! Bond hangs on to the door and the gun, but Carlos keeps kicking until the door comes off. Bond lets go of the truck door as it skitters away... dropping the gun in the process. Bond is now hanging outside the cab, trying to keep his head from scraping the pavement. Carlos concentrates on driving - speeding the tanker truck right at the Skyfleet prototype.

Throughout this chase, we cut back to the target - antagonist's goal - on a regular basis to remind the audience (reader) what is at stake. It's not just a chase scene, not just a fight scene; there is a larger objective. Carlos is trying to blow up this beautiful new plane prototype and Bond is trying to stop him. This is not a scene where the outcome has already been decided. Just as every kick and punch in the truck cab fight is part of a string of reversals, so is the entire scene. Every time Bond seems to have the upper hand, the plane will not be destroyed. Every time Carlos counters, that plane is going to turn into scrap metal. This keeps the entire scene exciting because the outcome is changing from punch to punch.

As Bond hangs out of the speeding truck cab, trying to keep his head from making contact with the pavement; Carlos loops the seat belt through the steering wheel to keep the truck on course, grabs his cell phone, pops open the driver's door and starts to jump out! When Bond grabs him from behind - and they two continue their fight.

At the Skyfleet prototype, the police evacuate the area and create a barricade of police cars, as the speeding jet fuel truck gets closer. And closer. And closer!

Carlos savagely kicks Bond in the face and jumps out of the truck. Bond grabs the wheel, jams on the brakes... and they do not work. The truck rams through the barricade, turning police cars into wreckage. Bond tries to turn the truck away from the Skyfleet plane, but the seat belt is strapped to the steering wheel. He rips the seat belt off. The tanker truck of explosive jet fuel is almost at the Skyfleet plane. Bond twists the wheel, and the truck skids *sideways* toward the plane. Will it stop in time? Suspense builds as it gets closer. It comes to a stop inches away from the plane. Bond has saved the day! Or has he?

IRONIC TWISTS

When Bond staggers out of the truck cab, he is thrown to the ground and handcuffed by the police, who believe that *he* is the terrorist. The police take Bond to a police car and throw him over the hood to search him... as Carlos watches from a safe distance. The tanker truck full of jet fuel is only inches away from the plane. Bond watches as Carlos lifts his cell phone, smiles at Bond, and presses the remote detonation button. Bond has gone through all of this to save the day... and is now going to die when the tanker truck explodes. The detonator begins beeping faster - counting down the seconds until the explosion. Bond is laying prone over the hood of the police car, handcuffed, powerless.

Carlos hears the detonator beeping close by - very close - and finds it attached to his belt. He tries to remove it, but there isn't time. Blam. Bond's turn to smile.

Finding an interesting way to vanquish your villain is great, but a clever or ironic method is even more satisfying for the audience. Turning their own plan against them at the last minute turns the end of your action scene into more than brute force or great marksmanship. A protagonist who outsmarts the villain by turning the tables on him is someone we'll cheer on for the rest of the script. It also makes you look clever as a writer. Of course, sometimes your hero just has to shoot the sucker and get it over with. Whatever works best for the scene.

Though Bond has prevented Carlos from blowing up the plane, he has also lost his only lead to the "ellipses conspiracy", creating further complications. You want your action scene resolutions to create further conflicts, so that the script has someplace to go. Though the death of Carlos creates a dead end – kind of a story chapter end – because Bond must still track down the "ellipses" conspiracy, it also begins a "new chapter"... one that leads to LeChiffre who is the film's villain.

ACTION GAGS

Action scripts are filled with Action Scenes, and action scenes are filled with Action Gags. Action gags aren't funny; they are the actual step-by-step pieces of an action scene The "gag" part is stuntman slang for a stunt. Remember, every time you write a car chase, fist fight, or shoot out; that scene will either be performed by stunt doubles, or by the stars under the supervision of a Stunt Coordinator. The stunt coordinator's job is to make the stunt look dangerous to the audience, but be safe for the participants.

In the first edition of this book I listed the five basic kinds of stunts (Falls, Burns, Cars, Horses, and Fights) but that leaves out underwater stunts and dozens of other things stuntmen do these days. High falls like the amazing one in “Stick” (1985) used to be done by crazy stuntmen falling off of buildings for real, but now there are wires and decelerators and even CGI – so yesterday's stunt categories aren't as important as tomorrow's. Instead of thinking of stunts as what a human stuntman can do and survive, we should just let our imaginations run free and let them figure out what combination of crazy human and CGI they can use to make it work. They will always use crazy humans, so my friend Rick McCallum (“J. Edgar”) and his pal Chuck Waters (all of the “Indiana Jones” movies, most of Clint Eastwood's movies including “J. Edgar”) will be there to add realism by risking their lives. I've hung out with Chuck a few times, he's been doing stunts since 1968 and doing Eastwood's stunts since “High Plains Drifter”... and did the stair roll at the end of “The Exorcist” one day and then flew to Seattle to fall of the top of the Space Needle for “The Parallax View”.

Chuck has been Stunt Coordinator on dozens of films including “At Close Range”, and his job is to cram a fist fight or shoot out or car chase with so many individual gags that the audience is constantly excited. As screenwriters, we can make his job easier by coming up with some great gags and putting them in the script. Remember, action scenes must be fully described... but not boring. So come up with some great, exciting action gags for your script.

Though things often change on set and those great gags you came up with may not end up in the movie, our job is to make the *screenplay* exciting and fantastic so that it can become a movie in the first place. But any action scene begins with what is on the page, and on my blog I have a piece with a scene from my original “Black Thunder” screenplay and then the scene from the film – and many of the gags I came up with while sitting in my office writing end up on the big screen. In one case a gag where the hero throws a bad guy out of the bed of a speeding pick up truck onto the road... was improved by the stunt coordinator – the bad guy gets thrown onto the front window of a speeding car full of bad guys giving chase! It was a real man thrown from one moving vehicle to another – I would never have thought that possible when I was writing the screenplay. So, don't limit yourself!

Last chapter when we looked at “Found Weapons” and you thought about all of the weapons you could find in a car, each of those “weapons” and the bit where are used is a “gag”. And if that car is involved in a car chase, all of the various locations for the car chase and the obstacles at those locations are “gags” as well. Once you come up with your unique car chase or shoot out or fight scene, there are dozens of things that happen within that fight and those are the “gags”. You want to come up with unique and unusual “gags”. We put all of these little pieces, these details, together and end up with an exciting fight scene and car chase.

Ages ago I created a series of exciting action gags for a fight scene after seeing Jackie Chan in "The Big Brawl". Chan fights a pair of bad guys with a wooden bench; using the legs to hit them, and the seat as a shield. I used that gag as a base, but used a kitchen chair instead. Using a chair as a weapon gave my hero a lion tamer feel. He could hit someone with the legs, use the seat as a shield, and pin a villain against the wall using all four legs. From that gag, I added a few flips, with the chair as the fulcrum, and ended up breaking the chair over the villain's head. Later, the villain gets the drop on our hero, and he uses a broken chair leg as a club. When I wrote the scene, I studied a chair in my dining room and tried to figure out every single way it could be used as a weapon. Once I had a dozen "chair fight gags", I wrote my scene. I've done other scenes with standing floor lamps as weapons (sword / bo / lance / club / and a dandy electric cattle prod after the bulb breaks) and fist fights in unusual places (elevator / roof top / bathroom / in a speeding car / kitchen / on a

boat). Let your imagination run wild!

Let's take a look at that train scene in “Wanted”. Our hero Wesley (James McAvoy) is chasing Cross (Thomas Kretschmann) – the man who murdered his father – and both are on a speeding bullet train, with Wesley's bad ass mentor Fox (Angelina Jolie) speeding in a car on the country road that runs parallel to the train tracks. Wesley thinks he has Cross cornered in a train car... but he isn't there. He's *behind* Wesley! They grapple close to a train window. In the speeding car, Fox things she has a clear shot and fires at Cross. In the train, Cross sees the muzzle flare and moves away – the bullet misses. I guess I should mention this film is about practically super human marksmen – from a comic book where they *were* superhuman. Cross and Wesley hit the floor, and Cross skitters away down the aisle. Wesley pulls his gun – but screaming passengers get in his way. Cross gets into the next train car, and aims at Fox in the speeding car – ready to kill her! That's when Wesley comes through the door and both men fire at each other! And the bullets *hit each other* and deflect! Wesley prepares to fire again, when a panicked passenger bolts out of her seat and blocks his shot. But Wesley knows how to “bend a bullet like Beckham” and fires *around* the screaming woman at Cross... who fires at the bullet – deflecting it again. This is like a sword fight with *bullets* - parry and thrust!

In the speeding car, Fox fastens her seat belt and drives off the pavement, into a roadside drainage ditch... which she uses as a ramp to blast her car into the air.. and *into the train* - right between Cross and Wesley! She's dazed – the car is *inside the speeding bullet train*. Now when Cross and Wesley fire at each other – Fox is in the cross-fire! Both men run out of shells at the same time and take cover while slapping in a new magazine. When they pop up to fire...

The bullet train goes into a tunnel – and the part of the car that is protruding from the side of the train gets smashed – raining debris outside the train. The interior lights of the train go dark – but that doesn't stop Cross and Wesley from shooting at each other. With Fox still stuck between them in what is left of the car. Bullets ricochet and spark – creating moments of light in the darkness. Then the train comes to the end of the tunnel, where a bridge spans a *deep* canyon. Cross escapes into the next train car. Wesley has to climb *over* Fox's wrecked automobile to give chase. The Train Conductor pulls the emergency brake. The train wheels spark... and Wesley goes sliding down the train aisle from the sudden stop... slamming into the doors. He gets back on his feet and continues his pursuit of Cross...

When part of the car wreckage lodged under the train causes it to derail on the bridge! One of the train cars jack knifes off the bridge, pulling the others cars with it one-by-one! Fox scrambles out of her car as the whole back half of the train jumps the track and dangles over the side... one of the train cars uncoupling and falling all of the way down. Fox flies *outside the train* and grabs hold of the window frame... hanging hundreds of feet over the bottom of the canyon. She begins climbing up the outside of the train, trying to get to safety. Inside the train, Wesley is still chasing Cross – but both are climbing up the dangling train cars. The doors between cars are almost impossible to open – no power and gravity is pulling Wesley in the opposite direction.

While Wesley climbs up the train, using the seats tops as a ladder, Fox climbs up the exterior of the train using the broken windows. But the weight of the derailed cars begins to pull the rest of the train out of the tunnel and off the tracks, creating a race against time. Just as Wesley gets to the top dangling car... the coupling breaks and the other cars *plummet* into the ravine! Wesley is now hanging out the rear door... feet kicking the air. Sweaty fingers gripping for his life. Then the train car shakes... and one of Wesley's hands loses its grip. That's when someone inside the train car grabs his arm and hauls him to safety, Fox? No... Cross!

Okay, see how an action scene that you might think of as “chase and shoot out on a bullet train” actually has all of these exciting details? That was a three minute segment of that scene – there's more! But all of those exciting things happen in that three minutes of screen time – and whether it's a *digital* stunt woman climbing up the exterior of that derailed train or a real person, that's one “gag” in a scene *filled* with them. You may have noticed the reversals in that scene, and we will learn how to use those in a moment.

Once you've filled your action sequences with dozens of interesting, fresh, action gags; your script will be so much fun to read that producers will fight over who will get to make it. Action gags may not be funny, but

they sure are *fun*. And they're the cornerstone of every great action scene. Here are some methods to come up with new action gags and action scenes to help you brainstorm up something we haven't seen before.

A DOZEN TIPS TO CREATE

NEW ACTION SCENES

1) Combine two existing action gags to create a third. How about a foot chase of the roofs of cars stopped at a red light... then the light turns green and you have “car surfing”? I've combined fist fights and shoot outs to create really frightening close quarters shoot outs where pistols are used as clubs between gunshots. How about a car chase where the driver and passenger have to switch places? I have a scene in “Sleeper Agent” that begins as a car chased by motorcycles – exchanging gunfire – then one of the bad guys jumps off their motorcycle and climbs through the sun room inside the car with his machine gun – and we have a *very* close quarters gun fight in the middle of a car chase! Or how about combining a car chase and a safe cracking scene from a heist movie? “Fast Five” has that great opening scene where the cars are chasing the train, pull up along side it... and “peel” open the door on an armored security container to rob the contents – while the train is still speeding down the tracks! Take two ideas, twist them together, and you end up with something fresh and exciting.

2) Take the gag <u>past</u> the limit. Knock it up a level. In "The French Connection"s car chase, pedestrians jump out of the way of the moving vehicles; "The Corruptor" takes it well past the limit by hitting a bunch of innocent people on the sidewalk. You never want to pull your punches in an action scene – you want to take things to the limit... and then maybe over the line. The reason why we remember gags like Ah-nuld using the bad guy as a human shield – and the bad guy getting *riddled with bullets* - is that it's over the line. You just don't do those things in movies! There's a great gag in the beginning of “Terminator 2” where Ah-nuld throws a biker across the room – through the window into the bar's kitchen - and the biker lands on top of the stove – his face right on the hot grill! The problem with this method is that bigger isn't usually better, and eventually we'll run out of violence frontiers... everything will end up a Michael Bay “bigger explosions” movie. But if you can find the *clever* way to take things past the limit, go for it!

3) Mixing genres. Taking an action gag usually associated with one genre and using it in a different genre. Using horse stunts with motorcycles. "Raiders Of The Lost Ark" transfers some of Yakima Canutt's great stunts from "Stagecoach" (1939) to a motorcycle / truck chase. You can do horse chases and stunts on motorcycles, and flip that like they did in the remake of “3:10 To Yuma” and use modern day car chase gags with horses and wagons. In the *script* to “Night Hunter” I have a vampire hunter hero with a shotgun that shoots wooden stakes. Don't let genre limit you – if you see a great *dance move* in a musical, you might use that in as a great fight scene gag. Donald O'Connor ran up a wall and flipped over onto his feet in “Singing In The Rain” - and I've seen that gag used in a martial arts film. I've seen sword fights with gun barrels – knocking the gun barrel so that it misses the hero. Hey, Jean-Claude Van Damme has used *ballet moves* in films like Mark Verheiden's “Time Cop” to avoid being killed. You've seen that Western scene where the horse has to jump across the ravine from one cliff to another? Okay, in “True Lies” we get that scene with the bad guy on a motorcycle and Ah-nuld on a horse. I've used the western gag of gunfighters facing off for a quick draw contest many times, and in many unusual locations.

4) Unusual locations. We're used to seeing those quick draw contests on dusty western streets... so let's stage them someplace else! In "Show Of Force" my Top Gun hero was engaged in an air battle with the villain. These sequences usually end with the hero shooting down the villain's plane, but that's the cliche I wanted to avoid. So I had them play chicken (from 1950s juvenile delinquent movies) and fire missiles at each other (the airplane version of the "high noon" shoot out). In those 1950s juvenile delinquent movies, there was always some guy who rolled out of the car only seconds before impact. So I had my hero eject before the planes slammed into each other... but the villain ejects, too! The hero and villain pop their parachutes about a hundred yards away from each other... and engage in a "high noon" shoot out in the sky! A "para-shoot out"! From the dusty western streets to the sky thousands of feet above the ground!

5) Role reversals. Sometimes a cliche action gag can be made fresh and exciting just by swapping the hero and villain. We are used to seeing heroes following certain patterns and villains following other patterns... and that makes for a predictable scene. I've written some action scenes, then did a cut-and-paste to swap

hero and villain names and see what I end up with. Often it's a more interesting scene. A scene in “Night Hunter” was inspired by the Tech Noir Bar shootout in “The Terminator” - I wondered what would happen if it was the *hero* blasting away in a crowded night club and the villain trying to get away? Another great role reversal is hero and love interest – and the example I use when I teach my 2 day class is “Romancing The Stone” where rough-tough action guy Michael Douglas is trying to scale a wall to save writer Kathleen Turner from the evil villain Zolo... except he can't get up the damned wall, so *she* has to save herself. She becomes the bad-ass fighter in the scene. Again, there are certain patterns that love interests and sidekicks and heroes follow – and mixing them up can result in unexpected elements in a scene. I've created some interesting action scenes just by writing the scene then swapping the characters.

6) Props. Watch any Jackie Chan movie for an example. Chan loves to use whatever is available as a lethal weapon. In "Rumble In The Bronx" there's a fight in a grocery store that uses shopping carts, refrigerated cases, canned foods, and everything else you might find in the location as a weapon. Think about the location where your action scene takes place - what would you find there? How could you use it in a fight? I wrote an article for Script Magazine called “Hitchcock's Chocolates” about an Alfred Hitchcock theory that you use the elements of the locations and characters in your story. His film “Secret Agent” took place in Switzerland, so there was skiing and mountain climbing and a big scene in a chocolate factory... and the bad guy spies smuggled messages out in coded candy bar wrappers! So if you have a fight in a garden shed, using a rake or hoe as a weapon makes sense. This is not just a clever way to spice up a fight scene, it's *organic* - if you have a fight scene in a Starbucks Coffee shop, what are the weapons? If someone pulls out a meat cleaver, the audience will wonder where that came from. Using the weapons that are organic to the location or the character just makes sense... and combining this with unusual locations for an action scene results in all kinds of great props to use as fight scene gags.

7) Flipping the cliche. Just take what the audience expects to see and flip it just when they think they know what's coming next. In my "Dead Run" script I decided to play with cliches in my action scenes. I decided to end my car chase on a draw bridge. You've seen it a million times before: the hero's car jumps the gap in the bridge but the villain's car can't make it. Not in my script! The hero's car loses speed as it drives up the bridge, doesn't quite make the jump... gets wedged between both halves of the bridge. Stuck! The villain's car stops his car behind the hero's car, grabs his gun and starts shooting! The hero is a sitting duck! Only one way out - he opens the door and dives into the river below. Now he's a duck in the water - nothing to hide behind as the villain fires down at him! The only cover the hero can find - his car on the draw bridge. The villain has trouble shooting around it. Safety? Nope! As the draw bridge opens, the car gets unstuck... and falls down onto the hero! I twisted around the old "car jumps the draw bridge" cliche so that the expected doesn't happen.

8) Upside down action. A cousin to flipping the cliche, this method uses the exact opposite of the scene we've seen before. Instead of a high speed car chase, we do the slowest car chase in history (stuck in rush hour traffic, moving at five miles per hour). A great example of this is when Goldfinger has James Bond strapped to the table and the laser beam is inching up towards his crotch and Bond says, “Do you expect me to talk?” and that is exactly what scenes like this are about. The villain tortures the hero for information or vice-versa. We've seen it in a million movies. But Goldfinger responds, “No, I expect you to die,” and *walks away*! I have a scene in a script where a car is trying to run over the hero... so the hero turn and runs straight at the car! If a scene works one way, do the opposite to find an original scene.

9) Personalize it or make it realistic. Find the detail that makes it different. We are so used to seeing Hollywood shoot outs that we forget what happens in real shoot outs. An automatic weapon not only sprays bullets, it sprays hot brass shell casings. You don't want to get hit by these. Have you ever seen a movie where the hero and villain are wrestling with a machine gun, and the hero pulls the trigger so that the hot brass hits the villain in the face? Did you know that a gun barrel becomes hot after firing and will burn your hand if you grab it? When you punch someone in the head, there's a good chance you'll break a knuckle or two. These details make great action gags, and can take your action sequence in a fresh new direction. After you've broken your hand, do you hit the guy again? Or start kicking him?

10) Gee whiz! Let your imagination run wild and come up with something weird. We've probably covered this with “Wanted”s car driving into a train and the whole bend it like Beckham shooting *around* people, but using your imagination to create an amazing action scene is a great way to get your scripts noticed... and have one of those scenes people talk about long after they've seen the movie. "The Matrix" has some wild action gags - like Carrie-Anne Moss jumping off a roof, through a small window in the building across the street, rolling down a flight of stairs and popping up with her guns ready for action. Outrageous! Hey, and that's not even mentioning the whole “bullet time” shoot out. Challenge yourself to come up with the most amazing action gags you can think of. The wilder the better! We want them to skim the dialogue because they can't wait to get to your next action sequence.

11) Another exciting method for creating action gags is to MacGyverize your props. In my “Last Stand” screenplay I have a fight in a kitchen that uses all kinds of weaponized household items you would find in your kitchen cupboards. Spray oven cleaner and a match makes a great blow torch. Mix cooking oil and dish soap and you get napalm. Ammonia and bleach makes poison gas. Hey, and we haven't even opened the knife drawer, yet! Actually, I think in that scene when the hero *does* open the knife drawer, he reaches in and grabs... the potato masher! Not the best weapon in a fight. But that's part of the fun of found weapons – they don't only include the things that would make great weapons, there's also the things that are mostly useless in a fight. Mostly. If you get stuck with the potato masher – how do you use it as a weapon? One of the two scenes that sold my “Night Hunter” script had the hero lose all of his weapons and have to dumpster dive for new weapons. He created shuriken fighting stars from food can lids and a bo from a broken broom handle. Though this was a cool scene, writing it required that I pick through garbage to see what might make a good weapon... kind of messy and smelly research. In Joe Carnahan's “The Grey” Liam Neeson uses broken airline miniature bottles to make a pair of deadly brass knuckles. If your hero is trapped in a class room with a box of paperclips, a rubber band, and a ruler – how would he defend himself?

12) Unusual uses. A cousin to MacGyverizing – some items have a boring common use, but with some imagination can be used for evil! My friend Bob Stone bought a ceramic frog for his garden that croaked whenever anyone passed in front of it. Kind of a joke thing... but I came up with a slightly different use for it, and in my “Baker Touch” script I have a spooky scene where an FBI Agent is creeping through a bank robbery gang's house, knowing that there are four armed men hiding somewhere inside. But the robbers have set up a dozen of these ceramic frogs as alarms. Every time she triggers a frog's croaking, she spins – ready to fire... And the hidden bank robbers know her position! The frogs make great gags throughout the scene – creating jump moments and suspense. Now whenever I see something innocent that can be used for a potentially evil purpose in an action scene I write it down. You know those Birthday cards that allow you to record your own greeting? Imagine recording “Here I am!” on a dozen of them and setting each to trigger when someone opens a door? In “Rear Window” Jimmy Stewart uses his camera's flash to blind the man trying to attack him. I think with things like this, the more “innocent” an item is, the more fun it is to use it as a weapon. If you can find a way to use a Teddy Bear as a weapon, I guarantee people will be talking about that after the movie.

I always jot down props and action gag ideas and action scene ideas. You never know when you'll be writing an action scene and need a great gag, flip through the note cards and find the perfect thing to make my scene work. Keep your eyes open for the details in life – that's where you'll spot the cool action gags. That ladder on the back of the SUV stuck in traffic next to you?

REVERSALS AND RUGPULLS

Now that we have our original action scenes and some great action gags, how do we keep those scenes exciting? Shane ("Lethal Weapon") Black says: "The key to a good action scene is reversals. The "Star Wars" movies work because they are FULL of reversals."

What's a reversal, you ask? Let Shane explain: "It's like a good news, bad news joke. The bad news is, you get thrown out of an airplane. The good news is, you're wearing a parachute. The bad news is, your rip cord breaks. The good news is, you have a back up 'chute. The bad news is, you can't reach the cord. Back and forth, just like that, until the character reaches the ground. He's gonna die... no, he's not... Reversal, reversal, reversal."

There are two types of reversals – Story Reversals and Scene Reversals. Story Reversals are when a character has a plan or the audience has an expectation and it runs into a dead end, so that the character must figure out a new plan. The romantic lead finally works up the nerve to ask person of their dreams out on a date... except they are with their new beau. Reversal. Now the story must go in a different direction. Story Reversals are like rocks and mountains in the way of a river – the river will still flow to its destination (the sea), but it will have to work its way around the obstacles. Shane was talking about Scene Reversals, which are the cornerstone of any great action scene. These are little things that come in the way of moment-by-moment plans. The hero reaches out to grab a fallen gun and the villain kicks it away. But filling your action scenes with Scene Reversals you keep them exciting and involving and unpredictable. It's not just two people fighting – which can get boring after a sentence or two – it's a battle where advantage changes with every line.

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT IT WAS SAFE

Reversals make your action scenes unpredictable and exciting. It's one cliffhanger after another, and the audience stays on the edge of their seats wondering what will happen next.

In "The Fugitive" Harrison Ford as Richard Kimble is being chased down the stairs by Agent Gerard. Kimble reaches the lobby, but Gerard is right behind him. Kimble breaks through a crowd of people, and sees the automatic exit door only a few feet away. But the doors are whooshing closed. Gerard is right behind him. Kimble squeezes through the doors... but his foot gets stuck! Gerard draws his gun, and gets ready to shoot. Kimble tries to wiggle his foot out. Gerard takes aim. Kimble squeezes his foot out of the door. Gerard fires! Kimble hits the dirt. Gerard re-aims. Kimble stumbles to his feet. Gerard has a PERFECT shot and squeezes the trigger. BANG! The glass scars... it's bullet proof. Kimble gets away.

The great thing about reversals is that they are no cost excitement – you could spend millions of a big car chase, but a great reversal costs nothing. I interviewed Robert Rodriguez for Script Magazine, and the budget for his first film "El Mariachi" was only $7,000.00 - so there was no money for special effects, stars, or locations. The only thing Robert had was the script, and he filled it with reversals.

My favorite example from the film is the scene where our hero is being chased down the street by armed killers and comes to an intersection. The light is against him. The killers are gaining. Our hero grabs the tailgate of a passing pick up truck and flips inside the bed. The killers get to the intersection and see the pick up truck zooming away. Our hero breathes a sigh of relief... he's safe! The villain gets on his walkie talkie and tells his henchman that the hero has escaped in a truck, can the henchman head him off? In the pick up truck bed, our hero ducks down so that no one can see him. The henchman tells the villain: "I don't need to head him off. He jumped in the back of MY pick up truck. Want me to bring him around?" The hero panics as the pick up truck swings around and takes him back to the villain!

The cantina shoot out in the sequel/remake “Desperado” is wall-to-wall reversals... my favorite is when the Mariachi and the Assassin slide down the bar top and put their guns to each other's heads and pull the triggers: click! Click! Now they are grabbing fallen guns from the hands of dead bad guys trying to find one with ammunition!

REVERSALS IN ACTION

When I was a guest speaker at the Sacramento Film Festival a few years ago, I used a scene from “Road Warrior” to show how reversals work... but for the new edition of the book I thought it would be fun to use a scene from “Raiders Of The Lost Ark”, so here is the “Flying Wing Scene. The set up: Indiana Jones and Marion have been captured by the Nazis... who also have Ark. They escape – but are deep in Nazi controlled territory and must find a way out. That's when Indy spots the Flying Wing and tells Marion that they will *fly* out of here. He tells her to remove the wheel blocks so that they can take off while he deals with the pilot. Indy climbs the wing to deal with the Pilot in the cockpit...

BAD NEWS: When Indy gets partway up the wing, a Soldier comes up behind him with a huge monkeywrench.

GOOD NEWS: Indy slides down the wing to fight him. This is good news, because they are in the middle of a Nazi camp, and if the Soldier had called for help there would be hundreds of soldiers to deal with.

BAD NEWS: The Soldier swings the monkeywrench at Indy's head.

GOOD NEWS: Indy catches his arm and pushes him back until the monkeywrench hits one of the plane's two whirring propellers – kicking the wrench out of his hands. Now the fight is more even, and Indy K.O.s the Soldier.

BAD NEWS: The biggest, baddest, baldest Nazi soldier in the world sees Indy knock down knock down the other soldier and wants to get into this fight... but he's going to take off his shirt to expose his amazing build first.

GOOD NEWS: Marion grabs the first set of wheel blocks from the plane. One set down, one to go!

BAD NEWS: The Big Nazi just slams Indy in the face, knocking him down. The Big Nazi then *picks Indy up* to throw him...

GOOD NEWS: Indy bites the Big Nazi's arm to get him to let go.

BAD NEWS: The Big Nazi still throws Indy – just probably not as far as if he hadn't been bitten. Hey, maybe that's good news?

GOOD NEWS: Indy runs around the plane – away from the Big Nazi!

BAD NEWS: Right into the Pilot's pistol sights! The Pilot carefully aims at Indy's head! The Pilot fires – but misses because the plane is slowly moving. Re-aims!

GOOD NEWS: Indy sees the Pilot and runs away... back to the Big Nazi! Okay, that's not entirely good news.

BAD NEWS: The Big Nazi *knocks* Indy back to the front of the plane!

WORSE NEWS: Right into the Pilot's pistol sights again! The Pilot gets ready to fire!

GOOD NEWS: The Big Nazi steps in the Pilot's way and begins beating the crap out of Indy. Again – This is good news? The Big Nazi knocks Indy to the ground... and prepares to stomp him. I guess that is better than being shot in the head.

BAD NEWS: Indy throws dirt in the Big Nazi's eyes, blinding him. Okay, you might think that sounds like

Good News, except when the Big Nazi staggers away – the Pilot has a clear shot at Indy's *head* and prepares to pull the trigger!

GOOD NEWS: Marion *slams* the wheel blocks into the Pilot's head, and he goes down in the cockpit – firing the gun... and landing on the throttle!

WEIRD NEWS: Because Marion has only pulled the wheel blocks from one side of the plane, once the Pilot falls onto the controls it begins a slow pirouette. Spinning in a circle with the blocked wheels at the center. It's like ballet – with propellers.

BAD NEWS: The Big Nazi is just wailing on Indy.

GOOD NEWS: Marion gets into the cockpit to try and stop the plane from moving, but...

BAD NEWS: Can't get the pilot off the controls – dude is heavy – and...

WORSE NEWS: The cockpit canopy slams down – trapping her inside the plane with the unconscious Pilot. She can not get out – the canopy is locked somehow.

MORE BAD NEWS: The Big Nazi continues to pound on Indy.

MORE WORSE NEWS: Marion sees a troop truck filled with Nazi Soldiers drive by... stop when they see the spinning plane... and head right towards them!

GOOD NEWS: Marion scrambles into the plane's “tail gun” compartment, aims at the truckload of soldiers, and opens fire. Killing all but one, who scrambles for cover.

BAD NEWS: Because the plane is doing that slow pirouette – Marion can no longer fire at the one last soldier – he's behind her now. Grabbing his gun. Getting ready to fire.

WORSE NEWS: The plane's wing slices into a fuel tanker truck nearby – spraying gallons of gasoline all over!

GOOD NEWS: The plane finally comes around and Marion gets the last soldier moments before he can fire and get her.

BAD NEWS: Indy has been knocked to the ground by the Big Nazi... right in the path of the moving plane wheels!

GOOD NEWS: Indy dives *behind* the plane wheels – so that the wheels are between him and the Big Nazi. Better news – he sees the pilot's fallen pistol! He reaches for it...

BAD NEWS: The plane's wheels run over the gun... and the wheels are no longer between him and the Big Nazi, who lunges for him!

WORSE NEWS: Remember that tanker truck spilling gasoline? Well a river of gasoline has reaches the troop truck... which EXPLODES! This is worse news because just over the hill where there are hundreds of Nazi soldiers? They see that explosion and the commander orders some soldiers to stay with the Ark while others go to investigate. Indy and Marion will soon be massively outnumbered and captured again!

EVEN WORSE NEWS: Another river of gasoline is flowing to the plane – and the burning exploded troop truck's gasoline river of *burning* gas is now headed to the plane where Marion is trapped!

GOOD NEWS: Indy gets away from the Big Nazi long enough to climb the wing to try and free Marion... but the canopy is stuck!

BAD NEWS: The Big Nazi climbs up the wing and knocks Indy off!

WORSE NEWS: That river of burning gas is getting closer... closer... closer!

GOOD NEWS: Indy gets some sort of adrenaline rush and POUNCES on the Big Nazi – slamming him in the face again and again and again!

BAD NEWS: It's like he's hitting a brick wall. The Big Nazi just takes the slams to the face without even blinking! Then SLAMS Indy so hard he bounces onto the ground... unable to move. Indy has given it his best shot – and failed. He is going to die.

WORSE NEWS: The Big Nazi moves up to STOMP on Indy – and kill him.

GOOD NEWS: Indy looks up, preparing to die... then covers his face... As the propeller hits the Big Nazi and cuts him to ribbons. Yech! There's a cool shot where the Big Nazi's blood spray over the red & white swastika on the tail of the plane – turning it mostly red.

BAD NEWS: That burning river of gasoline? Almost to the plane. Marion is pounding on the cockpit canopy and can not get it open. She is about to be burned alive.

GOOD NEWS: Indy finds the Pilot's fallen gun, grabs it, scrambles up the wing...

BAD NEWS: The burning river of gasoline is only inches away.

GOOD NEWS: Indy blasts the canopy locks off with the pistol, pulls Marion out of the plane and they run away as the plane and everything else blows sky high! A MASSIVE EXPLOSION!

BAD NEWS: A bunch of Nazi soldiers arrive at the burning wreckage – so Indy and Marion have to hide... and they have no way to escape anymore now that the plane is a burning wreck, and the Nazi's have the Ark, and will probably win the war...

GOOD NEWS: Indy's Arab pal Sallah finds them before all of those Nazi soldiers and tells him: If you want the Ark, they are loading it onto a truck for Cairo!

See how the Good News/Bad News aspect of reversals works? Scene Reversals ask a question: will Indy be able to survive the Big Nazi stomping him to death? Then giving you an answer that creates a brand new question: the Big Nazi gets shredded by the propeller, but now how will Indy be able to get Marion out of the cockpit before the river of fire blows them both to smithereens? Each solution creates a brand new problem. A reader can't put the script down - there's always an unanswered question, an unsolved problem. Before the reader knows what's happening they have been drawn into the protagonist's problems. They are hooked! Emotionally involved in the scene. That is the reason why we remember this scene from a 1981 movie over thirty years later! Reversals *work*!

The best way to create a reversal is to look for the road less traveled. In any scene, there are at least three choices. Pick the one you've never (or seldom) seen. Then think "good news, bad news". What if the villain has a 13 shot Browning and the hero has a 5 shot Smith and Wesson? You're setting up a reversal, by having the hero run out of bullets (at a critical moment, of course). When the hero finally gets the villain in his sights and pulls the trigger... Click! Bad news. Then, let's say, the villain raises his gun. Worse news. But the hero Throws his empty gun at the villain, hitting him in the face. Good news! The villain shakes it off (he's really macho) and re-aims. Bad news! Now keep it going for an entire action scene, and you'll create a page turner that no reader can skim.

PLOT TWISTS

There was a time before “The Sixth Sense” when a plot twist didn't have to be something that came at the end and changed the whole meaning of the story. When a Plot Twist could happen in the middle of the script, and just change the course of the story. Let's go back to that time for this chapter... and our action screenplays. Just as a Scene Reversal is a dead end or element that changes the actions within a scene, a Story Reversal is the same thing on a story level. A Plot Twist is when it's more than just a dead end or a change – it's a completely unexpected change that twists the story in a different direction. More on the level of “Luke, I am your father” than the endings of “The Sixth Sense” or the original “Planet Of The Apes” (where the ending changed the whole story we've just seen). A plot twist can be something physical like when they finally get into the safe in “Tower Heist”... and it's empty! Or it can be something emotional like the scene in “From Paris With Love” where the geeky CIA hero discovers that the assassin he has been stalking... is his fiance. My favorite twist is from Alfred Hitchcock's early film “The 39 Steps” when our man-on-the-run-hero Richard Hannay goes to the local authorities – Professor Jordan, kind of the village mayor – and tells him that there is a ring of spies operating in his area, lead by a man who is missing the top section of his little finger... and Jordan raises his hand and says: “Like this?” Twist! Now the man he thought was the solution to his problems ends up *being* his problems. What I love about this twist is the way it is casually revealed that Jordan is the villain.

One of the most common problems with new scripts is that they're often too predictable. The reader *knows* what's going to happen next, so why read on? Already we're up against the conventions of the genre - we know the hero will usually win and the villain will be vanquished. So our job as action writers is to make sure the story doesn't take a direct path from beginning to end, but corkscrews a little. Zigs when you think it's going to zag. The great thing about twists is that they not only make the story unpredictable, they also give the story a conflict boost and sometimes make us doubt the hero actually will be triumphant.

In William Goldman's "Marathon Man", Babe's spy brother dies in his arms after being murdered by the villain, Zell. His brother's partner Janey asks if his brother said anything before he died. Any important information? Babe says "No". Later in the film, Babe has been kidnapped by Zell, who asks the same question... Only Zell is using a dentist's drill to jog Babe's memory. It's the signature scene in the film – and the one that had audiences screaming in the cinema. Zell, who was a Nazi dentist during World War Two and extracted many gold teeth from Jews in concentration camps knows how to use a drill on someone's teeth to create the most pain possible... and because we have all been to the dentist, we feel Babe's pain. “Is it safe?” Suddenly, Janey breaks into Zell's secret hide-out and rescues Babe. As they speed away, Janey asks Babe what he told Zell. "You've got to tell me." After Babe answers, Janey turns the car around and takes him *back* to Zell's hide-out! Twist! Janey is a bad guy!

When we look back on this twist, it makes perfect sense. From the very beginning, Janey was trying to find out what Babe's brother told him. The "rescue" only makes sense if Janey is a bad guy. How else would he have known the location of Zell's secret hide-out?

That's the most important rule about twists: They have to be logical upon reflection - it has to make sense and be set up. In this BluRay age the audience can zip back and look for the clues. If Janey was a bad guy in the rescue scene, he was a bad guy in the scenes before, right? He didn't just turn bad on the spot. This goes back to Lajos Egri's “No honest man will becomes a thief overnight; no thief will become an honest man in the same period of time." He points out that good drama requires a character to go from one state to another (to grow, to change), but the change must be gradual... or the character may have always secretly been a bad guy. But if the character has always secretly been a villain, they must be consistent. In “Marathon Man”, once we know that Janey is working for Zell we can zip back and see that he was *always* working for Zell – he has always wanted to know if Babe's brother told him anything before he died. Janey is consistent. The twist isn't contrived by the writer at the last minute – the twist just revealed something that was there all along.

FORESHADOWING

A plot twist may change the story for the hero and the audience, but it doesn't *actually* change anything – it just reveals what has always been true. If the hero's best friend is revealed as a villain on page 73, he was also a villain on page 37... and needs to act like it. Just because *we* don't know the best friend is a villain doesn't mean the *best friend* doesn't know it – of course he knows who he is and what his motives are!

The clues to the twist are called "Foreshadowing", and they are required for every twist. We need to be able to watch the film a second time and see all of those clues we missed the first time around. The best example of this is “The Sixth Sense”, because everyone has seen it... and few saw that big twist at the end coming. (Spoilers for those who have not seen the film!) When we come to the end and it is revealed that Bruce Willis is *dead*, it's a huge shock. An amazing twist! But when we watch the film for the second time, we wonder why we didn't see that twist coming – it's so obvious! The kid sees dead people... like Bruce Willis! There's that great scene where Bruce Willis has an anniversary dinner with his wife... and she's so cold and distant. When he talks, she completely ignores him as if he isn't there... because he isn't there – he's dead! That scene was a big emotional moment the first time I saw it, because I thought it was just a marriage on the rocks scene. And everything about that scene can be taken in two ways – as their relationship coming to an end the first time you see it... and that he's dead and doesn't know it the second time you see it. His character never opens a door, is never shown driving (he takes the bus), and the only person he really interacts with is the kid... the kid who sees dead people. That is how all twists should work – once the secret truth has been revealed you should be able to go back and spot all of the places the writer foreshadowed that twist... and if *you* are the writer? Part of the *fun* is writing those scenes because you know that twist is coming.

There's a good twist in Ernest Lehman's "North By Northwest". Cary Grant is chasing a man named George Kaplan, who is (in turn) chasing James Mason (the villain). Grant hops on board a train bound for Grand Rapids, Michigan (Kaplan's destination). In the train he meets Eva Marie Saint, who is also bound for Grand Rapids. They have an affair. When the train reaches Grand Rapids, Eva Marie Saint lures him into a trap! She's James Mason's mistress! One of the villains! It's a great twist, that holds up to logical examination. We know that the hero and the villain have the same destination. The train travels to that destination. We are given a clue: We *know* that the villain is on the train. The only thing we *don't* know, is that the villain and Eva Marie Saint are in cahoots. Once that is revealed, it all makes sense. Even the affair on the train was designed to control him so that he didn't discover the villain was on the train.

Be careful when foreshadowing your twist that you don't "Telegraph" it. You want the audience to find the clues *after* the twist, not *before* it (or it isn't really a twist). This is a balancing act which takes some practice before you'll perfect it. One method is to plant the clue to your twist as early as possible, to give the audience lots of time to forget it. That way, after the twist occurs, they'll remember the foreshadowing and say to themselves: "I should have seen it coming!" If you think about “The Sixth Sense” Bruce Willis gets shot in the first few minutes of the film, so when we see him after the fade out and time has passed, we just assume he got out of the hospital and has gone back to work. And by the time the twist is revealed we have completely forgotten that he was shot in the first few minutes.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?

The best way to “hide” a twist is through magic. A magician uses *Diversion* and *Anticipation* to trick the audience. When a magician shows you that there's nothing up his sleeve, he is secretly pulling a card from the secret pocket in the back of his coat and sliding it under a glass of water on the table. You have focused your attention on his sleeve... and it's a diversion. His wand is a diversion. Those flourishes are diversions. For the remainder of the trick, you anticipate that the card will appear in the hand at the end of that sleeve, and are completely surprised when the card turns up under a glass of water on the table.

“The Sixth Sense” is also a good example of the use of a diversion. Before we know that twist end, we believe that it is the story of a child psychologist who failed with one very disturbed patient and now has a new patient – a young boy – who seems even more troubled. Will he be able to save this patient? Or will the boy kill himself like his other patient? We are so focused on Willis trying to break through to the kid that we don't notice all of those clues that he's really dead. And when Willis finally breaks through and the kid explains what's troubling him – that he sees dead people – about halfway through the film, instead of thinking that Willis is dead, we worry that the kid is more disturbed than we originally thought. And we also worry that rational child psychologist Willis will not believe the kid... and the kill will become worse due to Willis screwing up... as he did before with that other patient who killed himself. While we are worried about Willis making the same fatal mistake twice, we don't even notice even more foreshadowing. And when we begin seeing the dead people – the hanging students, the murdered little girl – we are scared and fear that Willis will not believe the kid really can see dead people. We don't think: Hey, the kid can see Willis, right? The kid diversion keeps “expanding” and occupying our thoughts so that we don't see the obvious until it is revealed to us at the end. It's a great diversion.

When crafting your twist, the best way to keep from “telegraphing” it is with a strong diversion – just like a magician doing a magic trick. While the audience is worried about the troubled boy they never notice the dead protagonist.

A TWISTED EXAMPLE

There's an old Hitchcock Presents episode about a guy who gets pulled over by the police on his way home from work. The guy says "I know I was speeding, but can you give me a break? It's my birthday, and my wife's making a special dinner." The cops put him in handcuffs. "We aren't arresting you for speeding... we're arresting you for *murder*."

Our hero says there must be a mix up, he's innocent. "They're all innocent." The hero *pleads*. It's his birthday. His wife is waiting at home. "You've got the wrong man." One of the policemen shows him a sketch of the killer... and it's our hero!

Now our hero begins to panic. It's his birthday. Things like this aren't supposed to happen on your birthday. Our hero again pleads innocence. The mean policeman says, "That's it. We were going to take you to the station-house, but now we're going to take you to an old warehouse and beat a confession out of you."

Our hero really panics when the police car turns into an industrial section and pulls up in front of an old warehouse. He pleads, "I'm innocent. Don't beat me!" The policemen drag him into the dark warehouse and flip on the lights. "Surprise!" It's a surprise birthday party thrown by his wife and friends!

When you look back on this episode, you realize that the surprise party is the logical thing to happen on our hero's birthday... getting arrested for murder isn't. The arrest was the *diversion* from the surprise party. When the policemen take him into the warehouse, we *anticipate* it's because they want to beat a confession out of him. Boy, are we surprised! This twist works because the logical course of events (the surprise birthday party) is the twist. By leading the audience to believe it's one thing, then revealing that it's almost the opposite – we have a great twist.

When we hold the diversion up to the light, we see just how flimsy it is: What are the odds that someone who looks just like you committed a murder? What are the odds that the cops would spot you driving around and arrest you for the murder? And don't these cops seem a little hasty to beat a confession out of a guy who cooperates with them? The entire arrest scenario isn't logical... but we believe it because the writer focused our attention away from the real story. He tricked us, just like a magician.

That's the way to create a good twist: Focus the audience away from the logical progression of the plot through diversion and anticipation... then, when the logical events occur, it's unexpected! As writers, we are magicians and our screenplays are the magic trick. *We* know the Policemen are taking him to a surprise birthday party – but in order for the twist to work we need to convince the audience that our hero is really under arrest for murder and these two policemen are really going to take him to an old warehouse and beat him. As writers we can see both layers of the story – the lie on the surface and the truth underneath. For the twist to work we need to control both layers – to write those scenes like the “Sixth Sense” anniversary dinner which works for both layers. A magician knows they are performing a trick – they know the rabbit doesn't appear in their hat due to a miracle or sorcery. They have to use diversion and anticipation to keep the audience focused away from the hat while they secretly work its false bottom so that the rabbits can “appear”. No different for writers – except we seldom work in tuxedos and top hats.

SOAP OPERA TWISTS

A plot twist changes the director of the story. When Richard Hannay goes to the one person who he thinks can help him in “The 39 Steps” and that person ends up being *twist* the villain, he is in worse trouble than before, and now must escape both the police *and* the villain... and how do you convince the police that the man in charge, Professor Jordan, is an enemy spy? If a twist *does not* change the direction of the story we have what I call a Soap Opera Twist, like Frau Blucher in “Young Frankenstein” who finally reveals that Baron Frankenstein was her boyfriend. Um, so?

A Soap Opera Twist reveals information that may be shocking, but doesn't really change anything. Imagine if in “Star Wars” Luke and Leia's kiss was a lot more passionate... hey, imagine that they ended up in bed together if you want. Or in a warm Taun Taun. Now, Luke and Leia break up – still friends – and she hooks up with Han Solo in “Empire Strikes Back” and she says “I love you” and Han says that great line, “I know”... and then in “Return Of The Jedi” Leia and Han are a couple, and then Luke discovers that he has a sister... and it's Leia. Yikes! He kissed her (or slept with her in a warm Taun Taun if you prefer). Shocking! But does it change the course of the story in any way? Nope. By the time Luke finds out she is his sister, they've blown up Death Star 2 and saved the worlds. Weird and kinky that he slept with her, and it will probably make family reunions a little awkward, but it doesn't change the story. That's a Soap Opera Twist.

Watch out for Soap Opera Twists – they are really false twists.

HOLD YOUR TWISTS

The longer you "hold" a plot twist, the more powerful it becomes. The audience gets used to whatever your “anticipation” and “diversions” are and the twist is even more surprising. If Bruce Willis is shot by his patient in the first few minutes of “The Sixth Sense”, then a dozen minutes after that you reveal that he's dead – not much of a twist. We haven't had time to get so used to his being alive that we forget that he was shot. But hold that twist until the end of the movie and it has real impact on the audience. You want to hold your twists for as long as possible, to give them maximum impact,

In my script "Unreasonable Force" a pair of Detectives are ambushed by a gang. One Detective is shot in the chest and goes down, the other barely escapes with his life. The gang torches the police car and the corpse inside. The survivor feels guilty. He should have helped his fallen partner instead of run.

What if his partner had still been alive at the time?

The surviving detective has to tell his partner's child that Mommy isn't coming home... she was killed in the line of duty.

The surviving partner sinks into depression...

Not knowing that his partner is alive! She was wearing her bullet proof vest. The body burned beyond recognition in the police car is a female gang member shot in the cross fire.

The longer you give the audience to accept that the partner is dead, the greater the impact of the twist when they find out she's alive. They get used to her being dead. They come to accept it as a fact... *then* spring your twist!

One of the worst notes I've ever gotten from a producer was on my cheesy creature feature “Gatorbaby” about a group of 20-somethings spending a week on their wealthy great-grandfather's private island for his 104th birthday. When they get there, he has already gone to bed, but leaves a note to make themselves at home. His mansion is filled with old pictures of him as a young man – no photo shows him older than late 30s or early 40s. The next morning there is food prepared for them, but gramps is not around – heck, he's about to turn 104, how often does he even get out of bed? The 20-somethings figure that he is close to death, probably making out his will, and they are in competition to inherit his fortune. And they begin turning against each other and trying to undermine the others so that they can inherit. They have a conversation with him through his bedroom door, there's a scene where he's silhouetted in a doorway and talks to them... but he really hasn't been revealed yet. Well, he's an old man! Finally he comes out of his room... and he may be 104 years old but he looks no older than 40! He's found a method to stay forever young, and has no intention of *ever* dying. By holding the twist that he doesn't look his age, that reveal becomes a shock. But the crazy development executive wanted me to have him greet them when they arrived – giving away the twist! And when I tried to explain it, he just did not understand. That's what made this a terrible note – that the development exec couldn't understand the basic concept of holding a twist once it had been explained to him. Yikes!

The longer you hold a twist, the bigger the twist becomes.

RUGPULLS

A rugpull is like a twist to the 100th power. A rugpull is a *major* twist which shocks the audience and takes the plot in an entirely unexpected direction. A good example is the "Psycho" shower scene. What's shocking about that scene isn't the nudity or the graphic violence, it's that the *lead character* is killed. The audience doesn't know what to do after that. They've never been presented with a problem like this in a movie before. The hero isn't supposed to get killed one third of the way through the film. You can't do that in a movie!

In “Night Hunter” film I introduced the female lead, a reporter for a tabloid newspaper like the Weekly World News, set her up as sarcastic and funny and the perfect foil for our male lead - who is the last of the vampire hunters. The lead is on the run from the police who had falsely accused him of being a serial killer; and when he hijacks her car during a police chase, we all know what happens next. We've seen Hitchcock movies and all of the knock offs, we've seen “Three Days Of The Condor”, we've seen enough movies to know she will think he's guilty for a while and then see evidence that he's innocent and reluctantly help him and they will fall in love and by the end of the film he will be proven innocent and no longer be on the run, and they will walk off together holding hands. Except at the end of the car chase (the beginning of Act 2) the police shoot kill her. She is *dead*. Wait, you can't do that in a movie!

A rugpull is *drastic*. Although I wouldn't recommend killing your lead character, killing the sidekick, the love interest, or the lead's mom unexpectedly is a good rugpull.

Neil Jordan's "The Crying Game" has a great rugpull. The film's famous secret takes the story into such a strange and unpredictable direction, that the audience doesn't know what will happen next. You might at first think that this is just a twist, but twists don't make the audience jump that high out of their seats, nor will a twist change the entire course of the story and characters. After that rugpull, nothing in "The Crying Game" is the same. Even when the IRA gunmen come back into the story, the plot has derailed onto such a different track that the outcome isn't what you thought it would be.

The great thing about the surprise hit “Taken” is that it is constantly doing things you can not do in a movie - and that element of shock and surprise is probably what made it connected with the audience. The ticket buyers are just like that studio reader - they get tired of watching the same completely predictable movie every Friday night, and want to see something that is the same, but different. Something that fits in a popular genre, but does unexpected things within that genre.

Liam Neeson plays a divorced dad who seldom saw his daughter (Maggie Grace) while she was growing up, and now that she's almost an adult, he plans on spending the summer with her. They get the divorced dad thing right - it's messy, with all kinds of unresolved issues. There is no happy ending - family gets back together feel in this film - this is a family torn apart and it's going to stay that way. But that summer Neeson was going to spend getting closer to his daughter? She's going to be in Paris with her friend. This film constantly sets up a situation where we think we know what will happen, then completely trashes that situation unexpectedly.

When Grace and her friend get to Paris, they split a cab with a cute guy... and Grace discovers that the relatives of her friend they were supposed to be staying with are on vacation for the summer - so it's just two boy-crazy girls in a Paris apartment. While she's on the phone to Neeson, admitting that there is no adult supervision - some guys break into the flat and grab her friend. It's sudden and unexpected and the struggle knocks over half the furnishings. Neeson tells her to find a bedroom and hide under the bed, then talks her through what will probably happen.

We are sure that ex-spy dad will be able to save her by phone - because we've seen that he's a badass, and this is his cute underage daughter.

But instead, he says: "You will be taken".

Hey, we though ex-spy dad would have some sort of plan to prevent that from happening! Nope. It's inevitable. The guys come into the bedroom, do a search, and leave without finding her... we are sure she's safe! Then - YANK - someone grabs her feet and pulls her from under the bed. That's not what's supposed to happen in a movie! In a movie, the bad guys don't win!

She screams, one of the badguys finds the phone, Neeson makes his threat... and the phone is *smashed*.

There's also a great bit of unexpected plotting here - two *wealthy* American girls are kidnapped. So, when the girls are kidnapped, we immediately think there will be a call to Grace's wealthy stepfather (Xander Berkeley) with a ransom demand. But there is no call. After being lead to believe this will be about ransom, it's not. It's a "white slave" ring - kidnapping tourist girls, getting them hooked on drugs, forcing them to work as prostitutes. Not what we expected. After setting up how rich Berkeley is for the first third of the film, the story does something else - whenever you thought you knew what would happen next, the story does something you'd never expect.

The best *you can't do that in a movie* scene is when Neeson is cornered with another character - a completely innocent character. Someone on Neeson's side, helping him to find his daughter. And, to escape the predicament, Neeson pulls a gun and shoots this innocent person! Kind of a variation on that advice on what to do if you and a friend are being chased by a Grizzly Bear - trip your friend. Shooting this completely innocent person creates a diversion which allows Neeson to get away. He doesn't shoot to kill - he just wounds them. You can't just shoot another good guy to get away, can you? Well, not in a movie! Completely unexpected and brutal.

When this book first came out there was a storyboard sketch on the cover from my “Double Action” screenplay that managed to crash and burn on its way to the screen when post-Soviet Russia went from welcoming films with open arms, to the Russian Mafia wanting significantly greased palms. The screenplay opens with a tough modern day Texas Sheriff and his comic relief side-kick deputy and establishes their relationship. The deputy is kind of a screw up, but the Sheriff takes care of him like an older brother – and is organized and intelligent enough for the both of them. We meet the Sheriff's wife and kid, to see that he's not just a man of action, he's a family man, too – the perfect hero for an action movie. Then the Sheriff and Deputy go to serve a warrant, which turns into a shoot out, and in the shoot out the Sheriff saves the Deputy's life a couple of times... and then, when you think the shoot out is over – the Sheriff is shot dead by the last escaping bad guy. I killed the hero. I thought that would completely shock the studio reader and later the audience – you can't do that in a movie! Major rug pull, but the great thing about doing this is that now the comic-relief side-kick (the role who usually has a short life expectancy) must become the hero. Because he's been established as a screw up, we still are not sure he will survive the whole movie... and that makes the story unpredictable. I don't know what sold the script, but my guess is that killing the hero in the first 15 pages woke up a sleepy studio reader and kept him from skimming the rest of the screenplay.

In Hitchcock's “Sabotage” (1936) the deep cover terrorist gives his step-son a box to deliver by a specific time. Inside the box is a ticking bomb, but the kid doesn't know that. The kid gets distracted by some street performers and some other things in the big city and ends up wasting time as kids will do... the whole while suspense builds. We know the bomb is in the box, and we know why it must be delivered by a certain time - that's when it will go off. But, we also know that you can't kill a cute little kid on screen, right? Wrong! Hitchcock believed this so shocked the audience when the film came out that they disliked it. But we are still talking about it today because it's a great rug-pull.

In “The Big Heat” (1953) written by Sydney Boehm from a book by William P. McGivern, Glenn Ford is an incorruptible cop investigating the suicide of a fellow cop, who begins to believe it was murder ordered by mob boss Mike Lagana. The chief wants him to drop the case – the cop may have been dirty and they don't want that getting in the papers... and the mob wants him to just take some money and go away. Ford is married, living on a cop's salary, and could sure use the money... but he turns down the bribe. His wife thinks it's the right thing, goes out to the car to drive to the store and... BLAM! The car blows his wife to pieces in his front yard. Up, you can't do that in a movie!

After a rugpull, *anything* is possible. The audience has been hit by something so unexpected that they don't know what will happen next. You could kill the hero. The victim might still be alive. The villain might even win!

A word of caution: Rugpulls are like nuclear weapons. You can't use them indiscriminately. If you start killing lead characters after a while your script is going to be about some bystander who has nothing to do with the story... plus the audience will come to *expect* the unexpected... making your script predictable again. “Oh, that's his mother? Probably killed in a kitchen explosion in the next scene.” You can't use rugpulls in every script – they are special tools. But sometimes, you just have to do the unthinkable... something that completely changes the trajectory of the story and turns a cop investigates the mob story into an ultra-violent “Death Wish” like revenge flick. The audience thought the story was going to be one thing, but the rugpull turns it into something completely different. Shockingly different.

Twists, Reversals, And Rugpulls keep the pages turning on your script, and keep the audience interest in what happens next. A good twist will have the audience jumping out of their seats and screaming. But to keep the audience on the EDGE of their seats, we fill our scripts with suspense.

SUSPENSE

Keeping the audience on the edge of their seat is the function of *suspense*. Suspense is not the same as action, nor is it the same as surprise. Suspense is the *anticipation* of action. The longer you draw out the anticipation, the greater the suspense. Once the action happens, the suspense is over... but that's okay, because then we have the action, and we're writing action screenplays.

Hitchcock explained suspense in a number of interviews; "Two men are having an innocent little chat. Let us suppose that there is a bomb underneath the table between them. Nothing happens, then all of the sudden, BOOM! There is an explosion. The audience is surprised, but prior to this surprise, it has been an absolutely ordinary scene, of no special consequence.

"Now let us take a SUSPENSE situation. The bomb is underneath the table, but the audience knows it... Probably because they have seen the villain place it there. The audience is aware that the bomb is going to explode at one o'clock, and there is a clock in the decor. It is a quarter to one. In this situation, the same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating, because the audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: 'There's a bomb beneath you, and it's about to explode!'

"In the first case, we have given the audience fifteen seconds of SURPRISE at the moment of the explosion. In the second case, we have provided them with fifteen MINUTES of SUSPENSE."

There are two basic kinds of suspense: the "ticking clock" (or time lock) and "cross cutting". The Hitchcock example above is a ticking clock. We are given an event which will occur at a certain time, and our suspense builds as we get closer and closer to the time of the event.

You can further divide 'ticking clocks' into two categories: Big Clocks and Scene Clocks.

THE BIG CLOCK

The big clock is a ticking clock which covers the *entire* film. A major event in the film will occur at a certain time, and the hero is usually racing to stop it... but time is running out. In “Minority Report” thanks to the pregogs, Tom Cruise knows that he will murder Leo Crow in 36 hours. The problem is - he has no idea who Leo Crow is, where he is, or why he would ever want to murder him. Because he's the head of the Pre-Crimes Division - a policeman who believes in the precogs ability to predict murders with 100% accuracy, he knows that he has 36 hours to stop himself from killing Crow. He sets his watch to count down from 36 hours, and throughout the rest of the film he keeps consulting his watch. How much time does he have left?

At one point he looks at his watch and has only 51 minutes until he will murder Leo Crow. Since the Pre-Crimes Cops all have the same information that he has, he knows they will be there to capture him *before* he murders Crow. The clock keeps ticking/ He looks at his watch - how much time does he have left?

The next time he looks at his watch he has 12 minutes left. Time is running out!

The next time he looks at his watch he has just under 5 minutes... and he's in Crow's hotel room. Time is really running out!

We get to see Cruise's watch as it counts down the seconds - 10 - 9 - 8 - 7 - 6 - 5 - 4 - 3... suspense building with every second that passes! As time ticks away, he becomes more desperate... and the audience becomes more involved.

In Stephen DeSouza's classic 80's action flick "Commando”, John Matrix has twelve hours until the plane he was supposed to be on lands and the villains realize that he has escaped. That's twelve hours to find and rescue his kidnapped daughter... or the bad guys will kill her. Matrix sets his 1980s digital watch to count down the hours, and he frequently glances at his watch to find out how much time he has left. As the film goes on, time ticks away until we're down to *seconds* before they kill his daughter. The Big Clock is what separated this film from the dozens of other throw away action films, and ended up making Arnold a star. “These guys eat too much red meat!” Check out the Russian version “Den' D” - same exact story with different locations.

Sometimes a Big Clock can be cut into pieces, like in “Source Code” where a commuter train has blown up... and the mad bomber plans on blowing up the whole city of Chicago next. So they send our Iraq war hero Colter Stevens (Jake Gyllenhaal) back in time for 8 minutes to find the terrorist on the commuter train before it explodes... and that is one Big Clock. But there is a “Bigger Clock” - the bomb that *hasn't* exploded and will level Chicago if Colter can't find the bomber and stop him. But he fails – the train explodes and kills everyone on it, and he has to keep going back until he finds the guy. So each of the time travel segments is a Big Clock, plus the whole story has an additional Big Clock. This reminded me of one of my favorite films, “The Satan Bug” (1965), which we will discuss in a minute. The concept of a Big Clock movie made up of Big Clock scenes makes for an edge of your seat film.

Another good example of The Big Clock is "High Noon". We know the bad guys are arriving at noon, and suspense builds as every minute ticks away. In "High Noon" that grandfather clock becomes the focus of the film, and we keep returning to it. As every minute ticks away, Will Kane comes closer to the big shoot out. Kane tries everything to get help, and as time ticks away, he becomes more desperate... and the audience becomes more involved.

Another classic western uses a big clock in the exact opposite way. The original version of "3:10 To Yuma" (based on a story by Elmore Leonard), our hero is a regular guy, a farmer, picking up some spare change guarding an evil desperado in a hotel until the 3:10 prison train comes to take him away. In "High Noon" the clock is ticking away until the confrontation begins, in "3:10 To Yuma" the clock ticks away until the confrontation is over. If our hero can hold off the desperado's henchmen until 3:10, he'll survive. But the henchmen's plans escalate as time passes. Becoming more and more violent. After a while, we begin to

wonder if our farmer-hero can survive the attacks by these evil gunslingers. If he can hold on just another ten minutes....

That's suspense.

The remake pulls much of the action *out of the room* which opens up the story, yet oddly dissipates the suspense. It *does* give us a great horse chase, though... and great roles for both Russell Crowe and Christian Bale. But some things that seem innovative and interesting kind of undermine the story - at the end the desperado decides to do the right thing and give himself up... which kind of negates the whole film we have just seen. Though this is a great ending on paper, I think it runs into that “villain's death karma” thing we looked at back in the Hero Chapter – if the villain has made the hero's life hell for the past 110 minutes, the villain needs to get 110 minutes worth of hell all at once in the end. When the villain decides to reform, it seems like they are cheating karma. Check out both versions – each has something to offer.

Another film that uses a Big Clock in the exact opposite way is Don Siegel's “Hell Is For Heroes”, where a handful of soldiers are left at a remote outpost during World War 2... only to discover that an entire division of Nazis are headed their way! They know that if they can survive the night an American division will come to relieve them in the morning... but it's a handful of guys against *the German army*. Can they hold out until morning? As every minute ticks away, they are closer to salvation... but the Nazis are closer to a full scale attack! If they can hold on just another ten minutes....

That's suspense.

SCENE CLOCKS

If there's a *macro* there must be a *micro", and "Scene Clocks" can also be used to create suspense. A Scene Clock is like the Hitchcock bomb. A small ticking clock used in a scene or a series of scenes to keep the movie hopping.

A good example of the Scene Clock is the opening scene of "Minority Report". The precogs predict a murder - a business man will return home from work unexpectedly, discover his wife in the arms of another man, and stab them both to death with a pair of scissors... unless Tom Cruise and his team can stop them.

They look up the future killer's address - but it doesn't match the neighborhood in the precog images. Did he move? The clock is ticking - they have to figure out his new address just from looking at the images. Tom sees a kid on an old push merry-go-round, that narrows it down to one neighborhood. With the clock ticking - closer and closer to the time of the murder - Tom and his Team jet to the future crime scene. They get there and... all of the houses look exactly the same. The clock is ticking - only minutes until the murder!

Tick. Tick. Tick.
Minutes left to seconds left.

Tom has to figure out which one of the houses will be the crime scene. When he figures out the clues, they rush into the house with only seconds to spare... and stop the murder from happening.

There's another scene clock a few scenes later when the precogs predict that Tom will murder Leo Crow. The only other person who saw the precog's images was the nerdy guy who takes care of them. "I like you boss, you've always been good to me... so I'll give you 2 minutes before I hit the alarm." Now Cruise has 2 minutes to get out of the building... and he ends up trapped in an elevator with his arch-enemy Witworth...

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Another good example of the Scene Clock is the nuclear bomb used at the end of "Goldfinger". Goldfinger activates the bomb, then handcuffs James Bond to it. Toss in Odd Job as a diversion and you've upped the suspense through cross cutting (which we'll get to later). After Bond fries Odd Job, he races to the nuclear bomb, with time ticking away. He tries to disarm the bomb, but what does he know of nuclear weapons?

Tick. Tick. Tick.
Minutes left to seconds left.

Then the nuclear expert arrives and begins the disarming procedure. But is there enough time left?

Tick. Tick. Tick.
The seconds run out.

We *see* the timer clock, as it goes from double digits to single digits.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The bomb is finally disarmed with only *seconds* to spare. (Trivia question: How many seconds?)

DEADLINES

Whether it's a Scene Clock or a Big Clock it's based on a *deadline*. A certain exact time when something is going to take place. Usually the more exact the time, the better the suspense. If your villain says "I'll be back at nightfall to kill you", it's not as effective as if he says "I'll be back at seven fifteen to kill you". We can look at a clock and *see* how many minutes are left until seven fifteen, but looking at the sky and trying to figure out when nightfall starts is open to interpretation. Without a deadline and consequences in a rom-com, Hugh Grant wouldn't have to race anywhere at the end of the movie... so even if you are not writing an action or thriller film, these techniques are important.

The sooner the audience knows that deadline, the sooner the suspense begins. And the more often we *see* the ticking clock (some physical manifestation of time passing) the better the suspense. Have the hero look at his watch, have him run into a store with a clock...

We have to know how close the deadline is, or it is not effective.

The remake of “The Taking Of Pelham 123” has a rapidly approaching deadline where the audience is made aware of exactly how much time is left on the clock throughout the film. A mysterious guy named Ryder (John Travolta) and his crew have hijacked the Pelham subway train in New York City. Though he can't take the hijacked subway train to Cuba, he can take it to an isolated piece of track where his crew can defend the train, and make a list of demands. He radios the dispatcher, Garber (Denzel Washington) tells him the City of New York has exactly one hour to get him $10 million. That gives us our big ticking clock for the entire movie - 60 minutes and counting down to 0. But what are the consequences?

Ryder tells Garber that if he does not have the $10 million in one hour, he will kill one hostage every minute until he gets the money. Which gives us consequences and an additional series of deadlines. Once the 60 minutes are up, we have a series of 60 second deadlines... with someone being killed as consequences for *each* 60 second deadline. Plus, almost everything else in the film is given some sort of Scene Clock. We now have some hard deadlines that our protagonist must meet, or there are hard consequences. That presses the protagonist in to action - they can't just wait until Ryder gets hungry and gives up, they must do something *now* to prevent the loss of innocent lives.

Our protagonist Garber is just a dispatcher, not a hostage negotiator. So when the best NYPD hostage negotiator Camonetti (John Turturro) shows up, they send Garber home and Camonetti takes over... but Ryder refuses to talk to Camonetti! He gives them 60 seconds to get Garber back on the radio or he will kill the Motorman. Now, as Ryder counts down from 60, they race through the building looking for Garber, and finally find him outside the building on his way home! They grab him and rush him back to the radio... with Ryder counting down... and are not fast enough. Ryder kills the Motorman! Deadlines and consequences and a great Scene Clock.

While we have this 60 minute big clock countdown going on, there are several more small deadlines spread out throughout the screenplay. Once the $10 million in cash is assembled, they have to drive cross-town against the clock to deliver it to Ryder. Another deadline of sorts - this one is all about *distance*. Can they get the money across town in time? The film is a great example of using deadlines to create suspense and tension.

DOES ANYBODY KNOW

WHAT TIME IT IS?

But you can also use the *lack* of a physical clock to build suspense. Have you ever been on your way to work and got caught in a traffic jam? No watch and your car clock doesn't work? You *know* you're late for work, but you don't know *how* late. So you keep searching for a clock. Maybe the bank has one? No. Maybe you can see the clock in the 7-11 store. It's too far away, you can't read it. I've had this happen to me, and become so desperate to know what time it is that I've looked through the windows of cars to try and read other driver's watches.

In Alfred Hitchcock's “Notorious” there's a great "soft clock" - during a huge party at Nazi Sebastian's house, Cary Grant and Sebastian's wife Ingrid Bergman - who is really a deep cover CIA Agent - plan on searching his wine cellar. Bergman has managed to get keys to everyplace else in the house and do a quiet search, but there's only one wine cellar key and that's on Sebastian's key rings. So she swipes it just before the party while he's getting dressed and plans on returning it before he notices that it's missing.

Grant and Bergman sneak into the wine cellar and begin searching...

Unaware that the party is so successful that they're running out of champagne. We see the tub filled with champagne bottles as the waiters pull them out and pop the corks one-by-one. Fewer bottles - fewer bottles - fewer bottleS. The bottles are like our ticking clock. Eventually there will be so few bottles that a waiter will ask Sebastian to go down to the wine cellar to get some more... but when exactly is that? When there are ten bottles left? Five bottles left? Because we aren't exactly sure, the next bottle they pull from the tub might spell death for Grant and Bergman.

I decided to use this idea in a recent script called "Hard Return" after hearing my friend Roger Ebert constantly complain about how overused those red LED bomb timers are in films. The world as we know it will be destroyed in ten hours. A big red LED "countdown clock" on the wall of Mission Control begins counting back - 00:59:59 - 00:59:58 - 00:59:57 - Counting the seconds until we are all dead.

Then the power goes out.

Instant panic.

"Does anybody have a watch?"

Someone has an old fashioned watch, but has it been set for the right time? Is the sweep second hand accurate? Wait, is that minute hand on the seven or the eight? What if it's two minutes off, and the world ends before we complete the mission?

I took the cliche red LED timer and turned it!

One of my favorite “soft clocks” is in Richard Matheson's novel “I Am Legend” where a vampire plague has turned everyone except our hero Robert Neville into blood suckers who only come out after sunset. But on cloudy days it's difficult to tell exactly when the sun sets – and sometimes he gets trapped miles from the safety of his home-fortress. The lack of a hard deadline is used to build dread – which is a sister to suspense. On some days Neville never knows when he has run out of time, and this keeps you constantly worried that he will make the mistake of *not* looking at his watch and get in trouble. This is a brilliant novel which has now been filmed three times... and oddly enough the very first version made on the cheap with Vincent Price is still the best.

Creating an ambiguous ticking clock is a little dangerous. You have to make sure the audience

understands that there is a deadline or the suspense won't work.

WHEN TIME RAN OUT

No matter how you use the clock, time *must* be running out. The less time left on the clock, the higher the suspense. Obviously, if the villain's bomb is set to explode in an hour, it's more exciting than if it's set to explode a week from next Tuesday.

Ticking clocks are almost always stopped in time... but they don't have to be. The thriller “Out Of Time” is filled with beat-the-clock suspense... where the protagonist often *doesn't* solve the problem in time, which leads to even bigger problems!

Denzel Washington is a small town cop in Florida who is having an affair with the wife of the town's big celebrity, ex-pro football star Dean Cain. When Cain and his wife are murdered, a team of big city detectives are brought in to solve the crime. Now Denzel must race against the detectives to find the real killer before they uncover all of the evidence that points to him.

A good example of typical beat-the-clock suspense is when the detectives have the wife's phone records FAXed to the police station. Denzel *knows* there will be dozens of calls to his cell phone - evidence of his affair that might turn him into the number one suspect. So he has to intercept the FAX, scan it into his computer, delete his name and phone number from the list, then re-FAX it to the police department FAX machine. Problem is, after he intercepts the FAX, the detectives call the phone company and ask why it's taking so long... and the phone company resends the FAX! Now Denzel must scan and delete against the clock! Will he get his FAX sent before the phone company can resend theirs?

Later in the film, Denzel *fails* to beat the clock, which creates a big, juicy, conflict. Because he knew the victims, he has an inside track the big city detectives don't have. He uncovers a suspect - a friend of Cain's with a serious criminal record - and races to capture the suspect at his hotel room and recover any evidence that implicates Denzel. When Denzel leaves the police station, the detectives have found the suspect's name and are searching for his current location. Can Denzel get to the hotel, capture the suspect, destroy or remove any evidence that might implicate him in the murder; *before* the detectives get there?

Denzel gets to the hotel, finds a bunch of evidence that implicates him (the plan was to frame him for the murders) and also finds the suspect... with a gun! The two fight, Denzel *kills* the suspect, grabs the evidence, flees the hotel room... but the detectives have arrived at the hotel! They seal off all of the exits! Now he is trapped in the hotel with evidence implicating him in the murders and the suspect dead upstairs! How do you get past the detectives? Because Denzel *fails* to beat the clock, fails to make his deadline, an intense situation is created - how the heck can he escape?

Because the hero usually beats the clock in movies, when he or she fails it's unexpected and interesting. It creates another layer of suspense and adds conflict from those consequences.

MULTIPLE CLOCKS

Don't stop with one clock. Use multiples. A Big Clock and a few Scene Clocks. You can't have too much suspense.

In “The Satan Bug” a villain has stolen germ warfare material from a top secret government lab. The Big Clock has our hero trying to figure out who the villain is and where he has the germs stashed before the villain escapes. There are a half dozen Scene Clocks, ending with the hero capturing the villain and the villain explaining that he's planted a germ bomb in Los Angeles set to go off at noon.

That final Scene Clock keeps the last twenty minutes of the film hopping as the good guys try to find, then disarm, the bomb before it explodes and infects everyone in L.A. with a killer disease. “The Satan Bug “ is a suspense textbook, using both Scene Clocks and a Big Clock to keep us on the edge of our seat for the entire running time of the film. Using a clock of some sort based on a fixed deadline and consequences is the most common way to create suspense in a film. Remember that suspense is the anticipation of an action – so as soon as the action occurs, that suspense is over. But what about suspense in an action scene? Is that possible?

CROSSCUTTING

The other way to create suspense is through crosscutting. Crosscutting began as an editing technique in the silent era, designed to heighten suspense (usually credited to Eisenstein). There are two types of cross cutting, 'Action' and 'Suspense'.

For an example of 'Suspense' cross cutting we go back to Hitchcock: "A curious person breaks into someone else's room and begins to search through the drawers. Now, you show the person who lives in the room coming up the stairs. Then you cut back to the person who is searching, and the audience feels like warning him: 'Be careful, someone's coming up the stairs!' You cut back and forth between the searcher and the flat owner. The closer the flat owner gets, the more exciting the suspense. Soon the audience is yelling, 'Get out! Get out!'"

My erotic thriller, "Riptides", is about a husband who strays while his wife is away. The husband is in bed with his girlfriend when the wife returns early from her business trip.

* * *

INT. THE BEACH HOUSE - NIGHT

In the bedroom, Robert and Sandi make love. Robert hears a car pull up and stops.

SANDI
Don't stop.

EXT. BEACH HOUSE DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Laura parks her Mercedes in the driveway and gets out.

INT. THE BEACH HOUSE - NIGHT

Robert and Sandi continue making love.

EXT. BEACH HOUSE DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

Laura pops open the trunk and pulls out her luggage.

INT. THE BEACH HOUSE - NIGHT

Robert and Sandi's breathing is ragged and loud in the quiet bedroom.

EXT. THE BEACH HOUSE

Laura slides her key into the front door lock.

INT. THE BEACH HOUSE

Robert stops, listening to the sound of the keys.

ROBERT
(whispering)

My wife...

SANDI
Don't stop.

IN THE LIVING ROOM

Laura opens the door and enters the house, setting her luggage in the entrance hall.

LAURA
Robert?

She moves deeper into the house. Headed to the bedroom.

* * *

Suspense crosscutting moves back and forth between two subjects, with suspense building as the two subjects become closer to each other. Whether this is a man searching a house while the homeowner gets closer, or a killer stalking a victim hidden in the closet of an old dark house, or two trains on the same track racing towards each other; cross cutting takes two people or objects we *don't* want to see in the same scene and puts them on a collision course.

Suspense cross cutting can be used in a scene, or stretched over an entire script; as in “Bourne Identity” where we are constantly cutting back and forth between Chris Cooper and his team at Treadstone who are searching for Bourne, and Bourne trying to figure out who he is and why people are trying to kill him. As the film progresses, the two continue on a collision course... getting closer and closer!

ACTION CROSSCUTTING

Action crosscutting takes two *separate* actions and divides the audience's loyalties between them. The idea is to create a pair of different actions, and just as one scene gets exciting, jump to the other. When that scene becomes exciting, jump back to the first scene.

Suspense is created through *cliffhangers* at the end of each segment.

The Villain aims his gun at the Hero and gets ready to pull the trigger...

Cut to the Sidekick fighting with the Henchman on the roof of a building.
The Sidekick gets in a few punches, then the Henchman knocks the Sidekick off the roof!
The Sidekick grabs the edge of the roof with his fingertips.
The Henchman steps on his hand...

Cut to, the Hero drops to the floor just as the Villain fires.
The Hero rolls across the carpet and knocks the Villain down.
The gun goes skittering.
The Hero scrambles for the gun.
The Villain grabs a table and swings it at the Hero's head.
The Hero aims the gun at the Villain and pulls the trigger.
Click.
Out of bullets...

Cut to, the Sidekick...

The audience wants to find out how the Hero gets out of his problem *and* find out how the Sidekick gets out of HIS problem. By cutting between the two, you can draw out the action, and draw out the suspense, for quite a few minutes.

Action Crosscutting works great in Act Three, where you may have to fill 20 pages with exciting action sequences. It allows variety and suspense, and keeps the reader turning the pages to find out how the hero gets out of this one. But the reader can't skim, or she'll never find out how the Sidekick survives. A great example is the end of “Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol” where Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) is engaged in an epic fight with the villain over a briefcase filled with launch codes in an automated car park, which is cross-cut with comic relief Benji (Simon Pegg) is trying to rewire a computer without tools and keeps pricked his fingers into a bloody mess, which is cross-cut with sidekick Brandt (Jeremy Renner) who is battling the henchman in order to get get the power back on. We cut between all three battles – each being a different part of the solution which will stop a nuclear missile from taking out San Francisco (oddly – the city where I saw the film). By cutting from one character to another and creating a cliffhanger, the sequence continued to be exciting during all three battles. Cross cutting for suspense is a great Act Three tool, and can turn a longish action sequence into a page turner.

FOCUS OBJECTS

Suspense scenes are based on a "focus object" which the suspense revolves around.

The bomb under the table, a fraying rope on a rope bridge our hero is racing across, the bloody back seat of the car the protagonist transported the body in. In Hitchcock's “Saboteur” the only man who can prove the hero is innocent has fallen from the Statue Of Liberty's torch... the hero hangs on to the sleeve of his coat. The man dangles hundreds of feet above the ground. Hanging by a thread. The thread that connects his sleeve to his coat. The thread begins to unravel! The entire scene is focused on that thread! Will it hold long enough for the hero to haul him up? That's suspense!

In my cable film “Hard Evidence” there is a scene where our businessman hero and his drug running girl friend have to cross a border with $4 million in cash and heroin in a suitcase. Now, this case is specially designed to pass through an ex-ray machine, but the minute a Customs Agent opens it, my hero is in jail for the rest of his life.

In the script, they fly into LA and go through the customs line at the airport. As they wait their turn, suspense builds. Someone in front of them has their luggage searched. Their bag gets closer and closer to the Customs Agent. Tension.

Their turn. The Customs Agent examines the suitcase exterior and asks them questions. His fingers move to the latches... will he open it? The girlfriend makes a joke, the Customs Agent smiles, and passes them through without opening their luggage.

In a story conference, one of the producers wanted to change the location from the airport to a drive through check point.... they had a beautiful one they could get for the film. I argued: The focus of the scene needs to be the suitcase filled with drugs and money. If we drive a car through the checkpoint, the focus becomes the *car*. The Customs Agent will want to search the trunk, check to see if anything is hidden in the spare tire, and feel the seats for suspicious lumps. Sure, he might search the suitcase, but it's one of *several* items in his search, not the *focus* of his search.

The producer ended up agreeing with me that the airport scenario was better than the check point, even if the location wasn't as exciting. The scene as written was focused and suspenseful.

“Transporter 3” has a big high concept focus object swiped from some other movie... one that starred Rutger Hauer, coincidentally! Our tough guy driver Frank (Jason Statham) and the girl he's transporting each have an explosive bracelet around their wrists - if they get 25 feet away from the car, the bomb is activated, 50 feet away from the car and the bomb is set to go off... and 75 feet away from the car? Blam! Frank is blown to a zillion pieces in a massive fireball and explosion. So, it's best not to leave the car. This leads to some great scenes - one where the car is stolen and Frank has to keep up with it and get it back, using a bicycle and anything else he can grab.

But the director never shows us the danged bracelet in this chase - green you're okay, yellow at 25 feet, orange at 50 feet, red at 75 feet before you blow up. I want to know how much trouble Frank is in from minute to minute! They come up with this great suspense "focus object" and then never focus on it! No shots of it! Now, those "shots" may have been on the page or they may not have been - but *our* job is to make sure they *are* there. The action on the page includes milking that focus object for everything it's worth and making the scene a nail-biter of a read. We want to show that bracelet changing from green to yellow... and then changing from yellow to orange... then have Frank get close enough to the car that it goes back to yellow again. And keep that happening again and again throughout the scene. Once you create that focus object, it's your job to create the suspense that goes with it. If it ain't on the page, it ain't gonna be on the screen.

A great example of the focus object in a suspense scene is the wine cellar key in that famous scene from

“Notorious”. Alicia (Ingrid Bergman) is a party girl who has been drafted by CIA Agent Devlin (Cary Grant) during World War 2 to spy on Nazi Alex Sebastian in Rio. Alicia and Devlin fall in love... and then they get their orders – Alicia is to *sleep with* Sebastian. This throws a monkey wrench into their relationship. Alicia ends up marrying Sebastian and as Mrs. Sebastian she has access to the keys to every room... except the wine cellar. Since one of the Nazis freaked at a wine bottle, Devlin is sure that is the key to whatever these Nazis are up to... and orders Alicia to steal the key. And this begins a sequence that is *all about that key*. She steals the key from Sebastian’s key ring while he is dressing for the party only a few feet away. She has the key in her hand - when Sebastian approaches her, grabs both of her hands! He tells her how much he loves her and lifts one of her hands, opens it... (the empty one, close call) and kisses her palm. Then goes to kiss the other hand... but Alicia pulls him into her arms so that he’ll forget about the hand with the key in it. Distracts him with some loving so he won’t find the stolen key. That scene comes before the party, where the key is the focus as Alicia palms it off to Devlin and eventually Sebastian realizes the key is missing from his ring when he and the butler go down to get some more champagne. That key is the center of focus for about 15 minutes of the film!

Suspense is the backbone of any script, no matter what genre. Comedies, romances, science fiction, westerns, and of course Action Films. By using ticking clocks and cross cutting, you can keep those pages turning, and keep the audience glued to the edge of their seats between your action scenes.

SECRET SUCCESS

"It's a film with a secret." How often have we heard those words? When we hear them, don't we want to run right out to the theater, plunk down our $11, and find out what that secret is?

When it comes to writing successful action screenplays, I've got a secret. Do you want to know what it is? Of course you do. Everyone loves finding out a secret. It makes us feel naughty and superior at the same time. You still want to know my secret? What if I *don't* tell you? Wouldn't you get angry?

No need to worry. My secret is.... Secrets! I use them in my action scripts, and you can, too. From Batman to Bourne, all kinds of action screenplays use secrets. Secrets can be divided into Big Secrets, Little Secrets, and Character Secrets.

BIG SECRETS

Big secrets are usually found in mystery films, but have been put to good use in such dramas as "Suddenly, Last Summer" and can be the “machine that drives the story” in an action film. The audience either knows about the secret, and is on the edge of their seat hoping no one will discover it; or are trying to discover what the secret is, given various hints and clues throughout the story.

My favorite Big Secret is from Robert Towne's "Chinatown". Evelyn Mulwray is protecting her husband's alleged mistress. Why? There is some connection between the two women, and we spend much of the film wondering what it could be. Usually wives and mistresses don't much care for each other (with the exception of the two in "Diabolique"). The curiosity gets the best of detective Jake Gittes, and he forces Mrs. Mulwray into a confrontation.

By this point, the audience is more than just curious. We know this is some huge deep dark dirty secret. We've been waiting the entire film to hear this. We know she is about to reveal the one thing she has never revealed to anyone. And we get to eavesdrop!

Evelyn admits that the mistress is her sister... And her daughter. That her father molested her and she had a child by him. This is a secret so shocking, audiences were talking about it months later. To be in on a secret this big is delicious!

The reveal of this secret becomes the crescendo of the film.

It becomes apparent on a second viewing, that the Big Secret is what has been driving this film almost from the beginning. The moment the mistress is introduced, the question on every character's mind is: Who is she? The quest for her identity becomes the focus of the script. With every scene, our curiosity grows more intense, until the final reveal.

A variation on the "Chinatown" Big Secret was used in Carl Franklin's "Devil In A Blue Dress". But the secret was not given enough power in this script. The film should have focused on the question: Why would a beautiful white society woman enjoy hanging out in the all-Black South Central Los Angeles? Then when that big reveal comes in act three, it would have the same impact as the reveal in "Chinatown".

The secret of using Secrets is to come very close to revealing the secret (without doing so) several times within your script. To bring up the secret constantly. To ask the question "Why would a wife protect her husband's mistress?" or "Why would a white society woman hang out in a Black neighborhood?" Since you can't actually ask the question more than twice in your script, your character's *actions* must lead the audience to ask the question themselves.

Evelyn Mulwray isn't curious about her husband's mistress, and actually pays Jake to forget about her. Later she hides the mistress. Most of Evelyn's *actions* in the film are aimed at keeping her relationship with the mistress a secret. Every time he lies to Jake about the mistress, we ask ourselves: "What does she have to hide?" The more you can get your audience to ask that question, the more impact the reveal will have upon them.

Big Secrets may also be found in all of Tennessee Williams' Southern Gothic plays, like the aforementioned "Suddenly, Last Summer" which has a big secret which includes homosexuality, cannibalism, and private beaches. Though we may not have anything that extreme in an action screenplay, Big Secrets figure into everything from “The Dark Knight” to all of the “Bourne” movies.

Superheroes like Batman and Spider-Man and Superman all have secret identities which play a role in the stories. One of the major plot threads in the overly-plotty “Dark Knight” has Batman's secret identity discovered by Wayne Enterprises accountant Coleman Reese. If this information gets into the hands of The

Joker, he can bring down Batman and take over Gotham City. Except the Joker is all about chaos, so he puts a price on Reese's head and *everyone* in Gotham is gunning for the man. Now for Batman to protect his secret identity he must save the life of the man trying to reveal it... which creates a couple of big action scenes.

One of several problems I had with “Spider-Man 2” was that, after spending the first film doing everything possible to protect his secret identity in order to protect the woman he loves from danger, in the second film he seems not to care at all about his secret identity – allowing pretty much the whole city to know who he is under the mask. That negates the whole reason for the funny costume in the first place and makes you wonder if he *wants* Mary Jane to be in danger! What's up with that?

But you don't have to wear tights to have a secret identity – in the opening of “The Bourne Supremacy” our amnesiac spy Jason Bourne and his girlfriend Marie are living in a quiet village in India as far away from the rest of the world as possible. They have a “secret identity” as just regular people, and have done almost everything to keep their true identity secret... when they are discovered by Russian Agent Kirill... who tries to kill both of them. Which leads to a big action scene and tragedy... and Bourne coming out of retirement to get revenge. Which means having his secret identity exposed is what gets him involved in the story. And like all of the Bourne movies, the story is also about a buried secret... which Bourne is now trying to uncover. The secret of his first assassination mission – which was so top secret it's not even recorded in any of the CIA or Treadstone's files. Whatever that first mission was is what drives the whole story – with both Bourne and Pamela Landy at the CIA trying to figure it out. Spy movies are usually *filled* with secrets, and often secrets are what drive the stories of *secret agents*.

Secrets are also part of the other characters in “Bourne Supremacy” - both Pamela Landy (Joan Allen) and Ward Abbott (Brian Cox) aren't the lead characters, they're both CIA Agents, but each is completely different. Landy is a digger - she'll do anything to uncover the secrets behind the Treadstone operations (even if it puts her career in peril). Ward wants to cover everything up - bury the past (and Treadstone) and get on with CIA business. These are two very different approaches to the same job... and they are also the two choices facing Jason Bourne. These two supporting characters are there to support the story - and are different aspects of the big decision Bourne must make in the story. Bourne can either hide from the secrets in his past or dig into his past and discover some more frightening secrets about who he was... maybe even who he is. So just as Bourne's character is all about secrets, so are Landy and Ward's characters. All are different aspects of how people deal with secrets. And all three are dealing with the one Big Secret that is driving the entire story.

LITTLE SECRETS

Little Secrets can take a bland scene and turn it into an intense, nail biting, edge of the seat experience. Where Big Secrets drive a story, Little Secrets drive a scene. A Little Secret is something, which if discovered, will place our protagonist in hot water. The audience is usually let in on the secret at the beginning of the scene, then we sit on the edge of our seats hoping that no discovers it.

A great example of a Little Secret appears in Steven de Souza and Jeb Stuart's screenplay "Die Hard". John McClane is battling terrorists (lead by Hans Gruber) who have taken his wife Holly, sleazy businessman Ellis (and others) hostage in a high rise office building. If the terrorists learn the relationship between McClane and Holly, they will hurt her to get at McClane.

* * *

A VOICE comes over McClane's radio.

HANS VOICE
I have someone who wants to talk to you. A
Very Special Friend who was at the party
with you tonight.

McClane's face falls. Oh, God. Eyes closed, he waits for the
voice that tells him it's all over.

VOICE
Hello, Johnny Boy?

McClane's eyes open, showing equal parts shock and hope.

IN THE OFFICE
Camera adjusts to show ELLIS as Hans gives him the CB.

McCLANE
Ellis?

Ellis has a cigarette, and a Terrorist brings him a diet coke.

ELLIS
John, they're giving me a few minutes to
try and talk some sense into you...

McCLANE
(carefully)
Ellis, what have you told them?

ELLIS
I told them that we're old friends and you
were my guest at the party.

McClane sighs, partially relieved.
HANS, meanwhile, narrows his eyes.

McCLANE

Ellis... you shouldn't be doing this...

* * *

This scene builds suspense around the secret of John McClane's identity. The audience knows he is Holly's husband. That is his point of vulnerability. This secret must be hidden at all costs. See, even “Die Hard” is a movie about a guy with a secret identity!

When the scene begins, McClane and the audience think that Hans has discovered the secret. Then when Ellis speaks, we think Ellis may have told the secret. When we find that he hasn't told the secret, we begin to worry that the terrorists will *force* Ellis to tell the secret.

Knowing that a secret exists is a partial reveal. Even if the terrorists completely believe Ellis (they don't) they will want to learn details about McClane. Each detail is a stumbling block, which may reveal the secret. Every word Ellis speaks is another step closer to Hans discovering that McClane is Holly's husband. Another step closer to Holly's torture or death.

I used a Little Secret in my Made For Cable movie "Hard Evidence". A businessman is framed for murder, and realizes the only way out is to plant the murder gun and other evidence on the real killer.

The murder evidence (and three quarters of a million dollars in blackmail money) are in a briefcase. As the businessman gets ready to meet the real killer (and plant the evidence) there's a knock at his door. The police Detective investigating the crime!

Then a very tense scene occurs where the businessman is questioned by the Detective with the briefcase full of evidence sitting on a table between them. The Detective places his hands on the case several times in the scene. Once he even plays with the latches. Each time, you think he might discover the evidence and arrest the businessman.

What could have been a typical "Detective questions suspect" scene becomes an edge of the seat nail biter because of the inclusion of a secret. The audience wants to scream "Don't let him find that!" at the screen. This scene would have worked *without* the briefcase full of evidence, but adding that secret added suspense.

In my Thriller Class on audio I talk about the film “Bedroom Window” where the police come to question our hero – who claims to have been alone when he witnessed a murder... but was actually sleeping with his boss's wife at the time, and *she* witnessed the murder. That's the secret he's trying to hide, the Big Secret that drives the story. But his apartment is littered with “little secrets” - all kinds of evidence that his boss's wife was there that night, from her cigarettes to various personal items that he can't explain if the police find them. The great thing about little secrets like this is that they can build a great deal of suspense... but cost the production nothing.

Little Secrets can also be used for comic effect. Watch any episode of "I Love Lucy" for an example. In every scene, Lucy is trying to hide a secret from Ricky, and comedy grows from the exaggerated lengths to which she goes in order to protect her secret. How many chocolates can you hide in your mouth?

Including a Little Secret in almost every scene will create tension, suspense, (or comedy), and identification with the protagonist in your audience. The secret becomes the sub focus of the scene. A counter point to the dialogue, and a way to expose character.

CHARACTER SECRETS

Character Secrets are the stuff Southern Gothics are made of. Dark, personal, family secrets which must remain hidden at all costs, only to be unleashed in a volcanic explosion of drama at the end. Though Character Secrets fuel the works of Tennessee Williams and Lillian Hellman, they need not be the stuff of explosive drama. Because what separates Character Secrets from Big Secrets is: Character Secrets need not be revealed in the script. They can remain secrets.

I am positive some are now asking, "What is the use of having a secret if it is not revealed? How will the audience ever know of its existence?"

A secret helps define a character and create a sub-text for his or her actions. What we feel we have to hide from others tells us a lot about ourselves. Maintaining that secret will influence every choice we make. Every choice our characters make.

Let's say we have a businessman who inflates his resume in order to land a job. Now this businessman lives in fear that the lie on his resume will be exposed. He may lose his job. He also begins to see himself as a fraud.

Do others in his firm wonder why he seems to have less experience than his resume boasts? Do they begin to think of him as second rate? Will our businessman compensate for this by being overly punctual and bureaucratic? Or will he work extra hours in hopes that if his secret is discovered, his job performance will outshine it? Or does he become a delegator: Giving tasks which may expose his weakness/ secret to others? He may become the office paranoid, living in constant fear that others are trying for his title.

Quite a lot of characterization choices from one fudged resume, eh? This secret shades what might have been a standard businessman, turning him into someone three dimensional and different. Someone with a secondary motivation in every scene. Hide the secret. Make sure no one discovers it.

Before writing a script, I usually write a biography for each of my characters. Included are such mundane things as education, first love, worst job, pet words and phrases, and anything else which I may need to refer to while writing the script. But I also include the character's "dark secret", which may be anything from an inflated resume to something larger and more gothic like incest or murder. I usually don't reveal the dark secret in the script, but it tints the dialogue and actions of every scene that character plays in.

Character Secrets don't have to be dark – look at Harry's secret in “True Lies” - he's a dashing, James Bond-like spy... who tells his wife he's a boring computer salesman.

SECRET SUSPENSE

Secrets are like little ticking time bombs, waiting to go off. Waiting to twist your tale into a new direction or fuel your characters to make dangerous decisions. Secrets are part of your life, and they should become an integral part of your character's lives. As was noted in Stephen Sondheim and Anthony Perkin's brilliant screenplay "The Last Of Sheila": "The harder you try to keep a secret in, the more it wants to get out."

If you have a secret, everybody wants to know what it is. If your script has a secret, the Producer will keep turning pages, hoping to discover it. Now it's a shared secret between you and the Producer. And the harder the Producer tries to keep the secret, the more he wants to spill it to the world. On screen. In Technicolor. So using secrets in your action script may be your secret weapon for success.

I've got a secret...

SOMETHING EXTRA

The difference between a good action script and a great one is in the details. Think about your favorite action films – what made them special? A great action sequence? An amazing character? A great story idea? But what about all of the “secondary cool stuff” that elevates the film from standard action to memorable. I like to think of these “secondary cool things” as that something extra you give the audience – a *bonus* that they were not expecting.

COOL DEVICES

Here's a scene we have seen a million times before: The cops are outside the badguy's house, ready to break down the door. Guns ready, wearing bullet proof vests or riot gear. The cops always wonder what's behind that door. When they break it down, will they find an army of bad guys waiting to shoot them down? Will they find a mother and her child, and realize their informant has given them the wrong address? Or will they find their suspect alone and unarmed?

The question for the screenwriter is, How do we make this scene different that the thousands of other scenes exactly like it? This was answered in "Patriot Games" by giving the cops (and the audience) a little something extra. A neat device that amazed the audience. The police take a fiber optic strand and slide it under the door of the bad guy's flat. They twist the strand around until they have thoroughly reconnoitered the room. They know where every bad guy is, if he's armed, and what he's armed with. Once they have all of this knowledge, they crash open the door.

A neat idea. Something extra which makes this scene in "Patriot Games" different than all of the others. I don't know if this idea originated with Tom Clancy or the screenwriters, but I'm sure its genesis was in news reports about Doctors using fiber optic strands to recon the interior of the human body without major surgery. To transplant a device used in medicine to police work is genius at work.

In my HBO film “Crash Dive” I read Tom Clancy's research notes for “Hunt For Red October” published as “Submarine” before I wrote the screenplay, and was *looking* for interesting things on the submarine that I might use for another purpose. The two great finds – neither made it into the movie – were an emergency buoy that could be programmed to transmit a radio message and an infra-red viewing device for rescuing sailors in the event a smoky fire broke out in the submarine. The buoy was used by my hero Carter to get a message to Admiral Pendleton (Frederick Forest) after the terrorists had destroyed his short burst transmitter and were in control of the submarine's radios. The infra-red firefighting tool was used by the hero to see the position of the terrorists in another section of the submarine before he attacked – giving him an advantage. That cool bit was scrapped in favor of a cliché network of air ducts the hero could crawl through on the submarine. Um, no room for air ducts on a submarine. This is what happens when you tell director that it's “Die Hard on a submarine” - and they think that requires the hero in air ducts. But some of the cool things actually made it into the film by some miracle.

One of the things I loved about “Face/Off” was the magnetic prison. Whenever there's a disturbance the guards just press a button and all of the prisoner's boots stick to the floor. Not a big thing, just a cool little thing in a scene. Come up with enough of those and you have a script that impresses the reader and eventually the viewer.

Another cool thing in that movie is something to think about with both your heroes and you villains: character specific weapons. In an early scene with Castor Troy (Nicolas Cage) his brother has a cigar box that contains all of Troy's personal needs – from Chicklets gum to a pair of matched automatic pistols with gold and ivory grips. No one else in the history of film has guns like this!

One of the hot holiday gifts for 2011 is a new Mattel Hot Wheels car that comes with a built in digital camera that can film 12 minutes of video – and even has a video screen underneath to watch the footage and a USB cable so you can watch it on your laptop. If this is a *toy* you can buy for your kid, imagine the kind of gadgets the CIA has? But even if your Hero isn't a spy, he can hit Toys R Us on the way to the Villain's lair and pick up a portable spy camera that can zoom under a door and into a room to grab intelligence before being pulled back to safety with a piece of monofilament fishing line. How cool is that?

In my script “Down For The Count” my bodyguard hero has a pool table that flips over to expose an arsenal. I had a scene where he went to get a gun, and he could have just opened a drawer or a closet – but I wanted to give the audience a little something extra and came up with the pool table. We expect Bruce Wayne to have a secret stash of weapons because he's a superhero – but a regular guy?

One of the cool things about “Batman Begins” was how all of those corny Batman tools from the past became really cool Wayne Industries military equipment re-purposed. The “tumbler” Batmobile, the body armor that becomes the Batsuit, the paratrooper glider rig that allows him to “fly” and even looks like bat wings. A major part of why I liked “Batman Begins” was that they tool the silly things from Batman and found serious and logical ways they could exist... and when the Batmobile crashes in “The Dark Knight” and the Batcycle pops out moments before it self destructs? Something cool and extra!

COOL ACTIONS

Another neat idea popped up in Alan Sharp's "Rob Roy". Rob Roy has been captured by the army, under the command of his nemesis Archie. Hands tied, he is tethered to the back of a horse by about fifty feet of rope. No way to escape. He can only run fifty feet, before he reaches the end of his rope. We have seen "escape from the bad guys" scenes in a million films, but Alan Sharp treats us to something extra. When the Army stops at a bridge over a raging river, and Archie dismounts, Rob Roy quickly runs up to him, twists the tether line around his neck, then jumps off the bridge. The rope strangles Archie (forcing the army to rescue him) and breaks Rob Roy's fall into the river (dangling him a few feet from the surface). The only way the Army can save Archie from strangulation is to cut the rope... and free Rob Roy!

Of all the possible ways for Rob Roy to escape, this method gives us the most for our money. It was such a neat idea, that the audience I saw it with cheered. How clever! I wish that I had come up with that idea for one of my scripts.

Though it couldn't save the film, one of the things I liked about the new version of “Conan The Barbarian” was when young Conan was allowed to participate in the “Warrior Test” with the older boys. He's about ten years old and the other boys are in their teens – young men – and Conan's father (the great Ron Perlman) gives each of them a bird's egg and has them run a mountain obstacle course. Those who return with their eggs unbroken can train to be warriors. The older boys take their eggs and run as Conan watches... then his father hands him an egg and asks “What are you waiting for?” Conan takes the egg and tries to catch up with the older boys. Part of the obstacle course ends up being the other boys – they do everything they can to smash their competition's eggs. But when they come across a group of enemy warriors preparing to attack the village, all of the other boys turn and run back home. Little Conan attacks. These enemy warriors roar like jungle beasts (cool idea) and fight little Conan. Later Conan returns to the village covered in blood... carrying the *heads* of the enemy warriors! He drops the heads on the ground before his father... then spits out the unbroken egg. That unbroken egg was fantastic! If only the rest of the film had been that clever!

Always look for that something extra a character can do – especially if you have a scene that we have seen before.

COOL DIALOGUE

In Scott Rosenberg's "Things To Do In Denver When You're Dead", that little something extra is the bizarre slang the gangsters use. Instead of "Goodbye", they say "Boat Drinks". An old timer translates this for us: While in prison, convicts dream of drinking cocktails on a yacht when they get out. Hence "Boat Drinks", which is a variation on "Have a nice day". Weird slang peppers this script, from "Buckwheats" to "Give it a name", every line of dialogue giving the audience something extra.

Many writers are obsessed with using accurate slang, but slang evolves and changes. What's hip today may become passe. So why not invent your own slang? Why not create interesting phrases and contractions that are specific to the world your characters live in?

What is the Lone Ranger's horse's name? What is the Green Hornet's car named? Another aspect of Cool Dialogue is to give things pet names – which gives them a personality. In the “Executioner “ novels by Don Pendleton the hero Mack Bolan carries a stainless steel 44 automatic named “Big Thunder” - isn't that more interesting than just carrying some generic gun? Nicknames – for people, cars, weapons, places, and everything else – can be a “something extra” in dialogue that can turn generics into cool specifics.

COOL WORLDS

Every script takes us into a world where the story takes place... where the audience will spend two hours of their lives. You can chose any world you want - the only limit is your imagination! So take us someplace cool! Take us behind the scenes someplace and show us how that world works. All of the cool stuff that makes the audience feel like insiders.

At one point in my career I turned down adapting Dan Brown's “Angels & Demons” which takes us to places we have never been before - not only inside the Vatican and inside the Vatican politics of electing a new Pope, but also into the world of the Illuminati - that secret organization of rogue scientists what have been waging a top secret battle against the Catholic Church for hundreds of years. Even on Earth there are secret worlds where film has yet to take us - and Tom Hanks and his weird haircut was our tour guide for this one. We will not be going to any of the normal stops on the Vatican Tour, he's going to take us to all of the cool places that are strictly off limits - in fact, if you ask the Vatican these places don't even exist. But we're going to go there anyway – Cool!

If your script is about armored truck guards, take us behind the scenes and show us the interesting details of their world. If your script is about Navy SEALS, show us how they live their lives and let us see the equipment they use and maybe takes us for drinks at McP's after the mission. If your story is about astronauts or professional killers or magicians or deep sea explorers – takes us into that world and let us live your character's lives vicartiously.

Though “Worlds” are usually the *Arena* for the story, they can also be locations like Rio de Janeiro. “Fast Five” did something interesting and avoided the tourist locations and luxury for the gritty slums. Though there have been films that took place in the favelas before, it is an interesting and unusual location... and part of what makes the film unique. “Winter's Bone” takes us into some backwoods version of hell populated by hillbilly gangsters who would rather kill you and dump you in the swamp than answer your questions. Both of these films give the audience a sort of travelogue of places you would probably not want to visit in real life... but in the safety of a cinema? Cool!

Part of why we love movies is that we get to live other people's lives for two hours. I don't want to join the Navy, but I want to sit behind the stick of a F-14 fighter plane as a Top Gun pilot for a couple of hours and experience their world. The more details of that world you can show me, the more enjoyable my experience. In a strange way movies are a VR ride - the more detailed the world we create, the more the audience can immerse themselves in it. They more realistic the experience. So – what is the cool world your story takes place n?

CLEVER SOLUTIONS

There was a TV episode, I think from "Banacek" or “Mission Impossible”, where a ton of gold bullion is stolen from vault overnight. But how was it removed? Too heavy to lift, too bulky to get past the posted guards. Of all the various methods available, the screenwriter chose the one with something extra. The gold bricks were stacked against the back wall of the vault and painted brick red. They had never been removed from the vault, just disguised to look like the vault's back wall. Part of our job as writers is to amaze – just like a magician. If you can *reveal* something instead of just show it, that makes for a more interesting scene or solution. If we have a choice between the “normal” way to do something and the clever way – always go with the clever way! Use your creativity and imagination in every scene and situation.

One of the best ways to separate your script from the thundering herd is to fill it with cool ideas, give every scene something extra. Go over your script scene by scene, and try to infuse each with something extra, either a neat device or a neat method. Whichever, it should be something we haven't seen before. Something which will have the audience talking about it long after the final credits have rolled. Now all we have to do is introduce our hero, and we're off to the shoot outs!

HERO INTRODUCTION

In your screenplay, you don't just want your protagonist to walk into a room – you want to give them an introduction. One amazing scene where you introduce your lead character before they become involved in the plot full time. But the *better* method is to find a way to introduce the lead character as part of the story. The idea is to develop a great signature scene which sets the character up for the rest of the film.

In "The Ipcress File" (1965) we first see Harry Palmer as he wakes up in the morning and prepares for work. It is a simple scene which tells us *everything* we need to know about this character. He has to find his glasses before he can see the alarm clock. He grinds his own gourmet coffee beans, and uses a complicated coffee maker. He looks out his flat window while drinking his coffee. Later, he finds a woman's ear ring in his bed... while searching for his misplaced gun. And he leaves his apartment late for work.

All of the important elements of character we need to know about Harry Palmer is established in this scene... From here, the film whisks us away on an adventure. Though we don't need to know every single detail of the character after their introduction scene, we need to know enough about them to understand how they will react to the basic events of the story and what we might expect from them. If a character is introduced as a mild mannered computer programmer like Neo in “The Matrix”, we won't expect them to be a bad-ass martial arts expert in the very next scene. Even when a character is introduced out of their element as John McClane is in “Die Hard” there are some pretty strong hints that he's a bad-ass: they allow him to carry a gun on a plane! This isn't your normal nervous flier with an armload of stuffed animals for his kids. When the fishermen pull Jason Bourne out of the ocean, he has been shot several times and has a high tech gadget implanted in his body. Not just some tourist who fell off a cruise ship. In “Colombiana” our hero is introduced as a little girl in a school uniform... who takes off running after her parents are killed and leads an army of badguys on an amazing rooftop chase that few of them survive. She's agile and resourceful and determined.

The best way to write an introduction scene is to make a list of everything the audience needs to learn about your lead character. Then come up with a single scene which illustrates each of these important points in an entertaining way. The more information you can pack into one scene, the better we will know your hero – and know what to expect from them when the Villain's Plan kicks into gear.

Though the "Hot Dog" scene in "Dirty Harry" (1971) isn't the first time we see the character, it is a good example of how to pack lots of information in a single scene. Harry is sitting at the counter in a blue collar diner eating a hot dog when he spots a car idling in front of a bank across the street. Harry tells the diner owner to call the police, then unholsters his 44 Magnum and stops the bank robbery single handed, destroying anything which gets in his way. Finally he threatens the downed bank robber, and gives his signature lines from the film: “Did he fire six shots or only five?" Well, to tell you the truth, in all this excitement I kind of lost track myself. But being as this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one question: Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?"

One simple little scene - what do we learn about Harry from this scene?

1. He's a blue collar guy.

2) He's incredibly observant and smart. He sees the smoke from the tail pipe of the car parked in front of the bank, and figures out that there is a robbery in progress.

3) He carries a non-regulation gun. A HUGE gun. A gun that isn't designed to wound, but to kill.

4) He faces the robbers alone. He is fearless.

5) He doesn't wait for back up. He's a lone wolf, not a team player.

6) He continues eating his lunch as he brings down the robbers. This is just another normal occasion for Harry.

7) Nothing gets in his way on his quest for "justice". He trashes the entire block while catching the criminals.

8) He doesn't give the wounded robber the Miranda warning... He threatens to KILL him. No kid gloves,

here. This guy treats criminals like scum.

9) We learn many other details, and also get audience identification with Harry: This interrupts his lunch. Not even a sit-down lunch, but a lousy hot dog. Anyone who has ever had their lunch interrupted by work knows how Harry feels.

We learn at least nine very important things about Harry from this one brief scene. By the time Harry gets a new partner and is set out after the Zodiac Killer, we know exactly how he will react in every scene, because it was all set up in this character introduction scene. What we don't get in this scene – that Harry was married and his wife died after being hit by a drunk driver, but do we really need to know that to understand the character and their actions when the plot kicks in?

The film opens with the sniper shooting of a woman in a rooftop swimming pool, and then we see Harry as he meticulously investigates the crime scene and uses his powers of observation to spot the rooftop where the sniper must have fired from... and on that rooftop finds the shell casing. That's what happens in the background of the *title sequence*. The error many people (ie: critics) make when they think of action films is that they are not character oriented – yet a film like “Dirty Harry” is all about the character. Scene after scene is *exploring* the character through their actions. When the Mayor calls him into his office and asks him what he's been doing, he replies: “Well, for the past three quarters of an hour I've been sitting on my ass in your outer office waiting on you.” After being shot in the leg, the doctor wants to cut off his pants to remove the bullet... but Harry says the pants cost him $29.50 so he'd rather take them off, even if it hurts. Even though the introduction scene gives us the “big picture” on who Harry is, every scene in the film is about his character... giving us more and more information to add to what we already know.

ROAD WARRIOR INTRO

In my Visual Storytelling Blue Book I use the opening scene from "The Road Warrior" (Mad Max 2) as an example of how to introduce your hero *without a single line of dialogue*. You don't need a character to *tell* you who they are – they can show you all kinds of information through their actions.

We first see Max roaring down the highway in his car, his faithful dog by his side. He is being chased by a group of scumbags. Blocking the road ahead of Max... an obstacle course of car wrecks. Max doesn't even slow down - he expertly guides his car between the wrecks. The scumbags chasing him aren't as good - they plow through some of the wrecks, scattering debris. The dog yawns - it's a typical day...

Then the fuel indicator light comes on. Max is almost out of gas! Max slows to conserve fuel. The dog hides in the back seat. The scumbags catch up, and flank Max's car. They aim their weapons through their car windows at Max. Max hits the brakes. The scumbags fire... but Max isn't there anymore. They end up firing at each other! The scumbag on the motorcycle (the villain, Wez) gets hit in the arm and drops out of the chase. Max is now BEHIND the scumbag's car... And rams it. Forcing it into a big truck wrecked on the side of the road. Crash!

Max stops his car near the wreck, jumps out with a gas can. Gas is leaking from the scumbag's overturned car. Max uses a hubcap to collect the gas. He uses a rag to sop up the gas that spilled onto the street, wringing it out into his gas can. The evil Wez watches from his motorcycle a hundred yards away. Max keeps an eye on him as he collects the gas. Wez pulls the arrow out of his arm, but puts it in his scabbard instead of throwing it away. Max pulls his shotgun... but Wez roars away on his motorcycle.

Max holsters the shotgun and checks out the big truck's fuel tanks, tapping them. Empty. He opens the cab door. A hideous rotting corpse falls out, right at Max! Max steps out of the way, bored. He searches the corpse for valuables, finds a little music box. He winds up the music box and it plays "Happy Birthday". For the first time, we see Max smile. The smile fades. He pockets the music box, grabs his gas, and roars away.

What do we learn about Max from this scene?

1. He's a loner. An outcast from society.

2) He's an expert driver - he makes it through the obstacle course or wrecks, but the villains don't.
3) This is a typical day for Max. The dog's reactions show us what Max is feeling - this is a great technique to use when you have a strong silent type as your lead. Use a sidekick of some sort to show the emotions your lead character won't reveal.
4) Max is fearless. When the dog hides in the back seat, Max shows no fear.
5) Max is inventive - he jams on the brakes so that the bad guys shoot each other. That also shows his driving skills again, but it also shows that he's intelligent.
6) He's a good guy - the villains are shooting at him, but he's not shooting back. His weapons are a last resort for self defense.
7) We also learn how valuable gas is both to Max and the villains. People kill each other for gasoline in this world.
8) Max uses the rag to sop spilled gas off the street - gas is like gold. Max would risk attack by Wez just to collect some spilled gasoline.
9) Max is so used to seeing dead bodies that the corpse has no effect on him. This tells us about Max and the world our story takes place in.
10) Searching the corpse for valuables - Max is a scavenger... but not a predator like Wez and the scumbags.
11) Max smiles when he hears the music box... there's a human buried in there somewhere. But buried deep. Something made Max this stone-face man. Something hardened his heart, closed him off from the outside world. That music box cut through Max's armor... and showed us the emotional journey that Max will make in this film. He is a man who is dead inside who will learn to live again.

We learn almost a dozen things about Max and his world from this one brief scene. Without a single word of dialogue, we have learned all we need to know about our hero. By the time he lands in the gas-makers village, we know exactly how he will react in every scene, because it was all set up in the introduction scene.

The best way to show us your character is to make a list of everything that defines them, then come up with a scene which illustrates each of these important points in an entertaining way. Showing us the character through their actions.

CRASH DIVE! INTO

Here's the introduction of the lead character (the opening scene) from my HBO World Premiere script "Crash Dive!":

EXT. SUB COMMAND - DAY

A sign outside the building identifies it as: Submarine Command, Admiral A.J. Pendelton, East Coast Operations.

An aging sports car brakes to a stop in front of a 'No Parking' sign, and JAMES ALLEN CARTER climbs out, a manila folder overflowing with paper in his left hand and a cup of coffee from home in his right.

CARTER is USN, Ret. Even though he's on the wrong side of 40, he's still in shape. Trim, but not pretty. Unshaven, his hair windblown, and his clothes look as if he's slept in them. His coffee cup exclaims the joys of bass fishing. He jogs up to the door, careful not to spill his coffee.

INT. SUB COMMAND - DAY

Carter jogs down the hall, evading the occasional UNIFORM.

* * *

Without a word of dialogue or exposition, what have we learned about James Carter? See how I use the old sports car as a metaphor for Carter? When he parks right in front of the No Parking sign, the audience will probably laugh. We like people who break the rules. Carter is late for work, something many of us can relate to. He seems a little disorganized, but that's okay, because in the next scene we will find out that he is a technical genius who has just solved a problem in 27 hours that the best brains at MIT couldn't solve in three months. Twenty pages later, the United States will be threatened by nuclear blackmail, and bookworm James Carter will be dropped behind enemy lines to use his photographic memory to save the world. Unfortunately, the bad guys have guns and knives...

TALK ABOUT HEROES

Another way to intro your character is the reveal. This is a second person technique, where we find out about your character through the dialogue or actions of others, then meet her.

The dialogue method is frequently used in Westerns. A group of grizzled cowboys sit around a poker table, talking about the meanest, toughest, fastest, gunslinger in all the west. Each contributes a story showing a different side of this gunslinger. "He once shot eight men without a reload. That bullet bounced from one man to another like a billiard ball." "I once saw him tear a man's arm clean off in a fist fight." "I personally know he ruined three of the girls at Miss Kitty's... They went and fell in love with him afterwords and quit the business." "The army put him in Yuma Prison once, but he tunneled his way out with his bare hands." "That's nothing, I heard some of Metaxas' raiders took him out to the middle of Death Valley, shot his horse, and left him to die. Only it backfired. He walked out of that desert and hunted every man to a one down. Shot them dead. One guy he shot in the kitchen in front of his wife and kids." "He's a tough one, that Roy Slade." As soon as the audience gets a vivid picture of who this desperado is, the saloon doors open and THERE HE IS... Woody Allen in a cowboy hat!

The main problem with introducing a character through second person dialogue is that it's talking heads, and film is a *visual* medium... so it's always better to show, don't tell.

REVEAL THE HERO

The visual second person intro is the one we most often see. Three examples:

One. In Ben Hecht's "Notorious", we see a wild party in progress. Dancing, drinking, people going into the coat room to make love. Amidst all of this carousing, we see a man sitting in a chair, back towards us. This man turns down all invitations to dance. He isn't drinking. He seems very businesslike. With every invitation he turns down, our curiosity about him *grows*. Finally, the hostess (a provocatively dressed Ingrid Bergman, looking hot!) tries to force him out of his shell. No success. As the party dies down, she continues flirting with him. Nothing. Now we *really* want to know what this guy's game is. Why is he even at this party? He is after something, but what? Soon, it is only Ingrid, a passed out drunk, and the mystery man. She makes a pass at him, he turns her down flat. He only wants to talk to her. We *finally* dolly around to see the Mystery Man's face... It's Cary Grant. Our hero.

In this scene, we many things about Grant's Devlin character, most important is that business comes before pleasure in his life. In fact, he is so business oriented that we wonder if he ever has *any* fun. Certainly, he has no love life. We also learn how focused he is, how easy it is for him to avoid temptation, and how patient he is... Like a hunter waiting in a duck blind for hours until the prey takes flight. All of these elements will figure into the story. Some of them will be assets, other liabilities.

Two. "Raiders Of The Lost Ark" has a similar reveal character intro. We are POV of the guides, cutting through a jungle. Who is leading? Not a guide, but our lead character. We only see the back of his head. When the expedition comes across something scary in the jungle, the guides pull back in terror... Our lead continues forward. When we come upon traps, our lead avoids them, but the guides (who are indigenous to this area, and should KNOW what to do) fumble and get killed. Finally, after we've learned how brave, crafty, gung-ho, intelligent, relentless, independent, and strong our lead character is, we see his face: Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones.

Three. I used a combination verbal and visual reveal in my "Unreasonable Force" script. We take the POV of a Homicide Detective at the crime scene. As the Detective comes up to each member of the MCSU Team, they say something which tells us about the Detective. A Uniform Cop is reverential, showing that the Detective is powerful. A Fingerprint man makes jokes, showing that the Detective has a sense of humor. The ME tells the Detective that the victim is a close range shotgun blast, really messy, then lifts the bloody cloth covering the corpse so that the Detective can see. The Detective isn't squeamish. Each person the Detective comes into contact with gives us another clue to who the Detective is. We develop this image of a tough, competent, action oriented cop... Then twist around to reveal pretty single mom Kelly Brooks. After the reveal, Kelly talks about the inconvenience of finding a sitter at short notice in the middle of the night. Couldn't these people get killed at a reasonable time of day? When babysitter rates are cheap?

In one scene, we learn everything we need to know about Kelly Brooks, so that the audience has a fairly good idea how she will react through the rest of the film.

Whether your character is a tough cop or a single mom (or both) it is important for you to familiarize the audience with your lead character quickly and succinctly, so that they may settle into their seats and enjoy the rest of the film. Create a single character introduction scene early in the script, and pack it full of information. Then let the story take control, and take the audience on a roller coaster ride for the rest of the film.

THE TWITCH

Screenwriting is writing for the screen, telling the story visually through the actions of the actions of the characters. Just like in real life, actions speak louder than words. What a characters says is usually what they wish were true, or what they want the others in the scene to believe is true. But good stories need characters to wrestle with inner demons, to overcome fears, and to solve emotional conflicts. How do we display a character's emotional conflict on screen without thought balloons or voice overs? How do you show feelings and thoughts on screen?

Though there are at least a dozen techniques to show what a character is thinking or feeling on screen, I use a method I call "The Twitch".

A "Twitch" is a physical manifestation of a character's internal conflict. A symbol of the conflict which the character can refer to throughout the script. An icon, a fetish doll. An object that can be used as a symbol of the turmoil bubbling within the character's mind. In the original "Pink Panther" movies, whenever Clouseau's name was mentioned around Inspector Dreyfus he began twitching uncontrollably, and we knew how he felt and could easily imagine what he was thinking. Though you might be able to get away with something like this in broad comedy, in a drama, action film, or other genre; reality and subtlety are called for.

A Twitch is always a physical object: a photo, a medallion, a watch, a cane, a hat, a ring. It differs from a Touchstone, which is a symbol used to remember peaceful, regular life when the character's world has gone to hell. The cliche Touchstone is the family photo a soldier looks at when under fire in a fox hole. The most famous is a sled called "Rosebud".

Probably the funniest Touchstone ever devised was in a sketch on the old Carol Burnett Show. Harvey Korman played a soldier about to go off to war who asks Carol for "a little something to remember her by" (sex?). Carol responds by giving him a *huge* potted plant from her living room. He vows to keep it close to his heart. The rest of the sketch was the standard WW2 soldier in a foxhole drama, with the ludicrous giant potted plant never leaving Korman's hands as bombs blast all around him. No matter how bad the war became, he still had that potted plant.

A Touchstone is a physical object which brings calm to a character.
A Twitch reminds the character of an unresolved conflict.

In Robert Rodriguez's "Desperado", the Mariachi's musical career ends when his girlfriend is murdered and he is shot in the hand. Whenever he picks up a guitar, he is reminded of his girlfriend's death. The guitar is the Mariachi's twitch. It symbolizes the death of his girlfriend, the death of his career, the death of his dreams. When the little boy asks him to play, he only manages a few notes before the pain overwhelms him.

The guitar, which was once the Mariachi's source of joy, is now his source of pain... And the use of the guitar case to hide his weapons is further symbolic of his inability to let go of his rage and need for vengeance. The film is filled with guitars and guitar cases, all symbolic. When he meets a new love, a new source of hope, she gives him a guitar as a gift. At the end of the film, he throws his guitar case of weapons as far as he can, removing the pain.

There are two types of Twitches, Early and Late.

THE LATE TWITCH

The best examples can be found in the Spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone. In "Once Upon A Time In The West", Charles Bronson's character has a harmonica on a lanyard around his neck, but only plays it in the presence of Henry Fonda's steel eyed gunslinger. That harmonica had some hidden meaning, and by the end of the film it would be revealed to us.

Through out the film, a great deal of mystery is built up around the harmonica. Why is it Bronson's most important possession, something worth dying for? Bronson spends a great deal of time touching the harmonica, studying it. The harmonica is clearly Bronson's twitch, symbolic of.... something. Some big emotional conflict – but we don't know what. Why does Bronson always play it in the presence of the steel eyed killed played by Henry Fonda? The mystery builds until the end when the mystery is revealed in a flashback: The Steel Eyed Killer puts a noose around Bronson's brother's neck, then hoists him onto young Bronson's shoulders. Then he uses the harmonica to gag young Bronson's cries for help. Young Bronson gets tired (and begins breathing rapidly on the harmonica) and collapses, his brother hangs. When Bronson faces the Steel Eyed Killer in a gun battle as an adult, he shoots the man who killed his brother... Then places the harmonica in the killer's mouth so he can hear his own last breaths.

One of the most famous Late Twitches are the musical pocket watches from Leone's "For A Few $ More". Colonel Douglas Mortimer has a pocket watch which he frequently studies. The villain, Indio, has a musical pocket watch which he uses the tune to time gun battles.

Indio seems haunted by his watch, and as the film progresses, we see snippets of a flash back, getting the history of the watch a little at a time. A woman gets the watch as a gift. Indio kills the woman's husband. Indio rapes the woman. The woman kills herself rather than be raped. Indio takes the watch from the dead woman's hand.

At the end shoot out between Mortimer and Indio, we finally see the Colonel's watch: It's the same as Indio's. The raped woman was Mortimer's sister, and the Colonel has been on a mission of vengeance.

The Late Twitch was also used in Sam Raimi's homage to spaghetti westerns, "The Quick And The Dead". You use the device to build the mystery of the unresolved conflict, and then pay it off – usually with a flashback – late in the film. The key to a Late Twitch is have your Hero hold it, touch it, play with it – so that the audience will realize it has some meaning and wonder about it. In my script "Past Lives" my emotionally damaged child psychologist Penny Temestra often rubs her chest when she's confronted with a decision... then it I revealed that she has three *huge* scars from bullet holes in her chest. That reveal just makes us wonder what the heck happened to her. Now when she touches her chest, we know what's she is touching – but how did that happen? How did a nice girl like her get shot? Late in the script I reveal how she was shot and what it means to her now. Late Twitches are all about mystery.

THE EARLY TWITCH

This is the method I prefer. You give your protagonist a physical object with personal meaning. In a 'tell scene' (usually in act one) the protagonist explains the significance of the object or we see them acquire the object. From that point on, whenever the protagonist touches the object, it reminds the audience of the protagonist's history. Like the guitars in "Desperado" or the silver bracelet in Borden Chase and Charles Schnee's classic western "Red River" or even the scar on John Travolta's chest in “Face/Off” that reminds him on his dead son. When Travolta is going under the knife to become Castor Troy so that he can infiltrate the terrorist operation, he insists on keeping that scar – it symbolizes his son. Close to his heart – yet painful.

In “Colombiana” young Cataleya's father gives her a necklace that has the Cataleya flower on it. She was named after the flower because his mother grew them. When he puts it around her neck, he tells her: "Never forget who you are." As an adult, killing the people responsible for her parent's murder, she touches the necklace sometimes... remembering.

In my HBO World Premiere movie "Grid Runners" (AKA “Virtual Combat”) I needed a way to remind the audience that Quarry was tracking the villain because his partner was killed (partially due to Quarry's negligence). So I had Quarry snag a photo CD of his partner from his personal effects. This becomes Quarry's twitch, a reminder of his involvement in his partner's death. He carries it throughout the entire script, consulting it often. Once it's established, whenever he brings it out, the audience knows he is thinking about his partner and his own failure to save him.

A similar twitch was used in “Minority Report” with Tom Cruise keeping holo-home movies of his dead son as well as his non-working watch – both things remind him of his loss... and his responsibility in the event. And in "Strange Days" Ralph Fiennes keeps CD ROMs of his old lover. The film's best scene has Angela Bassett throwing them to the floor, breaking them, and telling Fiennes to forget the past and get on with his life.

In “The Dark Knight” District Attorney Harvey Dent has a two-headed coin – a good luck token – and has a ”tell scene” where he explains the significance to Rachel. He gives her the coin for luck... before both are kidnapped by the Joker and placed in different warehouses set to blow up. After the woman he loves is killed and Dent is transformed into Two Face, that coin becomes more than just a reminder of Rachel's death (the death of his soul mate, the death of his soul). “You thought we could be decent men in an indecent time. But you were wrong. The world is cruel, and the only morality in a cruel world is chance.” Now the coin has a burned side – just as he does. A great “twitch” - filled with meaning and emotions. Every time Two Face takes it out, you understand what turned him into this monster.

Same director, different twitch – in “Inception” Cobb carries his wife's spinning top and explains to Ariadne early in the film the importance of having a personal totem that will tell you whether you are asleep or awake. He spins the top – and if it falls over he is awake. But in the film the top is more than just a way to know if he is awake, it's also a reminder of his dead wife – and his responsibility for her suicide. A great twitch because it serves more than one purpose – it has a function in the action of the story *and* is a reminder of Cobb's unresolved emotional conflict. Cobb also wears his wedding band... sometimes. In his dreams? Or when he is awake? Check out the very end of the film and tell me...

In my frequently almost produced script "Undercurrents" a sailor named Jeff takes a job captaining a yacht for a husband and wife con-man team. He becomes involved with the wife, Nola, and the con game. In so deep he doesn't know what's real and what's part of the charade. Jeff wears an old compass on a lanyard around his neck.

Here is the 'tell' scene:

* * *

NOLA
What's this?

JEFF
Compass. My father gave it to me when I was ten.

NOLA
Really?

JEFF
Every couple of months, he'd save up enough money to rent a boat for an hour, and take me sailing on Lake Merritt.
(beat)
A stupid little two man boat. We would sail around to the amusement park and sail back. That's all we had time for.

NOLA
An hour of sailing is better than none at all.

Jeff takes the compass from her hands, studying it.

JEFF
He was an alcoholic. Used to spend all night drinking, and wake up not knowing where he was.

Jeff rubs his thumb over the compass.

JEFF
I always know where I'm going. Where I'm going to wake up.

Nola presses her body against him, lips close.

NOLA
I NEVER know where I'm going to wake up. It's more exciting that way.

Their lips blend together and passion ignites them.

* * *

The compass has become more than a directional device, it symbolizes Jeff's fears of aimlessness, his fear of becoming like his father, his fears of confusion. It is a symbol of his lack of self confidence. The compass has become his crutch, and he touches it frequently.

When the story takes some unexpected twists and turns, Jeff finds himself completely lost. The compass is broken, taking away his sense of direction. He doesn't know what's real, or where to turn. He looks at the broken compass for a clue, but it gives no answers.

Only when he has learned to trust his own instincts, to navigate by 'dead reckoning', is he able to discard the broken compass and take charge of his life.

Whenever Jeff touches the compass, the audience knows he is "lost" without a word of dialogue. After the tell scene it has become a symbol for Jeff's internal struggles, his fears and lack of confidence. When he finally discards it, we *know* he has conquered his inner conflict and is ready to take on the world.

In Pixar's “Up” Karl Fredrickson must deal with the loss of his wife as he goes on the big adventure they never got a chance to take while she was alive... and he brings along the house they lived in together. That has to be the biggest twitch in the history of cinema!

THE DOUBLE TWITCH

In Jeb Stuart and Steven E. deSouza's "Die Hard", Holly Genero is given a gold Rolex watch by her employers. This Twitch symbolizes her allegiance to career. Her husband, John McClane, has spent the entire film realizing he must admit he's been "a jerk" and meet her halfway. The antagonist Hans, a terrorist/"exceptional thief", is motivated by his greed. During the fight scene at the end, Hans is pushed out a window, but grabs hold of Holly's watch band, almost pulling her out with him. As Hans dangles 30 stories above the ground, holding tightly to the symbolic gold Rolex, Holly makes a decision: To cast off her single minded quest for career advancement and meet her husband halfway. The watch band is opened, and Hans holds tight to the gold Rolex as he falls to the ground.

The Rolex is a double twitch: It symbolizes Career to Holly, and Greed to Hans. By using the Twitch, Stuart and deSouza have added shading and irony to a scene where a villain falls out a window to his death. Imparting the most information with the least amount of verbiage. That's what Symbols and Icons are all about.

My Showtime film "Black Thunder" has an interesting variation on the Double Twitch. The ultimate Stealth Fighter plane is stolen by terrorists, and Air Force test pilot Vince Conners is brought in to get it back. Conners was trained by the best, a gung-ho "Right Stuff" test pilot named Tom Ratcher, now retired from the Air Force. Whenever Conners gets into the cockpit of a plane, he tapes a photo on the control panel (Conners' twitch). The photo shows Ratcher with one arm over Conners' shoulder. But the photo is cropped so that we can't see Ratcher's other arm.

To get back the stolen Stealth Fighter plane, Conners is partnered with his rival and worst enemy, Rick Jannick. In the past, Jannick's hot-dog attitude almost got Conners killed.

Late in the film, Jannick is captured by the villains. They go through his belongings, and find a photo (Jannick's twitch). The photo shows Jannick's mentor, Tom Ratcher, with one arm over his shoulder... The other third of Conners' photo!

The full photo gives the audience Conners and Jannick's back story: They were rivals for Ratcher's fatherly affection. Because Conners was Ratcher's favorite, Jannick was forced into his crazy hot-dog attitude to get attention.

The same photo is not only both Conners and Jannick's twitch, it is also the key to their relationship. An Early Twitch for Conners which becomes a Late Twitch to explain his relationship with Jannick. This was completely left out of the Steven Seagal remake, along with all of the characters and their backstories. I came up with the idea for the photo that has three parts and we have to wait until the end until all three are revealed after seeing “Exotica” - a film where the ensemble cast has some mystery connection that isn't revealed until the end. Don't be afraid to try new and interesting things in your action script. Just because some technique or idea comes from an art house film doesn't mean it's off limits for your script.

CYMBALS AND SYMBOLS

Chose your Twitch Object carefully, as its appearance will have great meaning. If your script is a story about a love affair which begins to sour, have the couple win a heart shaped helium balloon at a carnival in an early scene. Then, as their love begins to fade, the helium balloon gradually sinks to the floor and deflates. Every time we see the balloon floating a little bit lower, we *know* the love between our couple is diminishing.

I have used wedding bands and money clips and compasses and retirement watches and children's toys. The key is to find the object that fits the characters and story and theme. Then either introduce that object in a scene that gives it meaning like a father sharing a snack with his son, or turn it into a mystery and reveal the meaning at the end as in the Leone Spaghetti Westerns. Whenever the character pulls the object from their pocket and looks at it, we'll know exactly what they are thinking and feeling. No need for pesky dialogue!

Since the object is symbolic of the character's emotional conflict, it should obviously relate to that conflict. In my "Last Resort" script, my protagonist is an ex-pro football player whose career and plans for the future are shattered along with the cartilage in his knee. He's out of the game, and finds himself without a future. Giving up on life, he begins a hermit-like existence as the owner/manager of a run down beach front resort. His cane is the constant reminder of his knee injury, and his lack of future.

As the story unfolds, he begins to see an a new future for himself, and becomes less reliant on his cane. Every time he experiences a minor drawback, he grabs his cane for support. Finally, he reaches a crisis point where he must confront his inner fears. He must decide if he is a used up cripple, or a man who will fight for himself. He throws the cane away, and stands tall. No longer a victim.

If I tried to express this in dialogue, it wouldn't work. It would come out corny and pretentious. And film is a medium of actions, not words. Tossing aside a cane is a hard image worth a thousand words of dialogue.

Similarly, a Touchstone is an object that is usually used to show memories of a more peaceful time. The cliche Touchstone is that family photo every soldier in a fox hole looks at in the scene before they are killed. That same photo could become a Twitch if the soldier's family had been killed in an attack, and his motivations were revenge. Instead of looking at the photo and feeling peace, he would be feeling anger.

>The problem with using a photo is that it's all surface, two dimensional and obvious. Better to find an object with some personality or significance. In Robert Rodat's "The Patriot" before Mel Gibson's character leaves his family to go off to war, his son gives him his collection of lead toy soldiers. As the war goes on, Gibson melts the toy soldiers one-by-one to make ammunition for his musket. The full bag of toys begins to empty. Every time he melts one, we know that he's not only missing his family he is also thinking about how he is losing his humanity... melting those things that make him a good father and husband away to be a soldier. Toy soldiers being turned into something that will kill soldiers. Not only better than a picture of his family, it is also thematic.

THE TEMPORARY TWITCH

There are times when you don't want to show the inner conflict of a character, but just give us a peek at his or her emotions. That's when the temporary twitch is useful.

In William Goldman's "Marathon Man" Dustin Hoffman has had a very negative dental experience. He uses a vial of oil of cloves to deaden the pain in his teeth. When he makes the decision to take on the badguys himself, he throws the vial to the ground, shattering it. Now we *know* he's ready for action.

In my script "High Impact" a father is searching for his kidnapped son. I needed to find a way to show that each was thinking of the other, when they were separated my many miles. So I used a temporary twitch. Just before the boy is kidnapped, the father breaks a Hershey bar in half to share with his son. Because they are about to eat dinner, both put the halves of the candy bar in their pockets for later. Then the son is kidnapped.

As the son is held captive, he breaks off sections of the Hershey bar... and we *know* he's thinking of his father. As the father searches frantically, the only food he has is the Hershey bar, which he eats a section at a time, thinking of his son. With hundreds of miles separating them, they are together. Joined by the Hershey bar. When each gets down to the last of their six sections, each separately chooses not to eat it. To keep the section as a reminder, to be eaten together.

Whether you use a Twitch early or late, or just to illustrate a temporary emotional state, it is an important tool with which to show the inner emotions of a character without resorting to dialogue. A way to tell the audience what a character is thinking without voice overs or speech balloons. A way to use pictures instead of a thousand words... maybe with real balloons.

EMOTION PICTURES

"I thought drama was when actors cried. But drama is when the audience cries" - Frank Capra.

My friend John Hill (“Quigley Down Under”) calls movies *emotion* pictures because people go to the movies to have emotional experiences. They want to feel. In our every day lives we usually have to hold in our emotions - films give us a chance to let all of those emotions out. Our job as writers is to give the audience an emotional experience, whether it's fear from a horror movie, sadness from a tragedy, romance from a love story, joy and laughter from a comedy, excitement from an action movie. Our job is to create those emotions in the audience through our scripts.

Imagine three gears: the first gear moves the second gear which moves the third gear. The screenwriter is that first gear, and we use our scripts (second gear) to move the audience (third gear). We're trying to move the audience emotionally. To make them laugh or cry or sit on the edge of their seat or cover their eyes in fear. Every part of our script should be designed to create an emotional response in the audience... we're writing *emotion* pictures.

Without emotions what we end up with is one of those boring science movies from high school where the dispassionate narrator drones on and on and on. Those things put me to sleep. You want your action script to have juice, excitement, sparks. Big drama, big emotions... move that audience gear as much as you can. Action films are all about life or death situations, and those are about the most emotionally charged situations I can think of. When you are writing an action scene, remember to make it emotional as well as physical.

PET ROCK OR PET PUPPY?

A film (and any form of storytelling) is communication. We strive to make the audience care about the character, the story unfolding, and *feel* the emotions the characters feel. I believe it's the main criteria when judging a film - did it make me *feel*? Was I emotionally involved with the characters and their struggles? If a film fails to engage me, it can have lots of swell action scenes and/or pretty pictures and it's nothing more than porn. Action porn or cinematography porn. Just an action movie that's just a big bag-o-stunt scenes. If I am not emotionally involved, the film has failed on a basic level.

A script is like having a pet. When I was kid I had a dog, and that dog was my best friend. When I came home from school he was waiting for me in the back yard with a wagging tail and a slobbery tennis ball. He'd always jump up and lick my face in greeting. We'd play together and go on hikes together and when I rode my bike he'd chase after me. Just looking at my dog made me smile. Most of you have probably had a pet at some point in your life, so take a minute to think about your relationship with your pet...

Now imagine it was a pet rock. A pretty rock, but still a rock. Cold, emotionless, dead. Imagine playing in the park with your rock. Imagine the warm feelings from just looking at your rock. Hmmm... no feelings, you say? Why is that? You are still you, so why does a living pet stir your emotions but a rock leave you cold?

Because the rock just sits there.

You don't want to write an action script that just sits there. You want your script to be *alive* and *exciting* and *emotional*. You want your script to have a wagging tail and jump into the audience's lap. You want to create an action script that actively brings emotions to the audience. Sure, the audience has emotions, but a *rock* isn't going to make them feel those emotions.

MIND IF I FEEL THAT?

The first step in creating an emotional script is to ask what emotion you want the audience to feel from your story. Seems like a simple question, but you might be surprised how many people have never thought about the emotional element in their story - and that's the most important part! They know the story and the character, but have never thought about what kind of emotional experience their story might provide. What we're looking for is a specific emotional experience - not some vague emotions or every emotion under the sun. Your script may make us laugh *and* cry, but it's going to do one more than the other. Shakespeare wrote comedies and tragedies, and though Shylock's speech in “Merchant Of Venice” is serious and dramatic, the rest of the play is a cross-dressing comedy. Though Rosencranz and Guildenstern are playful and funny in “Hamlet”, the rest of the play is an intense crime story with a tragic ending. So figure out what is the primary emotion your story is exploring - do you want the audience to laugh? Do you want them to cry? Do you want them to feel fear or sorrow or regret or elation or excitement or...?

Once you know what primary emotion is, look at the overall story (especially the end) and make sure your story is working to bring out those emotions in the audience. Now look at each scene in your script - is it emotional? Rewrite those scenes for maximum emotional impact. Give the audience a real emotional work out! We want to really move that "audience gear" and make them laugh out loud or cry or scream in fear or cheer. Using our screenplays and our writing skills we want to make the reader feel something.

In “Face/Off” the central conflict is FBI Agent Sean Archer's pursuit of the man who killed his son... at the expense of the rest of his family. Most of the action scenes have a family-based emotional component in them, whether it's Archer rescuing his daughter from the Villain, or Archer rescuing the Villain's son in the middle of a massive shoot out, or the henchman taking a bullet so that his sister (Gena Gershon) can live. There are family ties to almost every action sequence, and the *choices* that Archer makes in each scene shows his character's growth. The action scenes are *designed* to show character by setting up situations involving families... and firearms!

Remember that action is scenes *expose* character. That is one of the primary purposes of any scene - to expose character. Scenes should also advance the plot, illustrate the theme (if possible) and entertain the audience. Yes, that's a lot of work. But if your action scene isn't telling us anything about the character, isn't emotionally involving, it’s just a high school science movie. Our job is to provide emotions, to keep that audience gear moving.

Once you have your hero's emotional conflict (character arc), come up with a list of action scenes that will force him or her to deal with that conflict. Scenes that force them to solve that emotional conflict in order to survive. Remember, we're writing *emotion* pictures!

WE'RE GONNA NEED A BIGGER HOOK

Action without emotions is dull. It may seem exciting, but it's just not involving. Let's look at the opening of “Deep Blue Sea” which starred my Raindance Film Festival co-juror Saffron Burrows. The film opens with a nameless couple necking on a boat... Because we know the concept is that scientists have created bigger, smarter sharks you can probably guess that the nameless necking couple are lunchmeat... an action scene to kick off the film. But *how* they become lunchmeat will either involve us in the action or not. Here's one of those things that don't seem to make sense on the surface, but do if you dig a little deeper... Which provides the better action scene:

1) Boy and Girl both fall off boat into shark infested water.
2) Boy falls off boat into shark infested water, girl remains on boat.

It would seem that if one person falling in the water is scary, two people will be twice as scary. Plus, with both people in the water there's more threat because there's no one to rescue them.... But that's not the correct answer. That's kind of the bad development note answer.

Two victims are not twice as scary. Two victims are individuals both fighting to survive *individually*. They are caught up in their own survival that's self centered hard to show because it's all internal. Emotions are two between people, not a person and a shark or a person and a boat or even a person and himself. Sure, we understand fear, but we don't get the full emotional impact because the characters can do nothing to show us their fear. No emotional connection between the two people, and no variety to the emotions each are feeling individually. You should be looking for the most *emotionally effective* version of your scenes – and if you have a scene that isn't emotional, is there a way to improve it?

Instead let's have the Boy fall in the water and the Girl stay on the boat. We not only have *his* fear (that he's gonna get eaten), we have *her* fear (that the man she loves is going to be killed before her eyes)... not to mention combined fears that come when she tries to help him back on the boat and is afraid that she will fail (his fear, too). We can feel his fear, her fear, their fears that's a lot of emotions. And there are *more* emotions at stake here than fear we have love, regret, failure, self doubts, etc. Though few of us know what it's like to be attacked by a shark, making the individual fear tough to identify with, we have all felt that twist of emotions when someone we love gets hurt. That's easy to identify with. We also know what it's like to try and help someone and fail.

We not only get ten times as much emotion from this action scene we actually get more suspense and action: She tries to rescue him! That's an exciting scene. An *emotional* scene. We can show the emotions easier with two people. If both are thrashing around in the water at the same time, they aren't going to be communicating much. It's impossible for only one person to have a conversation... it takes two. In fact, any dramatic situation requires at least two people in an emotional situation. Without the connection, no drama, no emotion, no involvement.

Throwing the Boy in the water and keeping the Girl on the boat also creates lots of room for suspense and reversals and close calls. That's excitement and drama that illustrates and amplifies the emotional content. Every time she tries to pull him onto the boat and loses her grip on his arm intensifies the fear (reversals!). If it had been my scene, I'd end with a twist (or rugpull) She pulls him up out of the water *just* as the shark opens its mouth to chomp. He's saved, but she loses balance! Falls right into the shark's mouth. Chomp! Now the guy is on the boat alone the shark circling... and he has no reason to live now that the woman he loves is gone. The boat drifts to shore...

An emotional scene can *engage* the reader and pulls them into the story. Even movies like “Drive” (2011) where the protagonist keeps his emotions bottled up inside has real scenes where the getaway driver hero connects with the woman who lives next door and her kid... and even her husband once he gets out of prison. And even his mentor (Bryan Cranston) has a relationship with the villain (Albert Brooks). In “Terminator 2” the

Terminator learns why humans cry – and he's a “A cybernetic organism. Part man, part machine. Underneath, it's a hyper-alloy combat chassis, microprocessor-controlled. Fully armored; very tough. But outside, it's living human tissue: flesh, skin, hair, blood - grown for the cyborgs. It can't be bargained with. It can't be reasoned with. It doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And it absolutely will not stop, ever, until you are dead.” So, even your tough guy hero may have some emotions floating around underneath that macho exterior. We'll be looking at emotions and drama in a couple of other chapters, because that is often a soft spot in action scripts.

Look at all of your action and suspense scenes -- what's at stake *emotionally*? Remember, we're writing *emotion pictures*, here, and every action or suspense sequence has the ability to pull emotions to the surface. If we let them! It doesn't matter if the character cries... but if we can make a reader cry with our writing, we may end up making a sale!

THE HAMLET MOMENT

I once read a script by a new writer which was a real page turner. Non stop action, with the protagonist narrowly escaping one dangerous situation, only to find himself in a worse predicament. Real out of the fry pan into the fire stuff. Sounds exciting, right? Well, the script was actually rather dull.

It took me another read through to find the problem. The lead character seemed sketchy. He spent so much time running, we never had a chance to really know him. There was never a scene where he stopped to contemplate his fate. To let us in on his fears and anxieties.

I'm sure some of you are asking: What do you propose? Stopping the action for a moment of introspection? Some sort of speech like the soliloquy from "Hamlet"?

Yes. That's *exactly* what I am proposing.

"Hamlet" is an exciting tale of murder, mystery, and revenge. Filled with sword fights and intrigue. Yet the action stops about halfway through the script so that Hamlet can examine his mortality and his soul. He tells us his fears, and lets us in on the darkest of secrets which even his close friend Horatio knows nothing of. The audience becomes his confidant. His closest friend.

Wait a moment, you say. We're talking about an action script, here, not a drama!

So let's look at "Die Hard" by Jeb Stuart and Steven E. DeSouza, based on the novel by Roderick Thorp. Certainly not some stuffy drama... Yet about two thirds through the script (page 94), John McClane manages a very dramatic soliloquy about his mortality, and the mistakes he made in his marriage. A dramatic confession of past sins. He gives Officer Powell a message for his wife, in the event of his death. This is the most powerful scene in the movie. The "Hamlet Moment" for the John McClane character.

I should mention that this scene is not an actual soliloquy, not a speech. The screenwriters present it as dialogue between McClane and Officer Powell. But the confessional nature of the scene gives almost all of the dialogue to McClane, with Powell adding comments and questions along the way. In our modern world, the idea of an actual soliloquy, with a character talking to himself, seems rather silly... but film – even an action film – is still a dramatic medium, and it's important for character to have *moments*.

Officer Powell manages a Hamlet Moment of his own a few pages earlier (page 88) where he tells about accidentally killing and eleven year old kid, and his current fears and self doubts about his future as a policeman. Another juicy, dramatic scene. The kind every actor wants to play. When I first decided to rewrite this book I was going to throw out all of the “Die Hard” chapters and find new examples, but a strange thing happened – as time went on “Die Hard” became the bechmark for action films, and one of the few films where you could point to any minute, any scene, any character – and it was a great example. And when we come to dramatic moments? Well, there were two examples and there are several more.

Scenes like these serve two important purposes in your script. They allow the audience in on your protagonist's emotional conflict; making the reader more than just a casual acquaintance, but a close friend. And they give an actor a chance to act.

ACTORS WANT TO ACT

Years ago Sylvester Stallone took a pay cut to play a hearing impaired detective, forced to deal with his disabilities in the film "Copland". Bruce Willis is no stranger to drama, signing on to small roles for reduced pay in order to play dramatic characters in "Nobody's Fool" and several other films. Matt Damon bounces back and forth between serious dramas like “Invictus” and “Liberace”, and action flicks like the “Bourne” movies. Johnny Depp with play a swashbuckler in the “Pirates Of The Caribbean” movies and then do “Rum Diaries”. Angelina Jolie will do “Wanted” and “Salt” with “The Changeling” squeezed in between. Even Jason Statham mixes it up between gonzo action flicks like “Crank” and the “Transporter “ movies and more serious fare like “The Bank Job”. When an actor reads a script, they are looking for those dramatic scenes which will display their acting talents.

“The Bank Job” is a great example of a film that has a foot in each camp - it works really well as a crime film *and* really well as a dramatic character story about obligations to family and friends. It does what I call the 50-50 split. If I were a guy who loved the first “Transporter” movie and was looking for an entertaining action film complete with suspense and fight scenes and people getting shot and scenes in topless bars, I would enjoy this film. If I were some guy who wanted to see a character based drama about an interesting event in history that impacted the British government, I would enjoy this film. It's like a Doublemint Movie - two films in one. It's not just a story about breaking into a bank, it's the story about a group of childhood friends who are *still* friends. When they decide to break into the bank over the weekend, the robbery impacts the friendships. No extra scenes needed - the robbery scenes also have the friendship elements. But the scenes where they meet to discuss the robbery ends up being the bachelor party for one of the guys and then the wedding. These scenes are all about the characters and their lifetime friendship, and the robbery plans *impact* those scenes. There are enough dramatic scenes for an actor to love, and enough action scenes for an audience to love.

Patrick Duncan (“Courage Under Fire”) says, “Don't forget you are writing your script to attract an actor.”

In order to attract actors to your work, to sign them to the project, there should be scenes where they are allowed to use whatever acting gifts they may have. This is what they will be looking for when they read the script. One rather famous actor is known to highlight "acting" passages and write "NAR" on lines where there is no acting required. After so marking the script, he gives it a final flip through... if there are too many passages with NAR written on them, he doesn't take the role.

On the set of “Steel Sharks” Billy Dee Williams told me he had a stack of scripts to choose from and decided on mined because of a scene on page 20 where the Admiral character talks about the most difficult part of his job – sending men to their death. Though that scene is important to the story, I also wrote it to attract an actor. We had an HBO budget and couldn't really attract a name with cash, so we had to have the kind of *role* an actor dreams of playing. My lead got a great speech about trying to live up to his war hero father, my antagonist got a speech about people not being responsible for their actions, and both of my supporting characters (played by Billy Dee Williams and Gary Busey) had nice little speeches designed to show off their acting talents. And, when I say “little speeches” that's what I mean. In the “Die Hard” analysis chapter I have the whole speech McClane gives to Powell – and it's 87 words. That's not two pages or one page or even half a page. It's probably around a quarter of a page of great dramatic material – an amazing character moment. My little speeches were about the same length – maybe a quarter of a page of gold.

Part of our job as screenwriters is to provide actors with a showcase for their talents. A few, well placed, big dramatic scenes serve not only the actor, but the audience and the story. Remember: Conflict is the basis of story, and drama is the natural growth of conflict.

DRAMATIC MOMENTS

In "Adventures In The Screen Trade", William Goldman says: "You must give the star everything." That includes at least one scene where the audience says to themselves: "Wow, that Sylvester Stallone really knows how to ACT!" A Hamlet Moment where our characters are allowed to reveal themselves, to take the audience into their confidence. Even the fastest paced action script requires the audience to know and understand the protagonist in order to be effective. Fully developed characters make us care.

I think it was John Ford who said a character needs three great moments and no bad ones. Our job is to create those moments. Oh, and Ford was talking about John Wayne westerns, not Shakespeare. Action flicks.

Though he's known for animation, I was excited that Brad Bird was directing “Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol” because I'm a huge fan of his previous James Bond inspired flick “The Incredibles”. There are two great moments in “The Incredibles” - the scene where Bob has one of those life changing epiphanies and confesses his shortcomings to those he loves. After discovering that his family is still alive, all are captured by Syndrome. While imprisoned, Bob admits to Helen, "This is my fault. I've been a lousy father. So caught up in the past that... You are my greatest adventure. And I almost missed it." Now *that's* a moment - not a dry eye in the house for than one. And *less* than a quarter page!

An even *better* one comes near the end, when the entire family arrives in Metroville to fight the giant killer robot. He asks Helen and the kids to hide and wait until he's saved the day, and she's not having any part of that. "You're my husband, I'm with you for better or worse." "I have to do this alone." She thinks he's still trying to relive his glory days, but he says, "I'm not strong enough." "And this will make you stronger? That's what this is? Some sort of workout?" "No... I can't lose you again. I can't... not again... I'm not... strong enough." Wow, brought tears to my eyes just typing that! Then Helen says, "If we work together, you won't have to be." Wow! Moment on top of moment! Then, the whole family kicks robot butt and saves the world. Okay, this was an action superhero *cartoon* - we are writing scripts for real live actors. They have to be at least this good!

In “Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol” Tom Cruise, Jeremy Renner, and Paula Patton each get a nice dramatic moment dealing with the “ghosts” in their past. The things that haunt them and make them the characters they are today. Even in a wall-to-wall action flick a moment of character reflection adds to the story.

Make sure your script has a handful of great moments that cut to the heart of your characters. Movies are about people, about what people learn about themselves and their world, and how they deal with what they've learned. Even silly kid's cartoons need powerful character moments, so imagine what your live action flick for adults needs! Make sure your story packs an emotional punch!

Look over your current script. Do you have at least one solid dramatic scene where your protagonist reveals him/herself? Have your provided the star with a role he/she can really sink her teeth into? Writers like to tell stories, actors like to act. Our common ground is a good dramatic scene. A few good dramatic scenes will help attract actors to your action script, which helps attract producers as well.

LOVE INTERESTS

In the first version of this book I said that most action films star men, and have female love interests... that was before Edwin Salt went through a sex change and “Haywire” and “Colombiana” hit the screens. Your action script might have a female lead and a male love interest, or a transgendered lead or... well, anything is possible. So if I accidentally refer to the love interest as female in this chapter, just mentally change it to whatever works best in your story. I mean, Clint Eastwood made a couple of movies with an Orangutan named Clyde... Just sayin'!

Not all heroes need love interests. Dirty Harry doesn't have much time for romance in most of his films – he was married and his wife died, but I believe the only romantic interest is in “Sudden Impact” - with the killer. Liam Neeson is a divorced dad in “Taken” and doesn't have time to hook up with anyone... and his wife in “Unknown” says she's married to somebody else... and in “The Grey” his wife is back home while he is snowbound and dancing with wolves. Evelyn Salt is happily married, and doesn't even flirt with anyone while she's jumping from speeding truck to speeding truck on the freeway. Do any of those guys in “The Expendables” hook up? I think Stallone and the rebel-gal had a couple of conversations, but I don't remember it being a love match. When people are firing machine guns and bazookas at you, kinda hard to find time for dinner and a movie.

In my techno-thriller film "Steel Sharks", the hero is a captured Navy SEAL trying to escape. No time for romance! The film has helicopters, Gary Busey in a submarine, F-14 fighter planes, and Billy Dee Williams as the Admiral of an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf. The only woman in the entire film is Williams' tough, competent attache, Ms. Hickey. The hero doesn't even meet Ms. Hickey! If your script doesn't need a love interest, don't feel like you are required to add one. There's no rule that says there has to be a love interest in an action film (Rom-Coms are another story).

But if you think a love interest is a good idea for your story, read on...

SUSPECTS

For a love interest to be integral to the plot, rather than something glued on to provide a little nudity or a kissing scene, she's probably going to be a suspect. That doesn't mean she's a cliche femme fatale (or homme fatale for female lead movies), but it does mean she will probably be related to the victim in some way... related to the *conflict* that the protagonist is dealing with.

In "The Big Sleep", Marlowe has a central love interest, Vivian Rutledge, and kind of a secondary love interest, Vivian's sister Carmen. Either woman may have killed Sean Regan. Vivian is involved in an illegal scam with gambler Eddie Mars. Carmen poses for porno pictures, and may have killed the pornographer, A.G. Geiger... so both women are directly connected to the story.

The Marlowe/Vivian relationship was an invention of the screenwriters, and is a textbook example of the suspect love interest. Neither one trusts the other, and much of their romantic bantering has an undercurrent of third degree questioning. As the relationship progresses, Marlowe finally has it out with Vivian. In a speeding car, he pulls the truth from her... and discovers that she's *not* the murderer. From that point on, they band together to catch the killer.

If the love interest is a suspect, she can't be the primary suspect without moving into "Noir/Erotic Thriller" territory, like "Basic Instinct" or my cable film "Hard Evidence". She can't be the secondary suspect, as they usually end up being the killer. So the love interest has to be a minor suspect; someone who might be the killer, but probably isn't. Just enough for suspicion, but not so much that the hero and love interest trade machine gun fire in the last reel. Someone on the periphery of the crime, but still connected in some way.

Another possibility is the love interest might be a witness to the crime, or have some other connection to the conflict event at the center of the story.

I HAVE YOUR WIFE!

In Act Three, where it "gets personal", the love interest is frequently kidnapped by the villain. This ups the ante. My “Treacherous” film ends with Tia Carrere taken hostage by the bad guys and the hero must rescue her... or watch her die. But while your love interest is kidnapped; don't have her sit there, have her *do something*. Try to escape like Alyssa Milano did in Steven DeSouza's "Commando" and the kid did in “Colombiana”. Make sure your characters don't end up “plot props”. Have them beat up a minor henchman. Create a weapon out of a pencil, a rubber band, and a ruler. You're writing an action script, so keep the action going strong. If the love interest is too much of a wimp, or if all she does is stand around and scream during the fight scenes, the audience is going to wonder why the hero wants to save her in the first place.

I love kick ass women in films, and would much rather see the love interest throw some punches and kicks if she's captured than just stand there doing nothing. Same thing goes for any fights scenes that involve both hero and love interest – let her kick some ass, too! In my “Altitude” script I have two main female roles: one who is kind of a toned down femme fatale type (an attractive woman who we later learn is working for the villain) and a “nice girl” role (again – toned down from any Noir cliché - she's just a competent professional doing her job) and at the end of the script while the hero is fighting the villain... these two women get to face off and try to kick each other's butts. Though some producer might read that scene and think “Cat Fight!”, I just wanted the female lead to kick a little ass before the closing credits. Also – someone needed to fight the bad girl, right?

Both "Lethal Weapon" and "Face/Off" use a different kind of love: the girl kidnapped in these films is the protagonist's daughter. When violent FBI Agent John Travolta realizes the terrorist villain he's pursuing has made this “Take Your Daughter To Work Day”, he is torn between protecting the daughter he has come to ignore and indiscriminate machine gunning in the villain's general direction. This is a great moment in the film because it sums up the protagonist's emotional conflict: he believes that the best thing he can do for his family is to kill the dude who murdered his son, and his family just wants him to be a husband and father. So here the big decision he must make in the story is an *action scene*.

"Face/Off", like "Die Hard", is really a story which explores families in crisis against a background of things exploding real good. Both use their action plots to fuel the type of smaller, personal stories usually found in dramas. In a strange way, "Face/Off" is the action version of "Ordinary People"... both films are about how the death of a son affects a family. Whenever some snooty critic refers to action movies as some lesser cinema I always wonder how they can miss that character is the basis of a great action film... and the life-or-death conflict just raises the stakes and deepens the drama. Plus, the screenwriter who got an Oscar for adapting “Ordinary People” wrote “Spider-Man 2”... another drama about a dead family member and dealing with the residual guilt.

The "kidnapped girl" has become such a hoary old cliche in action films, I would shy away from it if possible, or try to find a new angle. In "Lethal Weapon 2" the love interest is murdered by the villain at the beginning of Act Three... Making it very difficult for Riggs to walk off into the sunset with her. But giving him a hell of a good reason to kick badguy's butts.

OTHER KIDNAPPERS

There's another kind of kidnapped love interest in action and thriller films – not kidnapped by the villain but kidnapped by the *hero*. In “Three Days Of The Condor” Robert Redford reads books for the CIA, returns from lunch to find all of his co-workers assassinated... including the cute co-worker he has a crush on. With the killers after him, and his apartment watched, and no one left in the world he can trust... he kidnaps Faye Dunaway as she leaves a store and forces her to take him home with her. A complete stranger – how will they ever find him at her place? Even though he keeps her tied up and always has a gun on her when he sleeps... they fall in love. A sick, twisted kind of love. And she decides to help him bring down the conspiracy and find the assassin.

Something similar happens in “The Bourne Identity” when Jason Bourne needs a ride to escape the police, and hijacks Marie and her little car. Though Bourne offers to pay her, she is still his kidnap victim and they must grow to trust each other... while falling in love so that she can eventually help him bring down the conspiracy and find the assassin... which ends up being *him*. Both of these films are paranoid thrillers and deal with issues of trust and identity – and having a kidnap victim as the love interest fits that in a weird way.

DIVORCE COURT

Another type of love interest is the "dysfunctional relationship". In "48 Hours" Nick Nolte and the beautiful Annette O'Toole spend all of their scenes bickering. She doesn't understand his work. Since all they do is fight, Nolte becomes *more* involved in his work, and the relationship crumbles. Finally he solves his case, goes home, and makes up.

This same situation was used in the prequel to "Die Hard", 1968's "The Detective" (novel by Rod Thorp) starring Frank Sinatra in the part later played by Bruce Willis. In "The Detective" Sinatra and his wife, played by Lee Remick, are in a rocky marriage (she doesn't understand his work) which pushes him deeper into his case (a brutal murder in New York's Gay community) and ends up leading to their divorce... Setting the scene for their reconciliation 17 years later in "Die Hard". Using a dysfunctional relationship is a way to bring out the blind dedication of the hero on his quest to vanquish the villain.

“Face/Off” is really all about the dysfunctional marriage... with the villain becoming a better husband and father than the hero. Sometimes the love interest subplot is really the main plot with the shoot outs and car chases as a catalyst.

But sometimes the rocky relationship between hero and love interest is used for “character shading” - a way to show another dimension of the protagonist that may not come out in the action story. In “True Crime” Clint Eastwood is a divorced dad, and the scenes with his wife and young daughter help to dimensionalize the character. The “Bad Boys” movies also use the character's romantic relationships (good and bad) to help “shade” the two leads. Sometimes the love interest is a piece of the background and not part of the main story.

SHE COMPLETES ME

This type of love interest is rare in action films: Woman As Redeemer. Best illustrated in Nicholas Ray's "On Dangerous Ground" (1952). Robert Ryan plays a brutal cop who beats up one too many suspects and is transferred to snow covered upstate New York... just in time to catch a killer. In this beautiful, pastoral setting, he blasts after the killer... a bull in a china shop. But softens when he falls in love with the suspect's blind sister played by Ida Lupino. Instead of railroading the suspect into the electric chair, the cop ends up going by the book. This is an interesting film, sort of a predecessor to "Witness".

Michael Vartan's character in “Colombiana” is a Woman As Redeemer, even though he's a dude! It's his character that shows revenge-focused Cataleya that there is a possibility for a real life without violence, and throughout the film we hope that she will find peace with him. There's a similar character in Cornell Woolrich's “The Bride Wore Black”, made into a movie by Francois Truffaut – Jill Killen has been tracking and killing the men responsible for her husband's death, when she meets a nice guy in the process of staking out of of her next victims. They begin a relationship, and for a while you think that maybe she will give up revenge and go back to having a normal life... But she kills her next victim anyway. For the rest of the story she alternates between a normal romantic life with her new man, and murdering the people who killed her last man. Then, there is a twist when she discovers the identity of the last man responsible for her husband's death...

MOLLS

In “The Big Heat” (1953) Glenn Ford's wife is blown up by the badguys around the end of Act One and he spends the rest of the film trying to get revenge. One of his leads is the girlfriend of mob killer Lee Marvin, played by Gloria Grahame. As Ford spends time with her, trying to get her to turn on her boyfriend and the mob, they develop and interesting relationship that is not sexual. He's courting her for information instead of romance, but Ford is the kindest man Grahame has ever met in her messed up life. This relationship not only helps to shade *his* character, it gives him someone to talk to after he's been bounced form the police force and isolated from society for bucking the system. Often a love interest – even if there is no actual love – gives the protagonist someone to confide in as the story unfolds.

There's a similar dynamic in “True Lies” between Ah-nuld's character and Tia Carrere – she's the bad girl who knows all about the villain's plan, and he's the spy trying to stop them. Can he tango his way into her heart and turn her against the badguys? There's a similar dynamic in the underrated 80s flick “To Live And Die In LA” between Secret Service Agent William Peterson and his snitch Darlanne Fluegel who is also in bed with badguy Willem Defoe. One of the most interesting versions of of the cop-love interest-crook is in Robert Towne's “Tequila Sunrise” where drug dealer Mel Gibson and ex-best friend cop out to bust him Kurt Russell are both sleeping with Michelle Pfieffer... and each tries to use her to get information on the other. Now we get an interesting love triangle where the romantic betrayal ends up more important than the crime story. Your hero may have a relationship with the Moll – and even if she's not exactly a love interest but there may still be some sexual tension there that you can explore.

A “moll” is a gangster's girl, and remember that villains need love, too. Sometimes giving a villain a love interest is a great way to shade *their* characters. One of my favorite parts of “Enemy Of The People” is when villain Jon Voight goes home after a tough day of trying to kill hero Will Smith... and his wife is nagging him over typical domestic things. The stuff on the “honey-do” list he hasn't done, putting an empty carton on milk back in the fridge, not getting that promotion at work that would give them a little more money. Remember – behind every *evil* man there is also a woman!

ALIBIS

Gloria Grahame has a different kind of role in the classic film “In A Lonely Place” (1950) where she is the alibi for murder suspect Humphrey Bogart. He's a screenwriter with some serious anger management issues accused of murder, and she's his neighbor who claims to have seen him at the time of the killing... except she's lying and we know it. This begins an interesting romantic “dance” between the two where she may end up his redeemer... or may have some scheme going that we don't know about. The great thing about this relationship is that Bogart has to go along with it – has to romance her – if he wants to stay out of jail.

In the Hungarian film “The Investigator” (2009) a shy medical examiner who is more comfortable with the dead than the living finally works up the nerve to ask the plain looking waitress at the restaurant where he eats dinner every evening... but when he's accused of a murder she becomes his alibi. Except their date was the night *after* the murder and he must convince her that they went out the night of the killing just to keep the cops off his back long enough to unravel the conspiracy that set him up... for a murder he *did* actually commit. This is a twisted thriller similar to “American Friend” that is not yet available in the United States. The great thing about the love interest as alibi is that it puts all kinds of pressure on the romance *plus* finds a great way to include the romantic subplot in the main story.

VILLAINS

Okay – spoilers for the film “From Paris With Love”. That was one of those films where the script was much better than the action scenes. The lead character played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers is a desk officer for the CIA who is assigned to be the chauffeur/go-fer for a top CIA assassin played by John Travolta. Meyers has a boring life and a girlfriend pressing him to do more and all of the things that make him just like us. But now he gets to live his fantasy by hanging out with a James Bond-like spy... But when his fantasy turns to reality, things end up messy. He learns that killing people isn't any fun and that he's really not cut out to be James Bond... His girlfriend was right. There's a great scene when he sees himself in the mirror after having to kill for the first time (in order to stay alive) that's heartbreaking. But when we come to the end of the movie and the deep cover villain is revealed and he has to kill them in order to save the world? It's his girlfriend Kasa Smutniak. Completely makes sense, because she hooked up with him to learn CIA secrets.

Villainous love interests are a basic in the Film Noir genre, and I cover Spider-Women in my class (audio version on CD). The great thing about a femme fatale (or homme fatale) is – as the poster for “Double Indemnity” asks – will she kiss him or kill him? In one of my guilty pleasures, “Gotcha!” (1985) our shy college kid hero (Anthony Edwards with a full head of hair) on vacation in Europe hooks up with a mysterious Eastern European women (Linda Fiorentino) and falls *hard* for her. She's his first – and he would do anything she says... including going with her behind enemy lines into East Germany to pick up some microfilm she will be smuggling out for someone in a strudel. But it's all a set up and he ends up running for his life. The woman he has given his heart to turns out to be an enemy spy! There are several twists after that, and Edwards has to become a badass in order to survive. But having the love interest also be the villain is a great way to give us sex and violence in one convenient package.

MacGUFFIN

The love interest might also be the valuable item that the bad guys are trying to get their hands on. In the first “Transporter” movie Frank Martin is a meticulous ex-Special Forces guy who has three rules he *never* breaks: Rule One: Never change the deal. Rule Two: No names, he doesn't want to know who he's working for. Rule Three: never look in the package. But when the package – a large duffel bag – starts moving and making noise, he breaks rule #3 and finds pretty Shu Qi. She becomes both the love interest *and* the MacGuffin that everyone wants to get their hands on... and the rest of the film is him trying to protect her from a bunch of heavily armed scumbags.

Jason Statham has another human MacGuffin in “Safe” - a little Chinese math whiz-kid who has *memorized* all of the codes for a safe combination and must keep her alive and in his custody until he figures out what is in the safe and how that can help him in the overly convoluted plot that seems to be 5 different scripts which got mixed up at the copy shop and they just filmed it anyway. There is no romance – she's a kid – but she a smart mouth little girl who is the focus of the whole story.

In the Parlapanides Brothers “Immortals” Oracle Phaedra is both a love interest and a MacGuffin, with an interesting twist. As long as she remains a virgin, she can see the future. That's why evil King Hyperion (Mickey Rourke) wants to get his hands on her. But while Theseus protects her, her visions of the future help him and his rag-tag crew stay one step ahead of King Hyperion. But the visions are a curse she would like to be rid of... and the romantic relationship jeopardizes the mission when they finally make love. Now she is worthless to Hyperion (though he doesn't know this) and worthless to Theseus... except as the woman he loves. This is an interesting sacrifice for love.

The first “Terminator” movie has Sarah Conner as a MacGuffin – and Kyle Reese must protect her from Ah-nuld and falls in love with her in the process... well, actually, he was in love with her before he even met her. This is a true love interest and MacGuffin combination that features gunfire *and* kissing... plus a Terminator that can not be stopped.

EQUAL TIME

In those “Terminator” movies Sarah Conners goes from victim to totally bad-ass action woman of action who was the equal of any man... and the superior to most. Though she's both the MacGuffin and Love interest in the first film, she hardens her heart while she's locked up and roars into the second film looking for a fight. There are plenty of tough women in today's action films – from the heros in films like “Colombiana” and “Haywire” to the side kicks and team members in films like Mila Kunis in “Book Of Eli” and Jennifer Lawrence in “X-Men: First Class” and Scarlett Johansson in “Dark Knight Rises” and Helen Mirren in “R.E.D”. Women no longer have to stand on the sidelines – they can kick ass like the boys.

Now that *Michelle* Yeoh has retired from kicking ass as Jackie Chan's sidekick in the “Police Story” movies and is using her dramatic gifts in films like action director Luc Besson's “The Lady”, we have *Michelle* Rodriguez kicking ass in both the “Fast And Furious” series and “Avatar” and in the first “Resident Evil“ movie (and in “Resident Evil: Retribution”). I love how she's the heir apparent to Janette Goldstein from “Aliens” - a totally tough gal who is one of the guys in films like “Battle: Los Angeles” and “S.W.A.T.” She's just as tough as any man.

Michelle Rodriguez makes a surprise appearance at the end of “Fast Five”, but there were tough girls on both teams – the car thieves have hottie Gal Gadot and the cops had mega-conflicted Brazilian cop Elsa Pataky - both women have semi-romantic relationships in the film which add complications to the story... and help shade male characters as well. Some of these people may be coming back for “Fast Six” - we'll know in 2013.

Both Milla Jovovich and Kate Beckinsale have proven can carry an action series on their own – no man needed. "Lethal Weapon 3" created the love interest for 1990s action films. A female cop as rough and tough as Riggs. She can stomp bad guys, *and* kiss good guys. Their scar comparison love scene is a classic... even though it's a rip off from "Jaws". Rene Russo also played a Secret Service Agent opposite Clint Eastwood in Jeff Maguire's brilliant "In The Line Of Fire" and was back beside Mel Gibson in "Lethal Weapon 4".

If at all possible, I'd suggest making your love interest a tough, competent woman who can take care of herself. Although the primary audience for action films is men, they usually bring a date. If your film can appeal to both sexes, you could have a hit on your hands.

IS NUDITY IS REQUIRED?

Because of the violence, action films are often end up R rated. Some producers figure, since they already have an R, why not throw in some nudity? It might help sell the film overseas. "Lethal Weapon 2" has a nude scene, "48 Hours" has a nude scene, and even "Die Hard" manages to throw in a couple of breasts during the office party which opens the film. Though action films seem to be moving out of R rated territory in favor of the teen audience who flock to PG-13 films, let's spend a couple of minutes covering nudity.

One cliche method of injecting nudity in your script is by having the cops go to a topless bar. I don't recommend it. Not only have we seen it a million times, but it makes the nudity part of the background action, and therefor unimportant. If it's unimportant, why is it even in the movie? Yeah, to sell some tickets or BluRays or Netflix downloads – but wouldn't it be better if the nudity was part of the story? I think if your only choice to sneak nudity into your script is to have some cops visit a strip club, you are better off without it. Plus, PG-13 is the new sweet spot rating and if the producer wants some extra nudity, he'll have you write in a scene after he buys the script. In “X-Men: First Class” Jennifer Lawrence was naked in bed with a sheet covering her – and the implied nudity worked just fine. In my friends Terry Rossio and Bill Marsilii's “Deja Vu”, Paula Patton took a shower while the scientists were watching *scientifically* through the time rip – and that scene implied nudity without giving us anything R Rated. So, you don't *need* nudity and if it doesn't fit in your story – leave it out.

SEX AND VIOLENCE

Be careful when creating your nude scene. Remember that a rape scene is *not* a sex scene... it's a violence scene! Using a rape as your way to include nudity is not only in bad taste, it works against the very reason you would want nudity in an action film. It doesn't titillate, it repulses. Any rape scene written to be *sexy* is just sick. Plus, it makes you look like a creep. Though there are films like “Ms. 45” where rape triggers a violent revenge plot – and that's fine. The rape there is not sexual at all – it makes you angry and want to track down the bastards and kill them.

For the same reason, you can't cross cut a sex scene and a violence scene. Many producers think that because nudity is exciting, and violence is exciting; combining both will be twice as exciting. Wrong! We are talking radically different kinds of excitement. Violence creates the excitement of fear. Nudity creates sexual excitement. Fear tends to cancel out sexual excitement. So cross cutting sex and violence is a great way to cancel out any excitement you might have had by using each emotion separately... plus, you look like a creep again.

In fact, the only way to combine sex and violence in your script is to give a naked woman a machine gun... And that image produces laughter rather than excitement. Check out "Jackie Brown" if you don't believe me!

NUDE ON A SUBMARINE

On my HBO World Premiere movie "Crash Dive", after the producer signed off on the script as ready to shoot... HBO insisted on a sex scene. It's a submarine warfare film, which takes place on a US 688 Class nuclear submarine. "There are 110 men on the submarine, what kind of sex did you have in mind?" I asked. In the original script, the hero had a love interest who was Admiral Frederic Forrest's attache played by Catherine Bell (the role that got her the female lead in “JAG”). After a few scenes where they work together on logistics, they spend the rest of the film thousands of miles away from each other flirting by short burst radio. No chance for nudity there. Can you sext with Morse Code?

The plot has a group of terrorists hijacking the sub on the high seas. One of the terrorists was a woman. "There's you sex scene!" the director said. After much arguing about why a terrorist would stop running and shooting long enough to indiscriminately bed down with some stranger, I wrote the scene.

It's the silliest scene in the film.

Everyone who has seen the film mentions how out of place the sex scene is in this particular action plot... and every review manages to point it out (usually mentioning “the writer” in the same sentence). Hey, without that scene my blog would have some boring title and I wouldn't get much stray traffic looking for hot X rated Navy material. (By the way – that whole story is the first entry on my blog Sex-In-A-Sub.) But not every script needs a sex scene, and some (like "Crash Dive!") are much better off without them.

KISS KISS BANG BANG

The best way to incorporate nudity into your action script is through a romantic sex scene between your hero and the love interest. This scene also serves to show a gentle side of the hero, which may not be apparent in those scenes where he fires two machine guns into an army of villains while rappelling down a wall yelling “Eat lead, mo-fos!”

Don't just have your hero and the love interest hop into bed because you need some nudity – and she's hot and he's the hero - build the relationship through a progression of scenes. A romantic relationship in an action film is no different than in any other film. Make sure they have things in common, a reason to fall in love. Take it step-by-step. And just when it seems right for them to end up in bed together, give them one more flirt scene before they hit the sheets. This creates a romantic reversal and payoff, which will thrill the audience.

Movies like "Die Hard", "Con Air", "True Lies", "Face/Off", and my cable film "Hard Evidence" use wives as the love interest. In all five films the hero's relationship with his wife is in trouble (Emotional Conflict), and through the action plot (Outer Conflict) comes to the realization that she is the love of his life. My friend jokingly calls these “family values pictures” because they glorify the institutions of marriage and family. I think we're going to see more films where the love interest is the hero's wife, just because society seems to be more conservative now. Those free-love hippies are AARP members now. Plus, not all action films need a love interest.

In some scripts where the love interest is a suspect, there is often a post-sex scene where the sidekick finds a piece of evidence pointing to her as the killer. Now the hero must choose between relationships: the love interest or the sidekick...

SIDEKICKS

From Tonto to Dr. Watson to Hannibal Lecter (think about it) heroes have always had sidekicks to advise them and give them someone to chat with between shootouts. Since heroes are usually the strong silent type, sidekicks are often necessary to reveal clues and keep the dialogue peppy. Sidekicks often are the brains to match the hero's brawn.

The Sidekick's main jobs are to help the hero, usually provide comic relief, and of course be murdered by the henchman at the end of Act 1 or the end of Act 2. In Shane Black's "The Last Action Hero" one of the best moments comes when the kid realizes that he's helping Arnold with his case and cracking jokes... This makes him the comic relief sidekick, which means he will be killed before the film is over! But I think after decades of sidekicks who died in the Hero's arms with those last words, “Avenge me!” plus the endless need for sequels at Hollywood studios, sidekicks may actually make it all the way to the closing credits these days. Heck, they changed the ending of “Lethal Weapon” so that Mel Gibson lived, right?

When creating your sidekick, make sure he or she (I often use female sidekicks) have a special knowledge or talent which will aid the hero. Some skill that will come in handy later in the film. The cliche is the computer nerd sidekick, who can hack into any system to find top secret information which will give the hero an edge or tell him what the badguys are really up to – like that danged kid in “Die Hard 4”. I've seen enough hacker sidekicks to last a lifetime, so try to come up with something else.

In NBC's 1940s radio show "Candy Matson YU2-8209", female private eye Candy had a Gay sidekick named Rembrant who was an expert on antiques and fine art. Every week Candy would stumble into some action packed case which would involve art forgeries or antiques, so that Rembrant could supply the important clue which would crack the case. If a major network could have a Gay antique expert as a sidekick in the 1940s, you can certainly do the same in a movie today.

This is where Hannibal Lecter becomes a great example of the non-comic relief sidekick. Clarice Starling is on the trail of Buffalo Bill – a killer who skins women alive – and needs someone to help her track him... someone with special skills... like a crazy psychiatrist who ate a bunch of his patients with fava beans and a find Chianti. Lecter *helps* Clarice find Buffalo Bill using his special skills. Talk about mismatched partners! She's a studious young F.B.I. Agent, he's a serial killer. She's free to go wherever she wants, he's behind several inches of bullet proof glass. Many people mistakenly remember Lecter as the villain, but he's locked up for most of the film... and *helping* Clarice. It's that other guy who wants you to apply some extra skin lotion so that your skin will be pliable when he removes it and turns it into an attractive full body outfit.

THE CONTRAST KEY

Your sidekick character is usually in contrast to your hero. If one's an introvert, the other is an extrovert. The reason for this is for one to bring out the character in the other. If both are too much alike, we'll have trouble telling them apart, and they won't naturally bring out the character in each other. Two “Oscars” or two “Felixes” does not make for an Odd Couple. My pessimism comes to surface in the presence of someone who is overly optimistic. My neatness comes to surface in the presence of a slob. If everyone in the room is acting too serious, I can t help but come up with jokes. Use contrast between hero and sidekick to bring out the character in each.

The hero of my film "Night Hunter" (1995) is the last of the vampire hunters... born and raised to kill blood suckers. He roars into town on his cycle, armed with his sawed off shotgun that fires wooden stakes, killing tools, and an ancient book listing all the known vampire families in the world. Cutter is a tortured man. A loner who lives by night, can't trust anyone, and kills for a living. If there was ever a hero who needed a comedy relief sidekick, it's him.

Because my theme was "belief", I needed to populate my script with skeptics, and I started with the sidekick. She's the ultimate skeptic, a reporter for the World Inquisitor tabloid who regularly covers alien abductions and Elvis sightings. I tried to infuse her dialogue with that Ben Hecht / "The Front Page" style sarcasm and machine gun fast delivery. The scene where he's explaining the world behind the world as we know it is her firing funny zingers at everything he says in earnest.

Even though much of her bantering was cut, Melanie Smith (who made out with Seinfeld at "Schindler's List") played the character to perfection. Her special skills were the Inquisitor's database of vampire stories, which provides clues to help Cutter, plus evidence that vampires might exist which she gives to the Detective who wants to arrest Cutter as a serial killer. Her general skepticism also comes into play – she takes nothing at face value (knowing how much BS there is in the world) and often sees the truth behind some lie. When someone tells the hero something, he may believe it... but she tears it apart to see if it's a lie. She also brings Cutter out of his shell... as she begins to believe in vampires, he begins to believe in trusting others again. If there had been romance between them, she'd be "woman as redeemer". Often with sidekicks I go to theme and find the opposite of the protagonist's belief or theory or emotional journey.

Another cliché that I'd watch out for is the tough guy hero with a strong moral code who has a sidekick with no moral code at all... which comes in handy when someone has to kill someone in cold blood and you can't really have the hero do it. I think this began with Robert B. Parker's Spencer and his sidekick Hawk – a hitman. Though you would think because we have real contrast between the two that also might be thematic this would be great... but after dozens of these brutal sidekick characters I think we've seen too many. Though I love Joe Pike, I think until he got his own novel he was almost more of a plot device than a character. If you *are* going to contrast the Hero and Sidekick to explore theme (and that's a great idea) make sure you actually *explore* that theme instead of *ignore* it. Really dig in and let they two discuss the morality of the situations you explore. Yes, I'm still talking about action films.

HE AIN'T HEAVY, HE'S MY BUDDY

A variation on the sidekick is the buddy cop. There are four main types of buddy cops:

1) Old Cop partnered with Rookie Cop.
2) Good Cop partnered with Corrupt Cop.
3) Cop from one department partnered Cop from another department.
4) Sane Cop partnered with Crazy Cop.
5) Human Cop partnered with Dog Cop.

Yeah, that last one was a joke – but have you counted the number of Cop/Dog movies that have been made over the years? Even Chuck Norris made one! In every buddy cop movie, one cop is usually the hero and one is usually the sidekick. Have an idea which is which before you begin plotting the script, because you may kill the lead and end up with the comic relief sidekick having to battle the villain (something I did in a script on purpose). And if your hero ends up with more than one sidekick, you have a Team Effort, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Buddy Cop Films have two variations on the basic three act structure. In one version ("48 Hours", "They Live"), the partners absolutely hate each other, trading insults and punches until the middle of Act Two. That's when they finally square off to fight. They beat the crap out of each other and gain insight and respect with every punch (huh?). By the end of the fight, they've learned to tolerate each other, and begin working together to solve the crime.

The other variation ("Lethal Weapon") has the "screw up" partner saving the "mainstream" partner's life at the beginning of Act Two. The screw up continues to provide help, which the mainstream partner grudgingly accepts. At the end of Act Two, the action affects the mainstream partner personally, and he has no one to turn to for help but the screw up partner. So they team up 100% to battle the villains. But either way, they usually begin as enemies, then become friends... I'm not sure if the world is ready for “lovers” - but who knows? There's often enough homo-eroticism in some buddy cop films to go that way.

An important thing to remember is that buddy cops need not be cops. Probably even better if they are not – cops kind of belong on TV. You can partner any two franchises to create something different. How about a defense lawyer and a private eye? (Perry Mason). A private eye and a samurai? ("The Yakuza"). Mad Max's sidekick in "The Road Warrior" was that crazy guy in the autogyro who did nothing but chatter and complain. The TV show “Castle” has a cop and a mystery writer. In “The Rock” we have a chemical weapons expert and a prisoners. In the great flick “The Hidden” plus a few others from the same time period we had a great combo of Cop and Alien Cop! Yeah, both were still cops – but the alien aspect made it more than just “two cops from different departments”. In my script "Recall", I partner a test driver for Road & Track Magazine with a tough female bodyguard to investigate a car which is "unsafe at any speed". The possibilities are limitless, so try to come up with something other than old cop/young cop. Because of all of the forensic shows on TV, the audience is now familiar with various strange professions that may come into play in an action story – so try to pair up two side professions we haven't seen before.

DYING IS EASY

No matter what his occupation, Sidekicks often find it hard to get life insurance. The statistics show that many Sidekicks die at the end of Act Two, cradled in the hero's arms, uttering the last words: "Avenge me". The next scene usually shows the hero loading his guns and preparing for battle. As I said – this is a cliché that usually kills the chance for sequel.

An alternative pops up from time to time, where the sidekick dies at the end of Act One, pushing a reluctant hero into action. This was done in "Robo Cop 3", requiring the costume for spunky Nancy Allen's return in "Robo 4" to be made of metal. Be careful when killing your sidekick on page 35! He or she must be a fully developed, likable character, before they get snuffed! Or else the audience just won't care whether the hero vows vengeance or not.

These days with the “Sherlock Holmes” franchise (can't exactly kill Watson) and the upcoming “Lone Ranger” movie written by my friends Ted & Terry (can't exactly kill Tonto – that's Johnny Depp!) I think sidekick's are expected to live. And sometimes there's a strange disagreement on who is the sidekick and who is the hero – a few years ago when they were gearing up to make “Rush Hour 3” everyone involved thought Jackie Chan was the hero and Chris Tucker was the comic relief sidekick... but Tucker's agents wanted significantly *more* money than Chan was getting and after tense negotiations, Tucker got his check... and kind of ended up the lead character in that series.

But sometimes we have these strange characters who may start out Antagonists and become Sidekicks, or start out Sidekicks and end up Antagonists – I call those Pivot Characters. Let's take a look at people who change sides and the women who love them...

PIVOT CHARACTERS

Sometimes you may have a character who doesn't fit either good guy or badguy – someone who is in between, or who may change sides somewhere along the way during the story. I call these “Pivot Characters”, and the best example is Tommy Lee Jones' Agent Gerard in “The Fugitive”. Though Harrison Ford's character has a minor arc in that film, Jones' character does a major shift during the story from wanting to arrest Ford whether he is guilty or not, to actually siding with Ford to bring down the real villain at the end.

Because at it's core, “The Fugitive” is kind of a mystery, with the real villain hidden until the end, Ford's character needs some antagonist to create conflict for him – conflict that we can see. That's where Agent Gerard comes in. Once Ford becomes a fugitive, Gerard's job is to capture him. That pursuit is what creates most of the action scenes in the film. Gerard is chasing Ford's character and Ford is chasing the One Armed Man, and the One Armed Man was hired by the real villain – the man who ordered the murder which resulted in the death of Ford's wife. Even though Gerard is an *antagonist* he is not the villain.

There is a great scene when Gerard is chasing him through the drainage tunnels and thinks that he has captured him at the edge of the dam, and Ford tells him that he did not kill his wife... and Gerard replies that he doesn't care. Not his job to care.

As the film goes on, Gerard *gradually* begins to believe that Ford may not be guilty, and *pivots* from antagonist to almost a sidekick by the end. Note that the change is gradual. Whenever you have a character shift sides – either from good to bad or bad to good – Egri's basic rule of character still applies: “No honest man will becomes a thief overnight; no thief will become an honest man in the same period of time." He points out that good drama requires a character to go from one state to another (to grow, to change), but the change must be gradual. Here are his 14 steps that take a character from Love to Hatred:

1) Possessive love.
2) Disappointment.
3) Doubt.
4) Questioning.
5) Suspicion.
6) Testing.
7) Hurt.
8) Realization.
9) Bitterness.
10) Reevaluation and failure to adjust.
11) Anger.
12) Fury at self.
13) Fury at object of affection.
14) Hate.

If a character doesn't go step-by-step through each stage of the change it will seem as if their actions don't match their character. Imagine a scene where your hero is madly in love with the female lead... then he is bitter about the relationship in the next scene. What happened? Instead of seeing the way the relationship is changing, we see a guy who has gone wacko. His actions are inconsistent with the way they were in the previous scene. Character change is the most important thing in your script - so make sure you don't leave it out! If your loyal sidekick back-stabs your hero, you need to show us step-by-step how he changed from one state to the other. In “The Fugitive” Gerard takes it one step at a time as he changes from not caring whether Ford's character is guilty to wanting to help him.

In “The Illusionist” we have a known Villain in Crown Prince Leopold (Rufus Sewell), but we also have a Pivot Character who begins as an antagonist and gradually takes the Hero's side in Inspector Uhl (Paul Giamatti). Without the Inspector being on his side, the magician Eisenheim (Eward Norton) would never get away with rescuing his lost love Sophie (Jessica Biel) from the evil Prince... which brings down his empire. But

when Uhl and Eisenheim first meet, Uhl has come to arrest him. Uhl is under direct orders from the Prince, and a man of loyalty. But as the story progresses, he begins to understand that there is more to the world that he first thought, and allows Eisenheim more leeway. Slowly he changes from antagonist to someone who passively plots against the Count in order to help the two lovers escape.

Faye Dunaway's character in “Three Days Of The Condor” is a different kind of Pivot Character, who begins as Robert Redford's captive and slowly begins to believe that this crazy guy who claims to read books for the CIA and has been marked for death... may not be crazy after all. She goes from fearing him to helping him to loving him.

Joubert the assassin (Max Von Sydow) also pivots from antagonist to helper for Redford's character. He starts out trying to kill him, and ends up offering him a job!

GOOD TO BAD?

Pivot Characters can work both ways – and Harvey Dent's character in “The Dark Knight” is a good example of a good sidekick type character evolving into a bad henchman type character. He goes from being Batman's helper – at one point willing to take the heat so that the superHero can continue to fight crime – to the Joker's pawn spreading chaos and violence over Gotham. Though Dent's change from good to bad is not gradual, it is *very* well motivated. We understand how those events can make a man lose faith in almost everything. But usually you need to “show your work” and take us step-by-step from one side to the other.

In “Panic Room” the character played by Forest Whitaker goes from bad guy to good – but the change didn't seem gradual enough. Almost as if someone flipped a switch. It ended up working because Whitaker is a personable actor, and made us believe it – but in a lesser actor's hands it would have seemed too abrupt. Make sure if any sidekick character ends up switching sides or a henchman character comes over to help the hero that you show all of the steps and even set up the character's ability to change early. Often, like in the case of Joubert from “Three Days Of The Condor” and Gerard from “The Fugitive”, the characters are just doing a job and when the job changes or is over they are allowed to make their own decisions. But if you have a sidekick switch sides you'll need to plant doubt early and then show us the gradual changes in order for the audience to believe it. We don't want to feel that someone was flipping that switch off screen.

The Pivot Character pops up frequently in Action Films, where allegiances can change... and your sidekick might slowly become a henchmen... like Dent did in “The Dark Knight”.

HENCHMEN

As the Sidekick is often the brains to the Hero's brawn, the Henchman is often the brawn to the Villain's brains. Villains sip cocktails and order the destruction of the world as we know it, Henchmen do the actual killing. Everything I have learned about henchmen I got from watching James Bond movies. In fact, I'll bet you can name the Henchman in “Moonraker” before you can name the Villain! James Bond movies have the best Henchman – from Red Grant and Rosa Kleb in “From Russia With Love” to Vargas in “Thunderball” who “Does not drink... does not smoke... does not make love. What do you do, Vargas?” to Jaws in “Moonraker” (did you get that right?). In the Action Scene chapter we looked at Carlos from “Casino Royale” who is Bond's equal – and a great physically violent Henchman to match LeChiffre's accountant for terrorists. But they completely dropped the ball in the awful “Quantum Of Solace” with Bowl Cut – what was his special skills? Walking around looking suspicious? Hopefully they'll do better in “Skyfall”.

I think the perfect henchman is Odd Job from "Goldfinger":

1) He's *Physically Powerful*, a guy about the size of Cleveland, Ohio. He towers over Bond, and is able to toss him around the room with little effort. When Bond slams a 2x4 into Odd Job's face in a fight, it breaks over the Henchman's head, and Odd Job smiles. Odd Job knows martial arts. One of the most important things to remember when creating your henchman: he has to be able to stomp the hero. When the audience sees the Henchman and the Hero fight, they have to be betting on the Henchman to win.

2) He has a *Special Weapon*, that razor edged bowler hat. A Henchmen should have a special weapon, and the more unusual and interesting the better. I don't mean you should make the Henchman an expert at killing people with ripe tomatoes; but if your choice is between a gun and a compound hunting bow... go with the bow! The audience should be able to identify the weapon with the henchman. So when they see that hat sailing at Tilly Masterson, they *know* that Odd Job can't be too far behind. That means one special weapon per Henchman. If the Henchman has three special weapons, each is less special. If he has a bag of special weapons, he basically has a bag – and what's special about that?

3) Odd Job is *Physically Different*. He's a mute (making him the ultimate strong silent type). He's also the only Korean in the entire film (even though he was played by a Japanese). The James Bond movies are a good place to learn about Henchmen, because every Bond film has a good Henchman. Yes, Jaws' metal teeth are kind of silly – but you remembered him, didn't you?

4) Odd Job *Enjoys His Work*. He smiles after tossing Bond across the room. There's a touch of sadist in Henchmen, which makes the audience ill at ease. There is no way a hero can bribe a henchman to quit... Henchmen like to hurt people. That's also the answer to what Vargas likes to do in “Thunderball” - he loves hurting people and killing them very slowly.

Henchmen are also impervious to pain. I mentioned Odd Job smiling after being hit be a 2x4, but in "Lethal Weapon" Gary Busey's Henchman has a lighted cigarette ground out on his hand and smiles the entire time. This sequence is the introduction to Busey's character, and we know right away that Riggs is no match for him. As early as possible, give your henchman a display of strength so that we know how tough he is. In "Lethal Weapon", we eagerly wait for the scene pitting Busey and Gibson against each other, because we *know* that Busey is the stronger of the two. By the way, Busey also seems to enjoy his work, and has that freakish albino white hair, making him a perfect Henchman.

You may be thinking that all of this Henchmen weirdness is just Hollywood and James Bond, but Henchmen have followed the above four rules since the beginning of time. Here's a description of henchman Eddie Prue from Raymond Chandler's 1942 novel "The High Window"... "A great long gallows of a man with a ravaged face and a haggard frozen right eye that had a clotted iris and the steady look of blindness. He was so tall that he had to stoop to put his hand on the back of the chair across from me." Physically strange, violent, has a special weapon... Prue is the perfect Henchman years before James Bond would be created.

And strange Henchmen are not old fashioned. There are plenty of other examples like Gary Busey's Mr. Joshua in “Lethal Weapon”, plus recent weirdos like the little guy Isaacs in “Hanna” (played by Tom Hollander). Isaacs is a great henchman – a pint sized mercenary who seems to own that night club in “Blue Velvet” and loves to whistle while he works. At one point he uses a bow and arrow as a weapon, turning a character into a human pincushion. In the first of Guy Ritchie's “Sherlock Holmes” movies he pits Holmes against a henchman twice the size of Odd Job – each armed with a hammer. The henchman has the “sledge” version.

Just between us, at one time I thought about trading out Odd Jobb from “Goldfinger” as the main example of Henchmen and using Big Baby from “Toy Story 3” - another perfect henchman to Lotso's villain!

Much like the Carlos character in “Casino Royale”, the Henchman played by Karl Urban in “The Bourne Supremacy” (Kirill) and the Henchman played by Clive Owen in “The Bourne Identity” (The Professor) are the protagonist's equal... and both prefer to use sniper rifles! Bourne must get past both of these guys in order to get all the way to the villains of the stories – and each is a formidable antagonist. They also represent the Villain in both films while the Villain's identity is a mystery – and that is the other great reason to have a Henchman. They can be the Villain's surrogate in action scenes so that you can keep the Villain's identity a secret or a mystery that the Hero is in the process of solving. A Henchman gives your Hero someone to battle before that big final battle with the Villain at the end of Act Three.

Love Interests and Henchmen and Sidekicks and Pivot Characters round out your cast of characters and keep your action plot working on more than one level, but what happens when the hero has more than one sidekick? You end up with a Team Effort.

TEAM EFFORTS

Team efforts pop up more often in action movies than in any other genre. From "The Guns Of Navarone" to "Buckaroo Banzai" to "The Guns Of The Magnificent Seven", action heroes are frequently cheaper by the (Dirty) dozen. Recently we've had an *explosion* of Team Effort films with “The Losers” and “The Expendables” and “The Inglorious Basterds” and “The A Team” and “The Avengers” and “The Expendables 2: Electric Bugaloo” and at least a few movies that I've forgotten. It seems like everyone wants to combine those big dramatic Oscar nominated Robert Altman directed ensemble stories... and explosions. But because of that ensemble cast Team Efforts are often the most difficult type of action script to write; and for some unusual reason the kind of script most likely to be written by a new writer. It could be that they idolize Tarantino, or think that more characters might equals less plot, or perhaps think that with five leads each not need to be as fully developed. Wrong!

Whenever you have five of anything at the same time (babies, pets, girlfriends) it is at least five times more complicated. You not only have to squeeze more characterization into less screen time, you have to juggle all of these plots and subplots. Am I trying to talk you out of writing a Team Effort script? No – just warning you that it's likely to be more difficult than you may have thought. But if you grew up reading Alastair MacLean, Don Westlake, Doc Savage pulps and watching “The A Team” on TV; you are probably going to want to write one – so here's how!

TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADER

Even the Dirty Dozen had a leader (Lee Marvin). Every team can be broken down into a Hero and his merry band of Sidekicks. There really is no such thing as an ensemble action film where everyone is equal. Give all of the guys in "Diner" a machine gun and set them against an army of terrorists, and you've got a disorganized mess. That's probably why Robert Altman never made “Three Women And A Nuclear Device” or “The Nashville Team”.

Teams have leaders, and the leader is the hero. And that may mean that the leader is the character with the emotional conflict and the outer conflict with the villain. In "The Wild Bunch", it's not Ernest Borgnine's character who used to be Robert Ryan's best friend, it's William Holden's character. The central conflict in "The Wild Bunch" is between Robert Ryan and William Holden (they get the flashbacks), the other characters are just along for the ride. Even William Holden's decision to go into town and rescue/avenge Angel is based upon his past relationship with Robert Ryan.

You have to know who the team leader is before you begin to plot your script. The guy who is ultimately in charge. When we look at “The Expendables” it's obvious that Stallone is in charge, when we look at “The Losers” Jeffrey Dean Morgan is the leader, when we look at “A Team” it's Liam Neeson just as it was George Pepard on TV, when we look at “Inglorious Basterds” it was Brad Pitt's Lt. Aldo Raine. The thing about the “Mission Impossible” movie series that I don't like is that they began by killing off leader Jim Phelps and the rest of the team in the first movie and turned it into a single protagonist story about Ethan Hunt. The cool thing about the TV show was *the team*! Though the later films have developed other teams members like Luther Stickell (Ving Rhames) and Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg) who end up in more than one film so they seem like more than background characters to Tom Cruise.

Since the team leader is the hero, it's usually his job to vanquish the villain – in some big mano-a-mano action scene in Act Three. "Predator" begins as a team effort, but by the end it's Ah-nuld who camouflages himself to attack the creature, not Sonny Landham or Carl Weathers or Shane Black. Who ever you chose as Team Leader (Hero) will probably remain the hero until the end of the script.

In some war films, the hero isn't the actual team leader, but he *is* the POV character, and ends up leading the team after the commander is killed. Sam Fuller's "Steel Helmet" is a good example of this. Gene Evans becomes the leader after half his division is wiped out... but the story was told from his point of view from the very beginning.

Another Sam Fuller film, "Fixed Bayonets" (1951), takes a different tact. The story is told from the POV of the fourth in command, played by Richard Basehart. He is "just one of the team", okay at following orders but afraid to make decisions. Fuller builds suspense by having Basehart's three superiors killed one by one, forcing him to confront his fear of leadership. True to the "hero on the run" Act Two, Basehart does everything in his power to make sure his superiors don't get killed... to the point of insane heroics! Realizing how close he came to getting killed just to avoid making decisions, acts as the catalyst for his character's change. Finally he leads his team to victory.

DOC SAVAGE DELINEATION

Once you've got your leader it's time to fill out the rest of the team. Basically, the other members follow the guidelines for sidekicks in the previous chapter but with one important addition. Sure, each member has to help the hero, and one of them might provide comic relief, and one of them will probably be killed by a henchman at the end of Act One or Act Two, but the big difference is...

They all have to be different.

Remember the contrast between the hero an the sidekick? That contrast increases exponentially when you have five sidekicks, each contrasting with the hero, and each contrasting with each other. Each team member has to be different than the leader *and* they need to be different than each other. No duplicates.

Sounds difficult? It gets worse. Each team member should also have his/her own character arc or emotional conflict – and these things may be resolved by the end of the film (or not). Each team member should have a special talent or knowledge of some sort, to make them valuable to the team and more than just an extra set of hands. Each team member should have a special weapon of some sort – no two should have the same fighting skills. Each team member should speak differently, so that if you were to cover the character headings in dialogue, you could easily tell them apart just by speech patterns and pet words and phrases. Each team member must have a different look, so that you can tell them apart at a glance... we don't want to confuse two team members in the middle of that big Act Three shoot out!

Doc Savage was a character in a series of a zillion pulp novels from the 1930s, about a team of adventurers who saved the world from a maniacal villain every month (mostly written by Lester Dent). He was the model for Superman (The Man Of Steel) and even had a Fortress Of Solitude and dozens of other things that ended up in the Superman comic books. Doc Savage, the "Man Of Bronze" was the team leader. Tall, muscular, good looking. Indiana Jones meets Ah-nuld with a little James Bond thrown in for good measure. They made a cheesy film in the 70s starring Ron Ely (who played Tarzan on TV) and at one point in time Frank Darabont was going to make a movie with Ah-nuld before he decided to run for Governator of California... I have the script somewhere.

Doc's five man team of "associates" were:

Colonel John “Renny” Renwick: The world's top engineer. Over six feet tall. An ex-boxer with massive ham-sized fists who is always depressed and sees a cloud in every silver lining.

Major Thomas “Long Tom” Roberts: Electrical expert. The “physical weakling” of the group, but a fast draw with a gun... and an expert with canons.

Brigadier General Theodore Marley “Ham” Brooks: Harvard lawyer. Slender, handsome, quick moving. He never goes anywhere with out his razor sharp wit and razor tipped sword-cane. Urbane, witty – kind of a William Powell type.

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Blodgett “Monk” Mayfair: Short, bald, hairy chested chemist and demolition expert. Lowbrow humor and earthy dialogue – the opposite of “Ham”, so they always end up paired together on missions. Remember, it's all about contrast!

William Harper “Johnny” Littlejohn: Expert in geology and archeology. Wears a monocle and uses ten syllable words. Very thin. As a kid, this character sent me to the dictionary to decipher his dialogue on a regular basis. Remember, it's about distinctive dialogue!

Each one of these guys had his own special weapon, his own style of dialogue and his own special talent. Whenever they needed to get past an alarm system, Long Tom was there. Whenever they needed to

MacGyver up an explosive device, Monk was there. When they came upon lost civilizations (they always did) Johnny was there. When they got hauled into court, or into a sword fight, Ham was there. If their plane crashed in the Arctic, you knew Renny could rebuild it and get them out of there before the polar bears attacked (they always did). This team worked out of the 86th floor of the Empire State Building in New York and often under the cover of the “Hildago Trading Company”, and managed to fight a different super villain in a different exotic local in 181 novel-length stories published in Doc Savage Magazine between 1933-1949. I read them in their 70s Bantam paperback editions as a kid – and on the back of every book was a break down of the team and their special skills and unique weapons. The joy of reading them really was the characters – lots of jokes and banter and romantic rivalries.

And that's one of the important lessons about teams – it's all about the characters.

If you look at the team from my favorite of the new Team Effort flicks, “The Losers”, they also have distinctive personalities and dialogue and attitude and each has their own specific weapon and military specialty:

Clay played by Jeffrey Dean Morgan is the leader and planner – “Operational Control”.

Pooch played by Columbus Short is in charge of Transport and Heavy Weapons – the married guy whose wife is about to give birth when they get called on their mission.

Cougar played by Oscar Jaenada is an expert sniper (Long-Range Eliminations) and a man who few words who is never seen without his beat up cowboy hat.

Jensen played by Chris Evans in the Communications and Technical expert – and a hella fast runner. He's not the least bit brave, and usually ends up bantering with...

Roque played by Idris Elba is Demolitions and Tactical expert... and as in many Team Efforts, he's the guy who switches sides. More on that coming up!

Aisha played by Zoe Saldana who is kind of a femme fatale who ends up joining the team by the end, where she proves herself handy with a rocket launcher. Like with any good Team movie, she has an agenda that brings her into conflict with the team... but also has her falling into bed with Clay.

Again, each character is a complete individual with different vocabularies and speech patterns and attitudes and looks and weapons and skills and everything else. One of the reasons why I liked this film more than “A Team” or “Basterds” is the distinctive characters. Because each was different than they other they could put them in a series of combinations, working together in pairs, and it was a different kind of fun. In my Dialogue Secrets Blue Book I look at ensemble comedies and how each of the Marx Brothers has a completely different type of comedy, so that there's something funny no matter what kind of sense of humor you have... and I think the same thing is the key to a great Team Effort script. You want different types of characters so that not only is each interesting individually, every time you pair two of them you get a different dynamic that is fun.

INTRODUCTIONS

In "The Professionals" (1966) Lee Marvin doesn't say, "we need another guy", he says: "What we really need is an equalizer. A dynamiter. A man with a delicate touch: to blow out a candle without putting a dent in the candle holder. And I know just the guy. He's not far from here...In jail." Burt Lancaster's character is introduced by his specific talent and weapon. Later we find out he's a well dressed romeo who can con his way into *any* woman's bed, and that he's had a few brushes with the law... he's currently shackled with a dozen other prisoners waiting to be taken to Yuma Prison for most of the rest of his life.

“The Professionals” introduces one character at a time, each in their own element. This method has been used in films like “The Andromeda Strain” where the scientists are shown in every day life when the crisis hits and each is scooped up by the military to work on the problem. This method allows us a moment of the character in their “natural habitat” before the action kicks in. A version of this was done in the heist movie “Tower Heist” - with each character introduced in their element before the story kicks in.

Another method of introducing your team is what usually ends up the very next scene in those films, that big briefing room scene where the team ends up meeting each other. Movies like “Guns Of Navarone” and “Where Eagles Dare” use this method. The challenge in the briefing room is to find some small thing that each can do in the room to give us a hint at their skills... like catching a falling coffee cup in “Ronin”. These small things give us a hint at the big things that will come later.

I had a challenge in my HBO film "Crash Dive!" - I had to introduce some key members of the submarine crew who would become part of the hero's "team" later in the film. A US 688 submarine gets hijacked on the high seas and they think they can get one man onto the sub – so they pick retired Naval engineer and brainiac James Allen Carter. Once on the submarine he has crew members as a potential team, and there's a scene (not in the film) where Carter and Lisa Stark go over the profiles of every member of the submarine crew and come up with an onboard team – each with special skills and different weapons disciplines. These are Navy guys – so they are already trained for battle. One of the questions at this point in the script is: are the guys they select still alive? One key guy ends up dead by the time he gets on the sub (again, I'm not sure that made it all the way to the screen). But I wanted to give the audience a feel for their personalities and backgrounds - a way to like them – before they become those black & white photos on the dossiers spread on on Carter's kitchen table.

The problem was, I only had a page and a half to introduce the team before the sub hijacking began. How can you introduce six characters in a page and a half, and give the audience enough of their backstory to know them, be funny so that the audience likes them, yet not sound like exposition? I came up with this answer:

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EXT. USS ULYSSES - UNDER WATER

The submarine cruises under water.

INT. CONTROL ROOM -- NIGHT

Lange moves from man to man, making sure they're on course.
Everything is perfect, so he turns to MacDonald.

LANGE
It's tradition for the Chief Of Boat to lead us in a sea
shanty on our first night out. Murphy?

Murphy begins singing a bawdy sea shanty. Each of our main characters takes center stage for a verse which tells a little of their background. Everyone chimes in on the last line of each stanza.

MURPHY
There was a young woman who lived by the sea, who had all the service boys screaming. She dated the Army, Air Force, and Marines; but all she wanted was Sea Men.

ROBISON
She met a young stud from the streets of L.A., and thought he was quite a he-man. Tried to get her to bed all night and all day...

EVERYONE
But all she wanted was Sea Men.

DENT
The son of a preacher tried to teach her to pray, but all he taught her was A-Men. He took her to church each and every Sunday...

EVERYONE
But all she wanted was Sea Men.

WAGER
A gambling man tried to teach her to play, but nothing could stop him from scheming. He bet her to win, and to show, and to stay...

EVERYONE
But all she wanted was Sea Men.

INT. ENLISTED BUNKS -- NIGHT

The laughter and singing echoes through the submarine.

The boat's maintenance man, the lowest enlisted man onboard, LARRY BLOCK, is trying to sleep. A twenty-something slacker who'd rather be playing DOOM on his computer than trapped in a sub for four months.

BLOCK
Hey, man, I'm trying to sleep down here. Sound like a bunch of goats.

INT. CONTROL ROOM -- NIGHT

Collins hands the controls to YAMAGUCHI and takes a verse.

COLLINS
A hillbilly driver tried to give her a boat, and tried to be her dream man. Said he'd throw in the Chief, who's a crazy old goat...

EVERYONE
But all she wanted was Sea Men.

All the men laugh together. A true team. Only one man in the Control Room isn't laughing, or even smiling: MacDonald. He's too snobby to enjoy the camaraderie.

MURPHY
This crazy old Chief was the son of a tailor, after looking at him she was screaming. To quiet the woman, he set her up with a sailor...

EVERYONE
But all she wanted was...
(big finish)
SEA MEN.

Lange smiles proudly at his men. He likes them. He looks down at his locket, missing his family.

***

The sea shanty allowed each character to talk about themselves without sounding expositional. We know that Robison is a ladies man, that Murphy has self depreciating humor (he jokes about how ugly he is in his verse), that Collins is a "Hillbilly driver" which conjures up images of running moonshine, that Dent is religious, that Wager is willing to gamble, and shows us Block trying to escape the music. Since each gets his verse, the actor will get to use physical actions as well. Because the song had a punchline, the audience will laugh, and like these guys... I hoped.

On the set, the film's director decided a song is a song... So he removed the sea shanty scene and substituted a rap number performed by extras who would not really be in the film again (except as crew members with numbers) and which did nothing to illuminate their characters. The critical members of the submarine's crew were *never introduced*. Hey, then they cut out the scene where Carter and Lisa talked about them while “assembling the team” from dossiers! We know nothing about them when the submarine is hijacked, and have trouble telling them apart. This was further complicated by bad casting choices which de-ethnicized the crew. Three of the actors cast look almost identical in crew cuts and uniform. How confusing!

Just as there are good guy teams, there are badguy teams – in “The Losers” and “The Expendables” and most of the others – and the same things hold true for them as well. Each of the terrorists in "Crash Dive!" was given their own weapon and their own point of view. My bad guy team. The female, Bolanne, wore a form fitting black suit with a bandoleer of throwing knives. One villain had a garrotte, another used a matched pair of pistols, a brutish ex-goatherd used a club and saw everything as "flock management". Each villain had a distinctive weapon, look, personality, attitude and world view. None of that made it into the film either! On film each of the terrorist is just a terrorist, and they all use the same kind of guns and speak the same and look the same and act the same. More confusion!

ACCESSORIZING YOU TEAM

When you create your team members accentuate the differences between each team member. Is one a cowboy in western garb and another a flashy dresser in a $5,000 Italian suit? The cowboy will have different speech patterns than the clothes horse. The cowboy will listen to different music, have different points of reference, and use a different approach to problem solving than our man in Armani. Look at the guys in “The Losers” - all have distinctive looks and clothes and attitudes and everything else!

On my HBO World Premiere "Steel Sharks" I had to create a Navy SEAL team which Admiral Billy Dee Williams would send deep into enemy territory via Gary Busey's submarine. The problem here: the entire team would be dressed in identical uniforms, and then put on camouflage face paint... How can we ever tell them apart?

By "Accessorizing".

Whenever you have five soldiers, five bank robbers, or five doctors who all will be dressed the same, it's important to give each one a little something to tell them apart. An accessory.

Let's take five bank robbers dressed in identical blue suits and ski masks. Which is which? Give one a boutonniere, another a gold crucifix, a third gets a stop watch on a lanyard around her neck, a fourth wears dark glasses *over* the ski mask, the fifth wears a red cowboy bandanna around her neck. Now the audience can tell them apart at a glance.

Each "accessory" is also a way to show character. In "Steel Sharks" I had a deeply religious character who always wore a crucifix, touching it sometimes during the mission. It was his touchstone, a great way to show his character, and was a physical way to tell him from the other guys when they were all dressed alike. The tough, stern SEAL who would become the hero's mentor and surrogate father as the script progressed, wore a necklace of every bullet that ever hit him. This was a great symbol of the character's hardness, his invulnerability, and a way to instantly identify him. I had one of these "accessories" for each team member. A way to tell them apart and tell us about their character. The director didn't get it, and didn't use them. Try to tell these guys apart in the shoot outs now!

The more alike the characters look or dress, the stronger the accessory must be. Our five bank robbers in ski masks require “big” interesting accessories. The SEAL team in uniform and camouflage make up require big accessories. When we don't have the instant visual reference point of clothing style or the face of the actor or anything else to tell characters apart, we need that something extra. Since you are giving each character that extra accessory, make sure it reveals character as well. And points for fun stuff like sun glasses over the ski mask.

CONTRAST DIFFERENCES

Can not street this enough. All of your team members need to be different. They must have different strengths and weaknesses. Different 'looks'. Different personalities and ways of handling problems. Different "voices" and speech rhythms. The audience must be able to instantly tell one from another.

All of these things probably need to be planned out before you begin writing because if one of your characters is a Grand Prix racer, it'll probably change the outcome of your car chase if he's driving. Or create an interesting scene if he ends up in the backseat, and your fussy art expert is driving. A change in the outcome of the car chase is going to change *every* scene which comes after it. So plan ahead! Make up a list of character traits for each team member. Contrast each Team Member with the Hero, and make sure there's plenty of contrast between each Team Member and the other members of the team, too. The more similar they are, the more different they must be!

The best way to bring out the different characters of your Team members is to pair them with the member who is *least* like them. In James Cameron's amazing “Aliens”, emotionally damaged survivor Ripley (Sigorney Weaver) is paired with steely calm Marine Hicks (Michael Biehn) which helps expose both characters. Ripley is the civilian, Hicks is the ultimate Marine - lots on contrast between the two. Ripley is scared, Hicks is always cool. We would never know that Hicks has a sense of humor if it weren't for his relationship with Ripley. Initially Hicks objects to taking Ripley along on the mission, but as the conflict intensifies, their relationship grows. A key moment is when Hicks shows her how to use the pulse rifle - Ripley has gone from baggage Hicks thought he'd have to carry to an equal. That's a *moment*!

Hicks and Hudson are also paired in some scenes to show character. When they're introduced both are in uniform and almost impossible to tell apart ("Yes, Hicks?" "Hudson, sir. He's Hicks.") but when the conflict erupts we can see that these two are very different characters. Hicks is always cool and quiet, Hudson develops a motor-mouth when he's scared.

HUDSON
Well that's great! That's just
fucking great, man. Now what the
fuck are we supposed to do, man?
We're in some pretty real shit now!

HICKS
Are you finished?

We can see how calm Hicks is by comparing him to how panicked Hudson is. They bring out the character in each other whenever they are together... so Cameron keeps throwing them together in scene after scene. We may not know anything about Hudson's life back on Earth, but his behavior creates a fully fleshed out character. We really know him. When he's screaming "Game over man! Game over!" we laugh - but we also feel his panic. We care about him. Both Hudson and Hicks are real people because we've learned about them as their relationship has developed over the course of the script.

But do we need to like the characters to care about them? The two most unlikable characters in “Aliens” are tough female Marine Vasquez and wimpy new Lieutenant Gorman ("How many drops is this for you, Lieutenant?" "Thirty-eight... simulated."). She's completely antagonistic, he's so pathetic it's hard to care about him. So Cameron sticks them together. They are opposites, and the contrast between the two brings their characters to the surface. Their relationship evolves throughout the script - hitting highs and lows. Nothing could be lower than when Gorman crashes the Armored Personnel Carrier - trapping them on the alien planet.

VASQUEZ
He's fucking dead!

She grabs Gorman by the collar, hauling him up roughly, ready to pulp him with her other fist.

VASQUEZ
Wake up pendejo! I'm gonna kill you, you useless fuck!

Hicks pushes her back. Right in her face.

HICKS
Hold it. Hold it. Back off right now.

Vasquez releases Gorman. His head smacks the deck.

Vasquez is aggressive, Gorman is ineffective (mostly because he's unconscious in that scene). But the script keeps throwing the two together, and each brings out the character in the other. This pays off when Vasquez and Gorman are trapped in an air duct together as an army of alien warriors approaches. She gives him the "power greeting" she only shares with a chosen few to show her respect. Gorman returns the greeting and hands her two grenades, keeping two for himself. When the creatures descend upon them, the two who were once enemies die together... as friends. And we care about both of them - we've come to know them and even like them. All because these two *contrasting* team members were paired in scene after scene.

Once you've created your Team Members and made sure they have different personalities and different looks, make sure to pair up the most different members to bring their characters (and some great drama) to the surface.

WEAPONS FOR WEIRDOS

The very first movie I ever worked on was Paul Kyriazi's martial arts film "Weapons Of Death" (1982), which was made in my home town area while I was taking Film Appreciation courses in my local community college and dreaming of Hollywood. I think I was 18 years old.

Each team member in the film is given a specific weapon and a specific character arc. The story concerns the daughter of a wealthy family from San Francisco's Chinatown who is kidnapped by the Tongs. The girl's brother, played by Eric Lee, assembles a team to rescue her from among his karate class friends: David, the bow and arrow expert, has trouble shooting at live targets. Eric, the swordsman, was stomped by the lead hench in Act One. Josh, the lance expert, is opposed to killing. Paul, the gunslinger, is engaged to the girl the badguys have kidnapped. And Curt, who uses a Conan-sized broadsword is the girl's father... or maybe he isn't. Each team member has a moment of truth in the film, where they must confront their personal demons to survive.

"Weapons Of Death" also uses a *Bad Guy Team*. A group of henchmen sent by the Villain to get the good guy team. Each member of the Bad Guy Team also has a special weapon and a special talent. This film is the most fun when it pairs off a Good Guy Team member with a lance against a Bad Guy Team member with a broadsword. There are dozens of fight styles and combinations you go through until the end of the film when each Good Guy Team member faces off against his Bad Guy Team counterpart: Two guys fighting with broadswords, or two guys in a high noon style pistol shootout. The different weapons – and combinations of weapons when one good guy fights one bad guy – is what makes this film fun.

Though the plot is a complete mess, this a fun film that has never been released on DVD expect in poor quality bootlegs of cut down TV versions. The original was beautifully shot anamorphic scope Panavision (ultra wide screen) on 35mm and deserves an actual video release. The head villain played by Gerald Okamura has co-starred in movies like “The Octagon” and “Big Trouble In Little China” and “G.I. Joe: Rise Of The Cobra” and is not only an expert fighting with weapons, he *creates* weapons for films and collectors and other martial arts masters. One of the great things in “Weapons Of Death” is his duffel bag of unusual weapons...

So let's think about how we are going to arm our Team Members. We want each to specialize in a different weapons than the others, and have that weapon be some glimpse of their personality it possible. Like any prop, we want it to reflect character. Just for the heck of it, let's look at the team from “The Expendables” and see what sort of weapons each uses...

Leader Barney Ross (Sylvester Stallone) has a pair of matching pistols.
Lee Christmas (Jason Statham) is a blades specialist, knife thrower.
Yin Yang (Jet Li) is a martial arts expert (duh).
Gunnar Jensen (Dolph Lundgren) is an ultra long range sniper.
Hale Caesar (Terry Crews) is an expert in heavy weapons.
Toll Road (Randy Couture) is their demolition expert.

See how each specializes in a different weapon? Find the weapon that fits each character, and there are always extra points for unusual weapons and disciplines. I recently jokes that I want to see a character who *juggles* in one of these films. But just as Castor Troy has that matching set of gold and pearl handled automatics in “Face/Off”, you want to find one of a kind weapons for your characters if possible. If you can come up with a cool weapon for every member of both your good guy team and your bad guy team, every time they get into an action scene will be fun... before the fighting even begins!

DETAILS, DETAILS

Another device which pops up in team efforts is the conflict within a team, which is part of the contrast we discussed earlier. Alastair MacLean novels (and the films made from them like "The Guns Of Navarone" and "Where Eagles Dare") always have tension and dissension within the team. From basic personality conflicts, to "one of us is a Nazi informer" subplots, conflict within a team keeps the scenes between car chases and shoot outs exciting, and adds another level of tension to the action scenes. Will Joe save Hal's life during the shoot out; when, in the preceding scene, Hal admitted that he'd slept with Joe's girl?

In "The Split" (1968) based on one of the Richard Stark novels by Don Westlake, a team of professional robbers are going to hit the LA Coliseum during a Rams playoff game. Tension in the team begins when a racist member played by Donald Sutherland locks horns with team leader Jim Brown (playing a version of Parker). Each team member, Gene Hackman, Julie Harris, Ernest Borgnine, and Warren Oates, must choose sides in this racial debate.

A better team heist film with racial undertones is Nelson Gidding's "Odds Against Tomorrow". Racist Robert Ryan gets teamed with Harry Belafonte for a heist and can't seem to set aside his prejudices long enough to pull the job. When the robbery falls apart, they are forced to work together to survive. "Odds Against Tomorrow" is a good example of how to incorporate a social message in a film which is also non-stop action. Just because we are blowing things up real good doesn't mean we can't also make a point at the same time. This is a great film with a fantastic jazz score, based on a novel by William P. McGivern who wrote a bunch of great action and thriller novels – many that have been turned into classic films.

TODAY ON SPRINGER:

GOOD BAD GUYS, BAD GOOD GUYS

An extension of Team Conflicts is the *Good Bad Guy* and *Bad Good Guy* characters also found in MacLean films and books. In "Where Eagles Dare" we know that one of the good guys team is really a Nazi informer... But who? As the film plays out, we are given clues to the bad good guy's identity, but when it's finally revealed... it's still a good twist.

For a textbook example of how to use good bad guys and bad good guys, read Robert Rostand's "The Killer Elite" – no relation to the recent Jason Statham movie. In this kick ass action book, three bodyguards are protecting an African Dignitary from three top assassins sent to kill him. But one of the assassins is providing anonymous tips to the good guys. And one of the three good guys is tipping off the bad guys. The resulting novel is filled with twists, turns, and thrill a minute action as our hero, Locken, tries to figure out which assassin he shouldn't kill, and which one of his two trusted sidekicks he should kill. This is one of my favorite action books, made into a film by Sam Peckinpah in the 70s... but got so mangled on the way to the screen that the film has as much to do with the book as that Jason Statham flick that swiped the title. Someone *really* needs to remake this and do a version that is 100% faithful to the book. Um, I would be interested in scripting. By the way – because everything is connected, the guy who made all of the cool weapons for the Peckinpah movie was... Gerald Okamura! He's also in the film with my friend Eric (“Little King Of Kata”) Lee!

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, Teams fill the role of sidekicks... and that means someone is going to die! Either at the end of Act One or the end of Act Two (or both, if you have enough team members) one of the loyal, trusted, witty members of the team is probably going to get blown away. In “Guns Of Navarone” a team member is seriously injured in a mountain climbing accident – gets gangrene – and has to be left behind. In “Were Eagles Dare” one of the team dies when they parachute behind enemy lines... except he was shot! “The Expendables” did something interesting and had Dolph Lundgren's drug addiction take him out of the mission. But when you have a *team* you can usually afford to have a couple of them killed in combat, right?

In "The Professionals" the team is forced to shoot their horses to avoid discovery by Raza's army. Robert Ryan is given the task, but can't harm the innocent animals... This leads to Burt Lancaster's capture and torture at the end of Act One. At the end of Act Two, Robert Ryan is wounded and the team must leave him behind to escape capture. Immediately after the team escapes, there is a silent "funeral" for Ryan... much like the one they held for Lancaster at the end of Act One.

The funeral after a team member's death is a moment for the team to cast aside their differences and band together. It has the potential to be the most powerful moment of your film, the only time your macho action audience gets a little misty in the eyes. So milk it if you can! Make that funeral scene the most powerful scene in your script. Why? Because it's fun to see an audience of macho grown men cry. Team Efforts are difficult to write, but can be lots of fun when you get the banter going between the guys (or gals if you've seen the Hong Kong film “So Close”) and they seem to be popular with audiences as I write this. So maybe we will see Paul Thomas Anderson's “The Magnolia Team”?

PERSONAL INJURIES

Pop Quiz: Which hurts more: hitting your elbow on a door frame or getting blasted by a laser? The obvious answer is the laser blast, but it isn't the correct answer. If I were to show you a film clip where a man hit his elbow on a door frame, you'd go "ouch". You'd understand the pain and empathize with the man. But if I showed you a "Star Trek" clip where a laser dissolves a man, it wouldn't effect you. You've never been hit by a laser blast, you have no idea what it feels like.

We all know about the evils of abstracts. Mystery novelist and TV writer Joe Gores says in the Mystery Writer's Handbook, "Don't indulge in 'soft' writing. A street, means any street. A car, means any car. I want to see a specific street, a specific car. Hard detail is what makes a story believable." The same holds true for violence in our action scripts – the more specific, the more believable.

You probably take special care when deciding whether your protagonist drives a sports car or a family sedan, if he wears tennis shoes or spats; but even specifics can be abstracts if the audience hasn't experienced them personally. The audience needs to feel the character's pain, and that means they need to be able to relate to it.

Which takes us back to that laser gun. Even if you actually know how lasers work, create a brand name and specifications, fill in all the knobs and do-dads – create the *details*; the audience still won't understand the pain of your laser blastee. There are things we can relate to and things we can only imagine... and things that we have never experienced like a laser blast end up vague and ineffective.

George Lucas figured out a way to by-pass this problem by creating 'light sabers', which are basically laser blades. They cut. We all know what it is like to get cut, don't we?

VIOLENCE IS AS VIOLENCE DOES

Using violence in your action script is meaningless unless your audience can feel it. Remember: film is communication. Your script must be designed to communicate with the audience (through the medium of the camera and the actors). The difference between effective violence and gratuitous violence is: Gratuitous violence isn't felt by the audience. It's just exploitation. Spurting blood and exploding heads. Who among us have had our heads explode? (If this *has* happened to you, please don't write me... I'd rather not know). When we see that guy's head explode in “Scanners” we don't go “Ouch”, we go “Cool” or “Gross” or some combination of both.

So violence needs to be personalized.

Here are three examples of action scenes which work because the audience understands the results of the violence:

Steven deSouza and Jeb Stuart's "Die Hard" contains one of the most painful moments on film. John McClane is our barefoot hero, taking on a team of ruthless terrorists. Hans and Karl have cornered McClane in the Computer Room, and the three are involved in a shoot out

* * *

HANS

looks at the glass all around him, gets and idea. He SHOUTS to Karl:

HANS
The glass! Shoot the glass!

And, saying this, he demonstrates. Karl follows suit.

McCLANE

As glass flies everywhere, McClane sees one option and takes it. BLASTING a burst to keep their heads down, he WHIRLS, JUMPS on top of a long counter and RUNS ACROSS THE ROOM. Their BULLETS follow him, six inches behind his moving form.

McClane reaches the end of the counter, DIVES to the floor:

HIS FOOT

goes right down on a jagged SHARD. He groans, keeps going.

STAIRWELL DOOR

He's out, gone, safe.

INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT

McClane all but crawls inside. His dragging foot leaving a trail of blood on the linoleum.

Wincing in pain, McClane washes his foot in a sink basin. He washes a deep cut, but the pain doesn't relent.

* * *

When I was a kid, I was walking barefoot in my back yard and stepped on a nail. It went right through my foot. I'll bet, in your life, you once stepped on broken glass while barefoot or ,maybe broke a drinking glass and cut yourself picking up the pieces. It hurts. We know it hurts. When John McClane drags himself into the bathroom, we know *exactly* how he feels. The pain is real for us, more real than a shotgun blast. Strange isn't it?

I already mentioned the scene in “Marathon Man” where the villain Szell tortures the hero with a dental drill – and that scene had the audience squirming in their seats because *we've been there* and we know what that feels like. Just revving up the dental drill puts us on edge.

My second example is from the classic Dean Riesner scripted "Play Misty For Me". Clint Eastwood is having a major ex- girlfriend problem: She is trying to kill him. With a knife. A very sharp knife. Do you know what “defense wounds” are?

She attacks Clint with the knife, stabbing out at his face. Not wanting to get stabbed in the face, he catches the knife in his hand. Ouch! There's a close up shot of the blade slicing his fingers as he tries to hang onto it. Double ouch! Then she pulls the blade back, out of his hand, practically severing his fingers. Triple ouch!

How many of us have been chopping an onion or carrot and cut ourselves? Probably everyone. Again, we know *exactly* how being cut with a knife feels. When it happens on screen, part of the audience's brain flashes back to the time they were cut, and they instantly feel the pain.

My last example is from a dark comedy film called "Swimming With Sharks" about a Personal Assistant who holds his mean spirited Boss hostage and metes out a strange revenge for on the job abuse. I've seen this film four times, and every time the audience jumps at one painful scene. Even though I know the scene is coming, it still affects me:

The Personal Assistant takes a crisp, clean, new piece of paper and slashes his Boss's face with paper cuts. Ouch! He also cuts his Boss's tongue with a sharp envelope flap. Ouch! This scene was worse for me than "Play Misty For Me". I work with paper and envelopes EVERY DAY. Paper cuts hurt worse than anything else on earth (including that nail in the foot). And a paper cut on your tongue? I've had one before. The pain stays for weeks! If you haven't seen "Swimming With Sharks", it's well worth a rent. Oh, and did I mention the Boss is a film producer?

The key to writing an effective action sequence is to make sure the violence is something the audience understands, and can empathize with. As B-Movie Maven Fred Olen Ray once asked me: "If a man is shot by a laser and falls down, is the laser on stun or kill? Is he hurt or dead?" We don't know, because we've never been shot by a laser.

PAIN IS IN THE DETAILS

Personalizing action/violence/pain means showing us the *details*. Details that we can understand. Say you have a plane crash survivor forced to search for help in a rocky terrain. He has been walking all day, and stops to take off his dress shoes. When he takes off his socks, we see the blisters on his feet. Big, painful blisters. Some have broken open, and when the air touches the nerve endings, our Survivor gasps in pain.

Anyone who has ever had new dress shoes knows how this feels. Because this is drama, we have *magnified* the injury and the pain. Taken it up a couple of notches. I already mentioned the back alley dentistry in “Marathon Man”, but the film has a few more painful moments we can all relate to – from drowning in a bathtub to a brilliant fight scene where an assassin with a garote tries to kill Roy Scheider – but he gets his hand up to stop the thin steel cord from cutting into his neck... except that means that it cuts into his *hand*. That's the beginning of a martial arts fight where every time Sheider throws a karate chop he rips his hand open more. Ouch! We have all cut out hands and know what it feels like.

Steven deSouza's "Commando" ends with an epic battle in the furnace room of a mansion. At one point, John Matrix's face is pressed against the furnace door. Sizzle! We know how that feels, from the time we lifted the pan without a pot holder. DeSouza has magnified the pain by making the furnace door red hot, and subject of the burn our hero's face. You know that's gotta hurt!

“The Immortals” has a knife right through the foot... and then that foot gets stomped on! The knife goes straight through the hand in “Blood Simple”, pegging the evil private detective's hand to a window frame. Ouch! And then he has to pull out the knife to get away. Yech! In “Doomsday” our female version of Snake Plissken yanks on a chain connecting a nose ring to and ear ring in order to get some cooperation. If you like gladiator movies, you've seen films like “Spartacus” where sand is thrown into the eyes of an opponent. Have you ever had dust in your eyes? Or sand anywhere that it shouldn't have been? We can relate to these injuries because we've suffered something similar.

When you are writing a fight scene, think of the detail. The personal injury which will make your audience gasp in identification. I like to have villains break my hero's fingers, either by crushing them or bending them backwards. We know that hurts. Did you know that a pistol barrel gets hot after firing? Hot enough to burn? When I have two characters struggling with a gun which keeps discharging, I like to add in the burn factor. Grab the barrel... sizzle... ouch! We may not have burned our hands on a gun barrel, but we've burned our hands on *something* hot before. We know exactly how it feels.

The shell casing from an automatic are also hot enough to burn, and I've had two men struggling over a gun with one purposely trying to spray his face with sizzling hot shells ejected from the gun. We know how it feels to have someone step on our foot really hard, to get something in our eye, to get a pavement scrape, to get salt in an open wound (never thought a salt shaker could be a torture device, did you?), to hit our thumb with a hammer, to hurt our knees and elbows and everything else that makes us scream in real life. These are the kinds of things to use in your action scenes to make them effective.

TOO MUCH VIOLENCE?

People often wonder how much violence is too much violence? And others don't wonder when they probably should... and then *you* wonder of they are psychos. The amount of violence in your screenplay and how graphic your descriptions are will rest on the tone of your screenplay. Comedians say it's not the joke, it's the delivery and Tone is the "delivery" of your script. The overall mood of the script. A comedy needs to be funny. But the tone of a script also influences what is acceptable in the story when it comes to violence.

Don Westlake wrote novels about professional thieves. The ones he wrote featuring Parker were violent crime novels (like “Point Blank”), the ones he wrote about Dortmunder were light comedies (like “The Hot Rock”). Both series have similar plots... in fact there's a strange cross-over novel (“Jimmy The Kid”) where the Dortmunder gang tries to replicate a Parker gang crime. The book alternates between chapters of Parker's violent version and Dortmunder's funny version of the exact same scene. We expect savage violence in the Parker novels, we don't expect to find scenes like that in the light-comedy Dortmunder stories. One series is dark and gritty and realistic, the other is fun and funny.

Both "The Wild Bunch" and "Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid" have the same plot, the same characters, the same end, many of the same scenes... but much different "tones". One is a very violent action story, the other is a buddy movie (light comedy). “The Wild Bunch” ends with the gang being shot to pieces in slow motion with blood spurting and guts spraying... “Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid” ends with the gang running out to face an army... and we freeze frame. Though they probably get shot to pieces as well, the tone of the film prohibits the story from showing it. “The Wild Bunch” has a gang member get his face shot off with a shotgun – and live! His face a bloody mess of meat. “Butch Cassidy” has a gang member get kicked in the groin and double over in pain... while the audience laughs. You could not transpose those scenes without alienating the audience.

Tone controls the level of reality in your screenplay, and that extends to the level of violence as well. So take tone into consideration when you are deciding if this scene is too violent or not violent enough... or just right.

Tone also give you a clue to what's expected on the page – how much detail you should go into when you are writing the violence. A gross and gory detailed description of a head exploding when a shotgun blast hit is will be out of place in “Butch Cassidy”, but might fit well in “The Wild Bunch”. Remember that usually less is more – and even if you are writing something with the savage tone of “The Wild Bunch”.

If *every* violent scene is super graphic and filled with lots of detailed descriptions of blood and guts and severed limbs and peeling flesh and... well, that may be a problem for two reasons: maybe you've got too much detail in your description and maybe some people will wonder if you like blood and guts so much that you might not be pleasant to work with. You know - maybe *you* are the psycho killer. You want evocative descriptions, but you don't want the reader to blow chunks all over your script. Plus, if every scene is really violent, it tends to lose its impact. The fingers getting blown off in “Taxi Driver” is a shocking violent moment because few scenes have been violent up to that point. If you want your violence to stand out, it can't be the norm.

WHEN YOU WANT TO HURT THE WORLD

Your villain has spent his entire life hurting people one by one, and now he's ready to move on to world destruction and/or domination. He wants to blow up Cleveland or wipe out his enemies' family lines. How do you make such massive destruction personal? There are two ways to make big action effective on screen.

ONE: Make sure your protagonist has a stake in the outcome, and make sure the audience's identification with your protagonist is *very* strong. A good example is Donald Stewart and W. Peter Iliff's "Patriot Games". We are introduced to family man Harrison Ford, his wife and daughter. We learn to care about them as a family. When Ford steps in to thwart a terrorist bombing, not only do the terrorist come after him, they come after his family as well. Ford must stop the Terrorists, because he and his family are directly threatened.

“Taken” also fits the *personal stakes* scenario – they are taking his child. But usually when you are dealing with some world destruction scenario it's not a kidnapping, but a loved one who is in harm's way. Though the Villain in “Deep Impact” is a comet hurtling towards Earth, the Tea Leone character's father will be killed – and that's her stake in the conflict. If you can find a way to put your hero's loved ones in harm's way as a result of the Villain's Plan for world destruction, it gives the Hero even more reason to stop him.

If your villain is killing a bunch of people you don't know, or don't care about, it is meaningless violence. Giving a spear-carrier a scene where he is kind to small animals before he is killed just doesn't cut it. Audiences see it coming from a mile away. Is there anyone in the world who saw "Top Gun" and didn't *know* Goose was about to die after they suddenly introduce his wife and family halfway through the film?

TWO: Have the Villain's Plan threaten the audience. We are sitting in the theater, minding our own business, when the Villain threatens to unleash a virus which will spread like wildfire. We see a map of the United States, and Donald Sutherland shows us how far the virus will spread in 24 hours... 48 hours... 96 hours (entire map is covered). Now the audience is affected by the villain's plan. If the hero doesn't stop him *we* will die.

This method works best in films where a nuclear incident will start a nuclear war which will probably destroy the world... or biological warfare will be unleashed. The audience itself is threatened by the villain's actions. We will become the victims. This is one of the factors in “X-Men: First Class” - with evil villain Sebastian Shaw (Kevin Bacon) engineering the Cuban Missile Crisis. If he succeeds, nuclear war will break out and we're all doomed.

In my script "Crash Dive!", a group of terrorists have hijacked a 688 Attack Class nuclear submarine, and are threatening to nuke New York. Because I realized that might sound like a good idea to some audience members, I added the threat of firing at some random "small town" targets as well. Like the very city where the movie theater you're watching "Crash Dive!" is located in. Now you, the viewer, have a stake in the outcome... of course, it ended up as an HBO Movie, so whatever city you're watching it on TV may be that mystery target.

The ultimate audience threat was in the William Castle film "The Tingler". At the end of the film, the Tingler escapes into a movie theater... the one *you're* sitting in! Vincent Price looks *right at you* and warns you "It's under your seat". Theaters were wired with buzzers under some of the seats to reproduce the feeling of the Tingler's attack. I'm sure a few people jumped. You want the villain's plan for world domination to either harm some character we have grown to love... or those of us in the audience watching the movie.

THIS WON'T HURT A BIT!

The one thing you don't want to do when creating violence in an action scene is to make it ineffective and painless. If the audience doesn't feel anything when a character is killed or injured, that's akin to pornography. It's violence desensitized. We've all seen some film where the hero gets shot or stabbed or worse and wraps a handkerchief around the wound, and is as good as new. This very violent act was without pain, without feeling.

In real life pain hurts. Our job as screenwriters is to make an emotional connection with our audience. To *involve* them. To allow them to feel our characters' pain, and our characters' joys. To do that, we must personalize our stories and our action scenes and make the audience an active participant in our script. If the tone is light, the violence may not hurt as much... but there will also be less violence. The hero probably won't get shot in the face. If you are doing a *parody* or some story that is completely unreal – like the crazy “Gonzo Action” of films like “Crank” and “Shoot 'Em Up” then unreal violence is okay. But if your story takes place in some level of reality – pain should hurt. A character should just be able to shrug off a bullet wound. I think having realistic injuries makes a movie more exciting – when Jason Bourne injures his leg in “Bourne Supremacy” and spends much of the rest of the film limping (which puts him danger of being caught in the foot chase scene), it's realistic *and* adds to the thrills.

When you get ready to write the next draft of your action script, just remember: This time, it's personal... and emotional.

EXPLODING THE CLICHES

One of the major problems with beginners scripts is that they are filled with scenes we've seen before, rather than scenes we'd like to see. Readers frequently note predictability, lack of plot twists, and overly simplistic elements as the reasons why scripts are rejected. I think much of this is due to screenwriters who reprocess old films into new scripts, thereby keeping cliches alive.

My Websters defines a cliche as an oft repeated and tedious expression or idea. Boringly obvious and stale.

So, now that we have met the enemy, how can we vanquish him?

I believe the best method is to use his own weapons against him. Once you have isolated the cliche, turn it upside down and backwards upon itself, transforming it into a twist or reversal. Quentin Tarantino is famous for this.

In "Reservoir Dogs" he gives us a group of macho, tough guy\ armed robbers. The tough guy cliche is: Once shot, they take it like a man. There are films where tough guys get shot, walk away, go home, and remove the bullet with a pocket knife and a pair of pliers, using whiskey (taken internally) as a pain killer. Mr. Tarantino turns this cliche upside down by having the gut shot Mr. Orange screaming in pain in the back of the getaway car. Flipping the cliche even more, Tarantino has Mr. Orange begging for his partner, Mr. White, to "just hold me". This is *not* cliché tough guy behavior. It is the exact *opposite* of how we expect tough guys to act.

How does Mr. White react? Does he "put the wounded man out of his misery" like Pike does in "The Wild Bunch" by killing him like a lame horse?

Nope. Mr. White holds his hand.

When was the last time you saw a film were tough guys held hands?

Tarantino, a movie junkie who knows every scene from every film ever made, is an expert at turning the oft repeated scenes on their heads to create something fresh and insightful. In every movie from “Dogs” to “Inglorious Basterds” (and probably “Django Unchained”) he takes the expected and flips it. He does this by setting up the cliche, and just when the audience says to themselves: "I know what's coming next", he gives them the exact opposite. Turning the cliche's weapons against itself.

The best way to deal with cliches is to: 1) Know Them, 2) Use Them, 3) Twist Them.

Cliches are born every day, and part of our responsibility as screenwriters is to know what the new cliches are. This means you must be constantly studying films and reading new scripts. If five screenwriters avoid the same cliche by the same method, it becomes a *new* cliché! One of the best ways to avoid cliches is to *personalize* - instead of going for the obvious scene or the obvious storyline, look at *your* life and *your* interests and come up with the thing that only you could come up with. Something that follows your “voice” as a writer. Also, when dealing with characters look at the personal side of the character in the situation – what would they do or say that no other character in your script (or in film history) would say or do? Cliche's are lazy writing – going for the obvious instead of coming up with something that we *haven't* seen before.

Cliched dialogue can either be a line we've hear too often, a line too "on the nose" for a scene, or a line which tell us what we see. No matter what, it is stale. I have a Blue Book on dialogue that contains all kinds of techniques for writing great dialogue – it's 200 pages, so I can't give you all of that information here... but I *can* share a few things that probably aren't in the Dialogue Blue Book.

Here are three good methods to deal with dialogue cliches:

1) SAY THE OPPOSITE. Here is the seduction scene from Ernest Lehman's "North By Northwest". Roger Thornhill, wanted for murder, is hiding in Eve Kendall's sleeping car.

THORNHILL
I can't let you get involved. Too dangerous.

EVE
I'm a big girl.

THORNHILL
In all the right places, too.

EVE
I mean, we've hardly met.

THORNHILL
That's right.

EVE
How do I know you aren't a murderer?

THORNHILL
You don't.

EVE
Maybe you're planning to murder me, right here,
tonight.

THORNHILL
Shall I?

EVE
Yes... Please do...

This time, Eve's hands guide him, and it is a long kiss,
indeed.

This dialogue takes places during a passionate embrace, and the exchange is broken by a number of serious kisses. It certainly doesn't *sound* like the typical seduction patter, does it? Eve gives very good reasons *not* to sleep with Thornhill. Not to even allow him in her room. And Thornhill does *nothing* to relieve any actual fears she may have that he really is a killer. Instead of talking about sex, they talk about violence. "Maybe you're planning to murder me"? The opposite of what they are feeling.

2) FIND THE DETAILS. Instead of having the character say what they feel, let them find a detail which illustrates their feelings. Have them talk about the detail, rather than the feelings. In "Terms Of Endearment" Debra Winger tells Shirley MacLane that she will miss her by saying "That is the first time I stopped hugging first." When Bo Hopkins is asked to surrender by the Pinkerton Detectives in "The Wild Bunch", he doesn't just say "no", he says: "You can kiss my sister's black cat's ass." Means the same thing, but is completely character specific. Surely the most memorable line in film history, and definitely too descriptive to be a cliche. The key is to *personalize* your dialogue with details from the character's life, which will not only get rid of the cliches, but offer insight and understanding of your character. Though, I think we learned more than we wanted to about Bo Hopkins' character.

3) EXPLODE THE CLICHE. This method requires that you find a cliche line and spin it to create witty variation in the tradition of Oscar Wilde and Dorothy Parker ("It was a divorce made in heaven", "If you laid all

the girls from Vassar end to end, you won't have been the first"). "It's all over but the shouting" becomes "It's all over but the SHOOTING". "She's the ROAD apple of my eye." "I'm just going to play it by FEAR." "He's a man of a thousand faces, but a master of none." "She was at that SPENDER age." "They gave him the benefit of his CLOUT." "She never lets any grass grow under her BACK." Your character might complain of always being "a NEIGHBOR of love." Or know a liposuction expert who "Let the fat out of the hag." Yes, I admit these are all groaners, but these lines are no longer cliches.

There are 200 pages of techniques in the Dialogue Blue Book that offer other solutions and some great tips on writing dialogue – if you need help with that aspect, check it out. No matter what method we may use, part of our duty as screenwriters is to keep our screenplays exciting and unusual, and the easiest way to do that is by avoiding cliches like the plague.

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

The 1990s pitch by a well known writer-director went something like this: "World Heavyweight Champ Rocky Balboa is challenged by a boxer from Iraq, so he flies to the Middle East to take on Saddam's best fighter in an internationally televised match. The moment Rocky sees his opponent, he knows he's in trouble: This guy is HUGE. Big as a house. Trained from birth as a boxer. Rocky has little chance of winning.

"But he fights for America... and wins!

"Saddam gets mad, and has Rocky arrested and thrown into prison. The President Of The United States realizes the only way to be re-elected is to have Rocky Balboa rescued.... So he calls in the toughest commando ever to serve: John Rambo.

"Rambo fights his way into Iraq, and breaks Rocky out of prison... Where the two men realize that they are identical twins separated at birth! After bonding, the two long lost brothers fight together to escape Iraq and destroy Saddam's regime!"

Rocky and Rambo: Identical twins! What a small world!

Motion pictures require us to suspend our disbelief. We know that Sylvester Stallone is not really Rocky Balboa, but an actor who used to get $20 million per picture and has a thing for tall, beautiful, fashion models. If Stallone takes a punch, we know he doesn't really get hurt. It's all make believe, and audiences are willing to buy a ticket and sit in the dark and pretend.

But coincidence can lead to the death of suspension of disbelief. Wrenching the audience out of the "movie reality" and making them yell "Fake!" at the screen, or nudge their friends and say "Yeah, right" with epic sarcasm.

Though film is not a realistic medium, relying more on the rhythms and wild logic of dreams, the viewing audience is (hopefully) wide awake. So your script should give the appearance of realism. We perceive reality to be mostly free of crazy coincidence. In fact, many coincidences which occur in real life would be considered unbelievable if transferred to the screen. Truth is often stranger than fiction, as they say. We want our scripts to *appear* realistic – and that means we will have to avoid crazy coincidences and set things up ahead of time.

WANT TO GET LUCKY?

The reason audiences reject coincidence is because they reek of luck. In "Fled" the hand-cuffed heroes on the run grab a hostage... who has handcuff keys in her purse! What are the odds? The pretty hostage decides to help them escape the police, and even falls in love with one of the prisoners! Amazing luck! Later in the film, the two heroes are being chased... and find a pair of motorcycles with the keys in the ignition! These two should have skipped the action plot and flown to Vegas!

Coincidence is like cliché – usually a sign of lazy writing. Instead of setting up a way out of the problem ahead of time, or figuring out some reasonable way a couple of handcuffed guys could escape that makes sense, we get an amazing coincidence. The worst thing about coincidences like this in an action film is that they remove *conflict* - and *story is conflict* even if it's a rom-com... when you remove the conflict from an action movie we're back to those cops at the station sitting around eating donuts and waiting for the phone to ring. Wouldn't it be more exciting if the motorcycle didn't have the keys in the ignition? If the woman they kidnap didn't have *handcuff keys* in her purse?

CAUSALITY IS REALITY

Websters defines coincidence as "A seemingly planned sequence of accidentally occurring events".

In real life, things don't happen for any particular reason. Accidents happen. Film reality should mimic the accidental feel of real life. The causality. When the audience leaves the theater, they don't feel hand of God moving them like chess pieces... they have free will. They create their own destiny. They want the characters on screen to have the same freedom. Take choice away from the characters with "planned accidents" and you have destroyed reality. You have forced situations to occur instead of allowing them to proceed naturally. You are contriving the story instead of just letting it happen.

No matter how much planning and outlining has gone into your script, the audience should feel as if the events are occurring right before their eyes. In the theatre world they call this "The illusion of the first time". Even though the actors may have performed the play 300 times previously, when the Female Lead admits "I don't love you, I love your brother", the Male Lead should be shocked and heartbroken... as if this is the first time he's heard this, not the three hundred and first. The audience wants to believe every twist and reversal is happening right before their eyes... That they are *witness* to these events.

As writers we may be secretly playing our characters like puppets, but we don t want the audience to ever see the strings. We don t want our scripts to seem forced, manipulative, contrived. In our scripts one event should logically lead to the next, carrying the character along with it. Natural and not contrived. That “Tennis Plotting” thing in micro as well as macro. Everything happens for a reason that the audience will believe.

HOW MANY COINCIDENCES ARE TOO MANY?

Aren't you supposed to be allowed three coincidences in every script? I've heard three as the magic number from a bunch of new screenwriter and can only assume that some college professors decided to pick a random number for amount of permissible coincidences. Why they all chose three is a coincidence. If they were writing a script, that's the *only* one they could get away with.

One coincidence. That's the limit in every genre but comedy. Here's the bad news: it's used up by a coincidence we usually aren't even aware of.

Coincidence is inherent in story. Real life is vague, problems aren't solved, there is no 'plot'. By organizing incidents into a beginning, middle, and end with a protagonist and antagonist; you're already using up your allotment of coincidence. That inciting incident that launches your plot is the only coincidence an audience will let you get away with. Everything else that happens in your script should be grounded in "reality" and seem coincidence-free.

This includes both "good" and "bad" coincidences. Many writers eliminate "good" coincidences, then pile on the bad luck; creating dozens of coincidences which negatively impact the protagonist. Good idea, right?

But bad coincidences create comedy - when bad things keep happening without reason, you end up with a Buster Keaton film. In Keaton's “The General” he's pursuing a stolen train in another train, and has no end of bad luck. When he sets a cannon on the his train to fire on the stolen train (this is a Civil War movie) he hits a bump and the cannon swings down to aim at *his* train. No matter what Keaton does, it always seems to backfire! We laugh at the character's bad luck - it's so bad it's unrealistic. Bad luck is just as unrealistic as good luck - it's all luck (and not realistic). Whether your coincidences are positive or negative doesn't matter because they're still coincidences! So, unless you're writing a comedy like Joseph Minion's "After Hours", remember that too many bad coincidences is no different that too many good ones.

WHY? WHY? WHY?

The best way to remove coincidence is through motivation. There are really two types of coincidences: Forced and Casual.

Forced coincidence is when we manipulate the story, playing God, to give a character amazing good luck (or amazing bad luck).

Casual coincidence is when events occur in a logical, motivated way. Two characters who live in the same apartment building take the elevator at the same time. A minute either way and they would each have been on the elevator alone, so it's technically a coincidence. But the audience completely accepts it because it's how real life works. Even though it is a coincidence it has been set up – these two people live in the same building and regularly use the elevator. Odds are they will ride it at the same time *sometime*, right?

Had one character lived in New York and the other in Chicago, and they shared an elevator in California, that might be a forced coincidence... Unless it's a hotel elevator and they are attending the same business convention... but that is set up by the business convention.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Newton's 3rd Law not only applies to plotting our action scripts, it applies to every scene and event in the story: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. When a ball hits the ground it bounces into the air, where gravity pulls it back to the ground so that it can bounce again. Our job is to trace the bouncing back to the hand that bounced it in the first place. The primary motivation. The ultimate *why* which has caused all of these incidents to occur. By knowing what set the ball into motion, you can remove all of the forced coincidence and replace it with motivation.

The best way to do this is to start your script with the primary motivation and build your story from the inside out. Coincidence often occurs when you re writing from the outside in. You come up with a great idea for an action scene on the Eiffel Tower, then find some excuse for your hero and villain to go to France. Your excuse never seems real.

But there are times when we need to reverse engineer a scene, to start with the effect and trace back to the cause. Make sure every event is grounded in motivation.

Don't stop at the first bounce, keep going back until you find the primary motivator of your script. This event in this scene happened due to a domino run of events which usually begins with your script's inciting incident. The events are not coincidence, but an integral part of your overall story, often linked by theme. Your script should be completely organic. Every action fully motivated, every effect traceable back to its cause. Most coincidence is sheer laziness on the part of the writer. Instead of tracing cause and effect back to find the motives by which the event could really happen, they opt for an easy way out. There *are* no easy ways out.

SET UPS & PAY OFFS

One method to remove crazy coincidences is to set them up ahead of time so that they are not coincidences. To *establish* that the character has a gun in their closet in a much earlier scene, so that when the bad guys attack his house and he pulls out the gun, we already knew it was there. Instead of wondering what sort of wizardry created a gun just when he needed it, we think: “Right! That gun!” It's really the same thing as a plot twist – the gun was there all along, but after establish it you might use a little diversion to make us forget about it. Or have the hero put the gun away and say that he will never use it again, so we it's no longer part of the story. But any time you have some character pull a rabbit out of a hat to save themselves, you can remove the coincidence just by backtracking and putting the rabbit in the hat earlier. It still has to make sense – if your protagonist's grandmother pulls out a LARS-2 rocket, no amount of setting up will make me believe she just happened to have one in the knitting room.

They key to establishing any skill or information or motorcycle-with-the-keys-in-it is to *set it up* early and let the audience forget about it, plus make sure it isn’t an obvious set up. You don’t want the audience to jump ahead of the story. The way to make a set up invisible is to establish the information for another reason that is important to the story. There are *two* reasons for this information - now and later. The audience thinks the scene is all about the now, but it’s really about the later.

A great example of this can be found in James Cameron’s “Aliens”. Ripley completely breaks down in front of the Space Marines when she describes the death of her crew. She is afraid that she has lost their respect, that they see her as a wimp. So, to show that she’s one tough broad, she asks if she can help load the drop ship. She’s licensed to use one of the big loaders. A skeptical Sgt. Apone tells her to go ahead. He’s sure she’s going to screw up, but Ripley is an *expert* at using the loader. She grabs some cargo and asks where he wants it, impressing both Apone and the other Space Marines. They accept her after that. You may think that is what the scene is about; if it were, that would be fine. It’s a great scene on its own. But it’s really the set up for the final battle with the Alien Queen, establishing the loader and her ability to use it.

The Coen Brothers' “Blood Simple” sets up elements then pays them off in unexpected ways. Our hero Ray is having an affair with his boss's wife... finds the boss dead in his bar and is sure that the wife killed him. So he covers up the crime. He puts the murder gun in the boss' pocket and dumps the body in the back seat of his car. He drives for hours until he finds a field in the middle of nowhere and digs a grave. When he goes back to the car to get the body, it's gone! Seems the boss wasn't quite dead yet, and is now crawling away! Ray grabs him, drags him to the grave and tosses him in. Then reaches for the shovel. Remember that gun Ray put in the boss' pocket? Pay off! The boss aims the gun at Ray's face and pulls the trigger!

Another great use of pay offs comes when the not-quite-dead boss confronts his wife. He says, "You left your weapon behind" and throws something to her. The gun that was used to shoot him? No... her compact! Throughout the film we have seen her use the compact to touch up her make up. The line of dialogue is *exactly* the same thing Ray told her after cleaning up the murder scene, but he was referring to her gun. By using the line in reference to her compact, the wife's *beauty* becomes her "weapon"... she lures men to their doom!

Set Ups And Pay Offs are the reason why we cheer when Han Solo returns for the final battle in “Star Wars”, the reason why we cry when E.T. touches Elliott's heart and says "I'll be right here", the reason why we laugh when we see the dog in the full-body cast in “There's Something About Mary”, and the reason why *we* might cry when Ah-nuld in “Terminator 2” says that he now knows why human's cry. These moments were carefully "set up" earlier in the film - planted like seeds so that they could bloom later in the film.

IS THERE A LION TAMER IN THE HOUSE?

I read an unsold script about a tough cop on the trail of a mad bomber. Early in the script we find out the cop's hobby is mountain climbing. The writer made a big deal out of it, devoting an entire scene to the cop explaining pitons, crampons, and climbing techniques. The cop chases the mad bomber through New York, where he's blowing up really tall buildings. Then, three quarters of the way through the script, the mad bomber traps the cop on the roof of a tall building with a ticking bomb! Of course, the cop uses his mountain climbing knowledge to climb down the side of the building and escape the blast.

Lucky coincidence: the cop's hobby being mountain climbing. If he'd taken up golf, he'd never have survived.

No matter how well you "set up" a coincidence, it's STILL a coincidence. You can spend twenty pages showing how much this cop loves mountain climbing, but the coincidence remains. This was lazy writing. The writer painted himself into a corner, came up with the mountain climbing escape, then went back and planted it in an earlier scene... Working from the outside in, instead of the inside out. Creating coincidences instead of causality.

MORE BROTHERS

I've written three films that ended up starring Don "The Dragon" Wilson – but one I didn't write was a film called "Bloodfist" about a kick boxer whose brother was killed in an illegal death match held in the Philippines. Don joins the contest to find his brother's killer and extract his revenge. Along the way he meets a beautiful girl... Her brother was *also* killed in the death match, and she's *also* looking for revenge. They team up, and find the killer... His motivation? His brother was killed in the death match!

Every single character had a dead brother! Small world!

This is the sort of silly plotting that happens when the motives are coincidences. This frequently happens in development, with Directors, Producers, and Devos who work from the outside in, assigning motivations rather than searching for them. Taking the lazy way out instead of doing the real work of writing - tracing back the effect to cause and primary motives. Instead of going with causality or motivations, they like to "make it personal" by ramming in an unbelievable coincidence. The audience always rejects these silly things.

In my original script to "Treacherous", the hero owns a resort and becomes involved with a sexy female guest... which gets him into trouble. The director decided to make the sexy guest the hero's ex-girl friend which makes the action plot complete coincidence. It changed a believable situation where a total stranger stayed at a resort owned by the hero into the preposterous coincidence of having the guest who sets the plot into motion just happen to have known the hero in his previous occupation (and in a different country). Small World! I'm sure the director thought he was adding motivation, but he was actually using coincidence as motive. Removing the causality and making the film laughable.

SCRIPT SPACKLE

Development folks often want motivations and explanations for random non-coincidental events. This isn't necessary. We have no idea why most things happen in the world. Everything doesn't need to be explained (by making it personal), as long as it makes sense or *can* make sense.

A "plot hole" is when a series of events doesn't make sense. When one event *can not* lead to the next.

Unfortunately, the usual solution is to patch it with a liberal coat of "script spackle": A scene which plugs the hole using coincidence or fancy footwork on the part of the writer. Instead of solving the story problem, they've covered the hole and hope nobody notices. The writer tries to solve a script problem by grafting something on, rather than going back to the central concept of the script and solving the actual problem. "Script spackle" covers the crack, but hasn't solved the foundation problems. That crack is still there, under the spackle. I've seen screenplays with more script spackle than script! This is solving a problem from the outside in, instead of from the inside out.

The way to solve a plot hole problem is *not* to go back and plug it with script spackle, but to find the reason the plot hole exists in the first place and solve that problem. Find the *root* of the problem and solve it, don't try to cover up the problem with script spackle. The problems always show through... and weaken your script.

I have seen many original scripts with plenty of script spackle covering the plot holes... and script spackle seems to be a common suggestion in development meetings. If you find a plot hole in your screenplay, going back and adding a line or scene to cover the hole is *not* the solution. Instead you really need to solve the problem at its root, and that may require a major rewrite. Yes, that is a lot of work. Yes, that requires some analytical skills on your part. Yes, screenwriting is often about solving problems. Just hiding the problems never works! All of those problems you thought you covered up, show on screen!

Beware of "false plot holes"! I've have Devos point out supposed "plot holes" which were actually non-coincidental causality. Things which DID make sense on examination, they just didn't examine them long enough. If the audience knows the situation CAN happen (is realistic) that's all that really matters. To "fix" a false plot hole by adding script spackle *damages* the script rather than improves it.

NOTHING PERSONAL

Devos like to make all motivations personal, but everyone can't have a dead brother. It's a mistake to change a believable causality for overly motivated characterization. Some characters are okay just doing their jobs.

The FBI's top serial killer expert is called in to stop a crazed killer hacking up college students. Hero shows up at the crime scene, only to discover the latest victim is his own daughter! You might think giving him two motivations is better than one, but it actually creates a forced coincidence. Of all the college students in the world, how could the killer possibly get the only one related to the FBI's top serial killer expert? What are the odds? This is the sort of thing which provokes laughter in the audience... It's ironic humor, after all.

A motivation can be personal or a franchise, but it can't be both without becoming coincidence. Having two unrelated reasons to be involved in the story is unbelievable. Being the FBI's top serial killer expert is enough.

In Thomas Rickman's "The Laughing Policeman" Walter Matthau plays a detective who becomes personally involved in his work. The unsolved murder of a little boy still haunts him years later. Being a detective gives him more than enough motivation to solve the case. He cares about his job, we care about him, we care about his job. That's why it doesn't need to be personal.

The reverse is also true. If the lead's connection to the story is personal, he shouldn't also be an expert in the very subject the story revolves around.

In "Die Hard" John McClain isn't an anti-terrorist expert in a building taken over by terrorists, he's a simple New York beat cop used to checking bad IDs and busting petty crooks. He only has a personal motivation, not a franchise; the only coincidence is the inciting incident.

"Lethal Weapon 2" has a fairly believable story about our buddy cops trying to bust a South African crime syndicate, but loses all credibility at the end when we find out the scumbags they're chasing are... coincidentally... the same ones who killed Mel Gibson's wife! (long before the first film begins). Small world!

The key to removing coincidence is motivation and setting things up and working from the inside out. Finding the cause which creates the effect. Creating dreams which the audience can view while wide awake.

SLIGHTLY OUT OF FOCUS

You may think that the focus of a film is the Director Of Photography's responsibility, something which happens on the film set, and far away from your desk... But focus begins with the screenplay.

Here's an example: Two characters are in the same shot, but at different focal lengths. The Director Of Photography must choose which character will be in focus. His decision will be based on what's in the script. Your script.

Though the creative process may be wild, byzantine and scatter shot, the results of that creation should be tightly focused, somewhat linear, and easy to understand. Screenplays are simple stories about complex people.

Problems frequently arise when the wild imagination must be tamed to fit the rigid structure of the screenplay. It's like trying to return the spring snakes to the tin after they have erupted on the unsuspecting victim: You know they'll fit back in the can, but squeezing them in there seems impossible.

THE FIRST STEP: ONE STORY

In focusing your script is to know what your screenplay is about. This seems simple enough, but many times when I ask a writer to tell me about their script, they answer with a disjointed, rambling monologue which leaves me more confused than enlightened. Each piece is well described, but I'm not sure how they all fit together into a single story.

Try this: Tell a friend what your script is about using no more than three brief sentences. (Remember, TV Guide will only use one brief sentence when your film hits cable.) Can you relate the entire idea of the script to them? Will they understand who the lead character is, and what their goals and conflicts will be?

If you have trouble telling a friend what your story is about, imagine how much trouble a development exec who has given your script a quick read over the weekend will have telling your story to the producer with the keys to the checkbook.

I like to write up my logline *before* I write my script and keep it on hand when writing the screenplay as a reminder of what the script is about. I used to write it on a card and tape it to the monitor, but now I'm writing on a laptop in a coffee shop – and there's no real way to tape anything. You may be writing on an iPad. But having a condensed version of what your action screenplay is all about will help you focus your script while you write it.

THE SECOND STEP: ONE HERO

Who is your lead character? Once the producer buys your script, he's going to spend $14-20 million for the star of the film; then hire some character actors or secondary names at $2 million to $500,000 for the rest of the roles. Is it obvious when reading your script who gets the $20 million? What role will Will Smith play? Or Angelina Jolie?

It's usually only *one* character, and the script will be about *that* character being forced to confront and solve an *emotional conflict* (often a character arc) in order to solve an *external conflict* (plot). This is the character who will be in focus when the Director Of Photography is faced with a focal length decision. As Canadian screenwriter Matthew Cope says: "The camera follows the money."

That lead character needs to be in most of the movie (it's called "Face Time" in the biz). The producer wants to get her $20 million worth, and it costs the same if Will Smith is in ten scenes or every scene. Hmm, so how many scenes do you think Will will be in? If your script is called “Dirty Harry” we expect Dirty Harry to be in the majority of the film, and the film to be *about* Dirty Harry. Same if your film is “Transporter 4” - the ticket buyers will expect Jason Statham to be in most of the scenes. If he's only in a handful of scenes and the rest of the film is split up between a half dozen other characters, the audience isn't going to like it... and the producer is going to wonder why he's paying Jason to be in the whole film. Your script is going to be *about* the lead character's problems, so it only makes sense that he or she's in as much of the film as possible. The producer will insist on it.

In William Goldman's "Adventures In The Screen Trade", he has an entire chapter on "Protecting The Star". This is some of the most important information you'll find in any screenwriting book, and required reading. Mr. Goldman says, "There is no single more important commercial element in screenplay writing than the star part". The star part, the lead character, is the focus of the film. Any other character is expendable.

You've got to know who is getting the $20 million, and make sure they are in the majority of the film.

THE THIRD STEP: ONE GOAL

Are the objectives of your lead character easy to understand? Your lead character is setting out to *do something*. Attain a specific goal. In William Goldman's "Ghost And The Darkness" Val Kilmer's character is trying to build a bridge across a river in Africa. The audience can easily understand building the bridge.

Are the objectives physical? Concrete? A vague goal like World Peace won't work. Film is a visual medium, and the goal needs to be something we can see. In "Ghost And The Darkness", it's that bridge. We can see the river, and the end of the railroad tracks on either side. By the end of the film, we can see the result of Kilmer's character's objectives: The bridge spanning the river, connecting the two sets of tracks.

In "The Fugitive", Dr. Richard Kimble is searching for the One Armed Man who killed his wife. A specific person. We can *see* that he has only one arm, and *see* that he is the same man Kimble fought with at the murder scene. It would not be enough to have Kimble's goal just be to evade the police. That's not concrete enough. Not visual. How can we tell he's evaded the police? The lead character's goal has to be something the Director Of Photography can focus his camera on. Something we can see. One single thing.

Remember that *before* Kimble's wife was murdered he also had a goal. He wasn't just created for this story – he was a living breathing character before the story began. I think one of those obvious things about big action scripts that many people miss is that the antagonist or force of antagonism usually brings the conflict to the story - and that overshadows whatever goal the protagonist had going before he is running for his life or battling Bane or that asteroid is hurtling towards Earth. And though the protagonist's goal may end up overshadowed by fighting to survive the conflict, they still started out with some goal and usually bump into it as part of that man-on-the-run story. The protagonist is not just some lump sitting around waiting for some one armed man to kill his wife. With Kimble, he was investigating a new drug's reports that looked a little phoney to him. That actually triggers the murder of his wife, and around halfway through the film he realizes that just finding the one armed man isn't enough – to find the people behind him he must figure out why his wife was killed (or why they tried to kill *him* and got his wife instead). This brings him back to his initial goal – before his wife was killed. Which means his “pre-story goal” was tied directly to his “story goal”.

In “Die Hard” John McClane's “pre-story goal” is to reunite with his estranged wife and children for Christmas (and drag them back to New York City kicking and screaming if he must), but this is interrupted by the “story goal” with Hans and the terrorists taking over Nakatomi Tower. But the reason why he has to tangle with the terrorists? The have his wife! (Kidnapped love interest!) So his “pre-story goal” is directly tied to his “story goal”. There is still really one goal – no focus issues. If John McClain's “pre-story goal” was to buy a TurboMan action figure for his son and he gets caught dealing with Hans and the terrorists, the story would have lost focus and had a very unsatisfying ending when McClain rescues his wife... but fails to get the TurboMan for his son.

THE FOURTH STEP: ONE DIRECTION

The path to your lead character's objectives should be linear. A single straight line leading from where the character is now, to where the character wishes to be. *Not* a complicated series of events like the old "Mouse Trap" board game.

I call this the A-B-C of the script. Does each scene lead logically to the next scene along the path to the lead character's objectives? The lead character has to find the quickest and most direct route to her goals. It shouldn't involve a bunch of little side trips, or too many back roads. They aren't sight seeing – they are trying to get someplace!

In "The Fugitive" script, Kimble becomes involved with a pretty doctor (played by Julianne Moore in the film). This entire subplot was filmed, but unused because it distracted from the linear movement of the film. Kimble gets no closer to his goals through this relationship, and it actually distracts him from his objectives. "The Fugitive" remains tightly focused on the capture of the One Armed Man, and is successful because side trips like the romantic subplot were eliminated.

We *expect* conflicts along the way to take the lead character off course, but we also expect Dr. Richard Kimble to capture a One Armed Man at the end of "The Fugitive", not become involved with the problems of a Red Headed Woman, no matter how attractive she may be. The lead character's objectives must remain a constant no matter how many variables the plot (and antagonist) throw in her way.

There is a difference between a script being “too linear” (development speak) and a script being an out of focus mess. A script that is “too linear” is too obvious – we know exactly what will happen next. There are no twists and turns and unexpected roadblocks built into the story. The protagonist gets from point A to point B on the freeway at the speed limit without any problem. We want them to have lots of problems and have to get off the freeway and find some alternate route and maybe have to go off road for a while and ford a river – but we *still* want them to be always heading towards their destination. We don't want them to change their minds halfway through the script and decide their wife is dead, maybe they *should* hook up with Julianne Moore and move to some country without extradition?

THE FIFTH STEP: ONE PLAN

The way to keep your lead character focused is to know her *plan of action*. No matter how many times the antagonist tries to knock your hero off her path, she must always maintain that plan of action. Every time she's slammed off course, she has to pick herself up, dust herself off, and start down that road again. Even if she gets hit so hard she's dizzy, she still needs to know exactly where she's going, and what she is going to do next.

The only exception is if indecision is part of her character arc, and I strongly caution against that. People don't buy a ticket to see wishy-washy heroes. They want to see strong, take-charge type people. We see enough indecisive people in everyday life, why would we want to pay to see more of them?

STEP NUMBER SIX: NEW PLAN

When the hero's plan of action just doesn't work, she should come up with a new plan, based on the same objectives, almost instantly. There are times when your hero is going to pick the route to her objectives, only to find the road closed for repairs. What seemed like the quickest and most direct way to obtain her goals was a major mistake, and may even cause pain and loss for your hero.

When this happens, remember that the audience's "fidget clock" is ticking. If your hero can't get over her loss and get back on track with a new plan to obtain her goals, your story will lose precious momentum, and some audience members may take this as an invitation to visit the candy counter or rest room. We don't want that. One of our goals is to keep the audience in their seats, even if their bladders are about to burst.

Like I said before, an audience in the bathroom is *not* watching your film.

THE SEVENTH STEP: VILLAIN'S PLAN

Know who your antagonist is, and what his objectives and plan of action are. Everything I've said about your lead character's objectives goes double for the antagonist. Though your hero may have to abandon her plan of action, the villain's plan of action will always remain an unchanging constant. An out of control bus knocking over anything in its path.

In Graham Yost's "Speed" Dennis Hopper is going to blow things up until he gets his money. He starts with an elevator. When that doesn't work, he tries a city bus or two. When they set a trap for him, he goes so far as to strap explosives to *himself* in order to get the money he feels he deserves. The quest for the money by using explosives is a constant for the villain. He never changes that plan, even though Keanu Reeves' smart young bomb squad guy does everything possible to stop him. The villain is focused to the point of tunnel vision, and the bomb squad cop must force Hopper (and a subway car) out of that tunnel in order to stop him.

In the end, the hero will become more focused on her goal than the villain, and that's how she survives and conquers.

BABY STEPS

The Director Of Photography can light and focus for many different depths of field; from deep focus, to a macro where only a pin head will be in focus. There are times when we do this in our scripts as well.

Every once in a while, I get "caught in a whirlwind". A dozen things happen to me at the same time, and I lose track of my goals. The day comes to an end, and I haven't written any pages on my script. I feel like that guy who used to spin plates on the tips of pool cues on the Ed Sullivan show, running from one small emergency to the next but never getting anything done.

This happens frequently to protagonists in action scripts and farce comedies. They can get caught in the whirlwind of a scene; lots of action, but they end up exactly where they started out. You can remedy this with a method I call Baby Steps.

The key is to give your protagonist small goals within the scene which combine into the larger goal of solving the current problems and moving your lead into the next scene. It's a bunch of baby steps which get the character across the room.

In a wild action sequence, this might be: "If I can only get that fallen gun... I can shoot the guy on the platform... run past the three guards in the confusion... shoot them if I have to... and get out that door." This is a plan of action which will let your hero escape (whether it works or not is another thing entirely). But the audience (and reader) must be able to see the plan of action step-by-step and understand it. Even if they can't see the entire plan, there must be small understandable goals which build to a solution. This gives your hero purpose within the scene.

If *you* as the writer get confused in a scene like this, write a list of objectives and/or draw a map or move around Hot Wheels cars on a table. Break the confusing scene into bite sized pieces that *you* can understand and then write it so that the *reader* can understand. Find the way that works for you – I know writers who have those green plastic army men and Hot Wheels cars in a desk drawer. I usually just draw maps and diagrams – sometimes figuring out the order the hero must punch people in order to escape. I have also acted out the escape in a Starbucks, but management asked me to leave.

And whatever their plan is, it *must* change the outcome of the scene. Story is change and if the protagonist does things and ends up back at square one you have just written a scene that goes nowhere... and going nowhere is frustrating for an audience. Instead running in place, let them run to the *wrong* place!

Your protagonist must always be actively *doing something* to get out of whatever scrape you've put her in... and that plan must work to some degree.

FOCUS ON THEME

Theme is hypotheses. A question. Like a theory. Not necessarily a moral to the story, and though I've said before it's often the point of the story - it doesn't have to be. I've also called theme an exploration - and I think that's closer to the real definition. You're poking around in some subject looking for answers or information. When you ask the question, you may come up with an answer... or you may not. But when you are searching for the answers you will certainly discover more than you knew before. Our job as screenwriters is to discover the story's theme, then *explore it* rather than *ignore it*. Make sure we really look into the theme and make sure the dialogue, characters, and even the fight scenes are there to explore that theme... and that requires focus.

“X-Men: The Last Stand” seemed to ask the question: If we can "cure" those who are different than us, should we? Problem is, once it asks the question it loses focus and proceeds to mostly ignore it in favor of big silly action set pieces that have nothing to do with the theme and usually end up with a kick in the nuts. No discussion among the X Team about the concept of a "cure", even though Jean may really need one. They never talk about it! Rogue has a legit reason for wanting the cure, and we get the best scene in the movie from a discussion between her and Wolverine (echoing their discussion onboard the train in the first film). But what does Bobby - Rogue's boyfriend - think about her being de-mutanized? Do you lose other traits when they de-mutanize you?

Everyone else seems to agree that the cure is a bad idea - no more discussion... and no more exploration of the subject. It's almost as if the cure is just an excuse for the story, rather than the actual story. There's this cure, and we have to do something about it. Why? Don't ask. And the story loses focus and becomes about nothing in particular.

The first two films showed us difference between Xavier's group and Magneto's gang as part of exploring theme, but in “The Last Stand” they don't seem all that different. They both agree that the cure is bad. No discussion, no exploration - just a bad idea. I wonder *why* it's bad? It takes away your super powers - but these characters seem *cursed* by their super powers. Cyclops has to wear his sunglasses at night, and can never look the woman he loves in the eyes (without destroying her with his laser beams). Storm can change the weather, but aside from guaranteeing a future of pleasant picnics, her power seems to have no other use except fighting those bad mutants. Starting fires and freezing stuff - don't we have appliances that cover that? What good are all of these super powers (except fighting crime... crime caused by other mutants)? Why is it good to be a mutant?

Because of this cure, Magneto wants to fight the humans and Xavier wants to... I guess just do nothing... they both seem to agree on the main points. I wonder what might have happened if the President had made the cure mandatory - would Xavier have fought it? If so, how is he different than Magneto? Why are the good mutants good and the bad mutants bad? Usually this is covered in theme - theme can often be found in the philosophical differences between hero and villain.

That created a complete cop out. By saying "the cure is bad" we get no chance at all to explore the hypothesis. With everyone on the same side, we not only remove the conflict, we have no way to explore the theme. Why not have Xavier be "pro cure" and have him gradually learn why the cure isn't the solution as the story goes on - this could be his character arc in the film. Xavier would likely be "pro cure" anyway - isn't the purpose of his school for mutants to teach them how to *control* their mutant behaviors so that they can blend in to society? They may still look different than everyone else, but at least they aren't burning everything with their laser vision! Xavier is all about mutants being more like everyone else - and that's exactly what the cure is! By giving a real voice to the cure, we could have some real discussions. Really dig in and look for answers. Explore the theme and keep your story focused on that exploration.

THE TENTH STEP: SCENE FOCUS

Make sure each individual scene is focused on the objectives of the script. The small objectives have to lead to the big objectives. Think of your script as a house of cards. Each scene is a card. If you can remove any scene, and the house remains standing, that scene shouldn't have been in your script.

Not only should each scene move the story forward, each scene should also be a microcosm of the story – which takes us back to theme. Every scene should contain the DNA necessary to clone the entire script. You should be able to read any scene from your script and have some idea of what the script is about. This usually comes down to the central conflict or theme - one of those two elements should be present in every single scene of your screenplay. The Central Conflict is where your *emotional conflict* and your *physical conflict* (the plot) intersect. You can usually find the theme through the central conflict, or find the central conflict through the theme. In “Avatar” the theme is that everything in the world is connected, and by destroying one part of the world, the other parts will also be destroyed.

The reason why Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) is part of this story is that he shares his dead scientist brother’s DNA - they are connected. He is a wounded soldier going to work for scientists, which makes him a fish out of water. But he is secretly still working for Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang), infiltrating the Na’vi and bringing back intelligence so that they can attack.

Jake goes into the chamber to become connected to his Na’vi body again and again in the film, each time he does this it is re-enforcing the theme of things being connected - though it’s easy to miss the importance of this.

Early in the film, Dr. Augustine (Sigorney Weaver) is fascinated by the way one tree's roots are connected to another’s roots - and how it seems that each tree helps nourish the other. There are a million other things she could have noticed, but this is the thematic one that contains the story DNA. Everything is connected on this planet.

The main trace of DNA that runs through most of the scenes are the ponytail things that connect Navi's to *everything* in their world. To trees, to animals, and even to each other. Again and again we see Jake or some other Na’vi becoming connected - becoming part of a horse or a dragon or a tree that connects them with their ancestors. This is a major element of almost every single scene in the film. It happens so often that you don’t really think about it, but it is demonstrating the theme... the DNA of the story flows through each of these moments... dozens of them. All of the scenes are connected in order to focus the script on *one* thing, instead of creating a scatter-shot plot that ends up about everything... and therefor about nothing.

CURLY SAYS IT ALL in Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel's "City Slickers"...

CURLY
You know what the secret of life is?

MITCH
(intrigued)
No, what?

Curly STICKS UP his index FINGER.

CURLY
This.

MITCH
Your finger?

CURLY
One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that... and everything else don't mean shit.

The secret of life and the secret of writing a great action screenplay is the ability to focus on your goals, focus on your story, and focus on your work. Once you have that focused screenplay, you have something for the cinematographer to focus on.

ACTION RESEARCH

Your new spec is “Jaws” With Claws - about an African lion that escapes from a traveling circus in a small town and begins eating people. You have this great scene where your hero is being chased by the lion through a neighborhood... but you don’t really know how fast a lion can run. Is the beast faster than the hero? Will the hero be caught and munched? You remember seeing a lion chasing gazelles on the Discovery Channel once, but how fast does a gazelle really run? Are they easier to catch than humans? Maybe your hero will hop on a motorcycle to get away. But are lions faster than motorcycles? That’s probably not something you’ll see on Discovery Channel. Hey, they show motorcycle races on the Speed Channel! Maybe if you watch long enough, a lion will escape from a traveling circus and try attacking the motorcycle race?

You need to do research. Some writers hate research, some writers love research, some writers never do any research at all. Back when I was working on "Steel Sharks" I was passed a script by a professional writer that was laugh out loud funny due to its complete lack of research. It was about top gun pilots who lived in huge luxury apartments with their girlfriends on an aircraft carrier. "Steel Sharks" was made with Navy co-operation - they gave us a submarine and aircraft carrier tour - I don’t remember seeing any huge luxury apartments onboard. I know that none of the crew members had their girlfriends or wives with them. Much of the script was laugh-provoking, from the giant gears below decks to operate the catapult to a scene where the top gun pilot hero sees what’s happening on the street below his plane while he’s in the middle of an ariel dog fight in the clouds. That script was a joke all over town!

WHY RESEARCH?

The screenwriter is the brains of the film, we create the document that everyone else on the project uses to make the film. It all starts with our research. Sure, they may hire a technical adviser, but that's after the screenplay has been written. The technical advisers don't write the script. There are screenwriters who don't do any research and end up with joke scripts that are passed all over town. There are screenwriters who write the script and then try to plug in research later. This can be a mistake. Sometimes your research may make entire scenes invalid. You may end up throwing away half your script, because in real life it's impossible. Sometimes the facts you plug in can change the outcome of the story: Your hero has a pistol that holds five rounds and your villain's weapon holds 13 rounds. Guess who wins that shoot out?

Researching first can result in a much better script. Not only due to accuracy, but to all of the cool things you discover by accident that end up in your script. My HBO World Premiere Movie "Crash Dive" began as a spec script. I'd read Tom Clancy's non-fiction book "Submarine" (basically his research for "Hunt For Red October") which was filled with all kinds of fun information that ended up in the screenplay. I had diagrams of the submarine on my wall so that I could chart where my characters were in relation to each other. Research also helped with the story: I discovered that 688 Attack Class submarines were designed and built before the computer revolution, so the BSY-1 computer system is a retrofit. Maybe my hero could circumvent the computer to wrestle control of the submarine away from the villains? Knowing actual procedures also helped create scenes and story: a device used for fire fighting that could see human heat signatures through dense smoke became a way for my hero to "see" the enemy (this was changed in production to a laugh-out-loud scene where the hero climbs through the submarine's non-existent air shafts). Knowing the tools that are available to your characters helps you know what they are capable of doing, and that has an impact on the story.

You also have a much better idea of who your characters are if you know the world they live in. Every Friday is pizza night on a submarine and the crew members take turns making pizza... and you *are* judged on your pizza. This was a great doorway into conversation, I could have crew members talk about each other based on their "pizza skills" and we could find out other things about them as a result. One of the things that fascinated me was "hot bunking" on a submarine - due to limited space, each shift shares its bunk with members of the other shifts. You have a very small drawer that is your only unshared space on a sub. Imagine having no privacy and no "territory" of your own. This became an aspect of character that I would never have considered without having done the research.

When you don't know the world you are writing about, you may be missing all of the interesting stuff! Research enriches your story and characters. If your characters know about guns, in order to really know your character *you* need to know something about guns. The more you know before you begin writing, the better your story can be.

There are two other reasons to research your action screenplay: Verisimilitude and Smart Readers. If you have some career soldier grab "a gun" the reader may find that generic and false. If your Hero is someone who knows about guns, to bring the reader into the story and make them believe what is happening, you need to be more specific. In the Something Extra chapter we talked about bring the reader into the world of the story, and part of that world is showing them the pretty weapons and sometimes explaining how they work. I love to throw in a detail that makes the scene real – the weight of a gun in someone's pocket or the exact number of shells in the magazine – and how that relates to the action scene. Plus, this stuff is fun!

But why spend the half an hour looking something up if you can just *make* it up? The audience won't know the difference, right? And those technical advisers will probably fix it, anyway. Well, the problem is – you need to get your script far enough down the line to get to those technical advisers. Remember that aircraft carrier script that was being passed around Hollywood because it was a joke? Well, that's because a certain number of studio readers and development executives and producers actually *know stuff*. If you make up your gun specs, your script might end up being read by someone who actually owns that model of gun. Just like a TV spec script that gets the show all wrong, an action script that gets the research all wrong may end up

prejudicing the rest of the read. If they think you're an idiot who can't even spend a couple of minutes doing basic research, they may not give the rest of your script a fair read... or maybe it *is* a fair read: you actually were the one who didn't take two minutes to look something up.

Another reason for doing research was demonstrated by those two Navy cooperation movies I did for HBO. How the “Crash Dive!” script came to be in the first place: I had read an article in The Hollywood Reporter that said the US Navy would *give* aircraft carries and submarines and helicopters and fighter planes and battleships and just about anything else you want *for free* if you submit a technically accurate screenplay. Because all of that hardware is paid for with tax dollars, it's technically owned by the public and a film crew can use all of the toys in a film... for the cost of fuel. This meant that I could write a huge Tom Clancy style script that could be made on an HBO budget... and I knew a producer who was making films for HBO! First thing I did was call the Navy's film office in Westwood to make sure this was for real – and it was. I asked what the catch was, and it was “must be technically accurate”. Hey, how come more producers weren't taking advantage of this? I did my research and my script was approved... but I discovered that most screenplays were not approved. If the writer did not do basic research, the Navy just closed the door on them. And there were plenty of Hollywood studio films that had the door slammed on them! While we were making “Steel Sharks” I witnessed a couple of *huge* companies get shot down. They had to either scrap their projects or *rent* battleships from some other country (the USA will give it to you for free – but not rent it to you no matter how much money you offer). What's strange about this is – I read *two* books grand total between “Crash Dive!” and “Steel Sharks”. Not a lot of research to get me through the door. Once I got through the door, the Navy gave me a hands-on tour of a nuclear submarine and an aircraft carrier and let me interview crew members and Navy SEALS. But to get that access, I just had to do some basic research that *many* other writers failed to do. Research gives you *access* to cooperation.

Another reason for research is that it will improve your story and characters – movies are about *people* and the more you know about those people the better you can write them. When I interviewed the submarine crew I was with two other groups who had been granted cooperation, but the difference was – they sent the rewrite guy and the director who hadn't done the basic research, and all of their questions were general. I already knew those answers and focused on life onboard a submarine. Since you “hot bunk” (share a bed: night crew and day crew) how do you deal with privacy issues? What if the person who sleeps in your bunk on the other shift smells bad? And – after being submerged for a couple of weeks – what does the submarine smell like? Plus questions about disagreements among crew members stuck together for long periods of time. I wanted to know about *the people* and how this environment effected them. Research isn't just about *facts*, it can be about *emotions* as well, and taking the audience into the world your characters live in 24/7. These are the things that might change the way your story works, or open a door to story possibilities you never knew existed.

But no matter how well you research, there will always be someone who thinks you got it wrong. One of the “consumer reviews” over on Amazon about “Black Thunder” can't get past my idiot mistake that the SR-71 *did not* have weapons – it was a spy plane. And that is true... mostly. In the script, it was noted that the YF-12A model (an SR-71 prototype) had been outfitted with a special weapons package that included AIM-47 missiles – and this particular SR-71 had “inherited” that weapons package. That got whittled down on screen to this SR-71 having a special weapons package that included missiles. You'd think there was still enough onscreen that anyone who really knew what they were talking about could put 2 and 2 together – but some people just live to complain. You can't satisfy them. But you know what? I did my research... and I was right. My *character* knew about the AIM-47 missiles, and that's what really mattered.

FOUR LEVELS OF RESEARCH

There are many different ways to research a subject, some are better than others. Here are the four basic types of research that you will use on your script.

1) Movies, television and novels. You may end up watching movies or reading some novels that will give you some basic background about your subject. I call this “junk research”. Information from these sources is much better when you are researching a "genre" than if you are looking for specific information. Reading all of the nurse romance novels on the shelf at Barnes & Noble isn’t going to teach you much about surgical procedures. Neither will watching every episode of "ER". Remember, no matter how realistic these shows may be, they are still "fiction". Facts can be set aside to increase the drama. Reality is often less interesting or too complicated. Even the best researched movie or television show can have its content changed by actors, the director, or some on-set change in story. Just because a TV show is a procedural doesn’t mean it’s accurate.

Even reality TV should be taken with a grain, no make that a shaker, of salt. Court TV has all kinds of great documentary shows and you can watch actual trials. But this is still entertainment programming! They may not show you every boring step involved in a procedure, and you don’t see an entire trial. In the old days they showed you the whole trial, now you get the highlights with lots of commentary. More commentary than trial footage. They cut out the boring stuff and have lots of in-studio debates. So you may be getting “truth” but it isn’t the whole truth and nothing but the truth. You may get some kernels of information, but you still need to follow it up with other sources.

2) Internet. Everyone loves using the internet for research because it’s so easy. Just go to Google and type in “African lion” and you get all kinds of information. The problem is, you’re only getting a fraction of the available information. Just as you won’t find every script on Drew’s, you won’t find all of the information available on any subject online. The internet is a fairly recent invention - only about a dozen years old - and not everything is available in an electronic format. Any script I wrote over a dozen years ago is only available in hard-copy - most of my screenplays were written on a typewriter or stand-alone word processor! The information available online on any subject is just a small fraction of what’s out there. Plus, anyone can put anything online... and not everything you read online is true. You may find some amazing fact online... that’s really someone’s opinion designed to look like a fact. Grab that shaker of salt again!

3) Books. The internet became available to the general public about twenty years ago (1993), but Gutenberg (Johannes, not Steve) invented the printing press in 1436. That’s over five hundred and fifty years more books! There are millions of books on millions of subjects; more information than you could ever find on the internet. Add in magazines and you can find information on anything and everything you can imagine. And you don’t even have to buy the books, you can borrow them from a public library. For my HBO World Premiere Movie "Grid Runners" I read a stack of books and a couple of magazine articles on cloning so that my scientists would sound like they knew what they were talking about... and I would know what is possible today and what might be possible in the near future. Did the audience know or care? I have no idea – but my characters were more realistic because of it, and *I* care.

Because so much of my work is in the action and thriller genres, I have a small library in my office of books that I use frequently, from "The Shooter’s Bible" to several books on military equipment and "The Anarchist’s Cookbook". I often wonder what the FBI would think if they tossed my office. I’m sure I’d end up on a terrorist watch list!

“The Shooter's Bible” is a great research book for guns. It's a huge catalog of pistols and rifles that includes all of the specs, and nice pictures as well. There are also sections in the back on gun care and cleaning and shell reloading that will help if you have some scene where those things might be happening during a conversation. When I'm selecting a distinctive gun for my Hero or Villain or Henchman or Sidekick this is a great resource – you can find something that looks cool and then see if it makes sense for your character. In one of my scripts the henchman carries a Striker-12, which is kind of a cross between a shotgun

and a machine gun! Really evil looking weapon.

Having the books right there has saved me on several projects. I once had to write a thriller for a producer with a deal at USA Network in two weeks, and needed to know about lethal poisons right away. I had a book co-written by my Mystery Writers of America pal Anne Klarner, "Deadly Doses: A Writers Guide To Poisons", on my shelf... and was able to slowly poison my character and still make my deadline. If I'm in a used book store and stumble across a book on some subject that's interesting or I may need as research, I'll grab it. Need to know the layout of Love Field airport (DAL)? I've got that! It's great to be able to just reach out and grab the research book without leaving my desk chair.

I also learned a great trick when researching complicated information - buy kid's books! An encyclopedia aimed at a kid audience will have a simple explanation that even an adult writer can understand. One of the problems with complicated material is that you have to translate the information so that the average audience member will understand it. Kids books not only explain everything in simple language, they often have pictures. If you don't know how an aircraft carrier's catapults work (they aren't run by gears, but by pressurized steam and pistons) they'll have an illustration to help make it clear. On another screenplay I needed a way to MacGyver up some weapons and bought some kid's science experiment books – and ended up with a bunch of ways to bring down badguys using things you can find in your kitchen.

For more dangerous things like bombs you can make from household items, "The Anarchist's Cookbook" is one of several books that will get you on the FBI's Watch List as a potential terrorist. It tells you how to make napalm and explosives and blow up buildings. If you buy one of these books and end up in prison because you fit the description of some real life terrorist, I am not going to bail you out... so be careful!

4) First hand. The best way to research anything is to go directly to the source. Need to know something about police procedure? Ask a cop. Have a medical research question? Ask a doctor. Why would a cop or a doctor talk to you? Well, their wives, husbands or significant others are probably tired of hearing about what happened today at work. People are always looking for a new pair of ears so they can tell that story about how someone else at work did something stupid and they saved the day... or how hard they work for so little money... or how important their job really is.

It doesn't take much to get people talking - and in no time they'll tell you the horror stories of their job. Ask me about my decade working in the warehouse and I'll tell you about the time a forklift ran over my foot and they made me complete my shift. I'll also tell you about forklift jousting and how one time Johnny fell asleep on a pallet and they used a Big Joe stacker to put him on top of a 20 foot stack - he slept through the whole thing and woke up an hour later with no way to get down! People have all of these stories their friends have heard a million times before... but they're just dying to tell again. So go out there and ask them!

A pitcher of beer can be your best source. For my "Recall" script about the auto industry, I went to the bar across from the Van Nuys GM plant at shift change and bought pitchers for the line crew. I told them I was a writer working on a script, and I wanted to know what it was like to do their jobs. I didn't just ask questions about their work experience, but how that effected their lives. The real gold that day was the guy who told me his hands were so rough from work that he was afraid to touch his wife. That was a heart breaker! I've bought pitchers for Navy SEALS and FBI Agents and treasure bums and learned more than I ever could have learned from a book. Movies are about people, so they are your best source of information.

RESEARCH JUNKIES AND SLAVES

You "can" become a research junkie and never get around to writing your script. That's a mistake. You can't use research as work avoidance - you have to do as much research as you need to write the script, then "write the script".

About 99% of the research you do will only inform your decisions - it will never end up on the page. No one wants to read a research document - they want to read a danged exciting story. No one goes to the movies to learn, they go to be entertained. Any information they might learn will be through your exciting story. Any sentence that looks more at home in a school textbook or a science or tech magazine probably shouldn't be in your script...unless you are using it to add verisimilitude. You want the research to help you create the story, not to get in the way of telling the story.

You can also be a slave to research There are times when you have to ignore a fact in order to make the script flow better. When you need a character to get from point A to point B but don't have time to show all of the steps of the journey, so you create a door where none exists. Presto, the character is at point B. Usually reality is boring, and you have to leave out the boring details or compress reality for the purpose of drama. Remember, we're writing drama not a documentary.

Take the time to research anything in your script you aren't familiar with... and you'll be improving your screenplay and learning things that may help you in those development meetings where they want to make everyone into cowboys. Part of our job is to take the audience into an interesting world they've never really seen before... to do that we must enter that world to observe and take notes. We "are" the brains of the movie - everything begins with our screenplay, and our research.

Once you have done your research, there're nothing left to do but write your action script, right? So let's get to work! Good luck with your action screenplay, and keep writing!

FINISHING TOUCHES

Writing "THE END" is usually only the beginning. Once you've finished writing your action script, go out and celebrate, but don't send it out into the world, yet. It probably needs a rewrite or two. Every script can be improved, and our job as writers is to get our scripts as close to perfect as possible before we try to sell them. Though nothing is ever perfect, and I am often doing last minute polishes before sending a script after a producer requests it – you want to get your screenplays as close to perfect as possible. Remember, you may only get one chance to have a Producer read your action script, so you want to make sure they read the best script possible.

My method is to alternate screenplays: “shoebox” one script and write another script, *then* go back and do rewrites on the first screenplay. That way I come to the script with “fresh eyes”. Alternating screenplays also is a form of “cross training” - you may exercise different muscles on script B that can help you with the rewrite on script A.

You'd be surprised at how often something which made sense while you were writing it, looks silly a few months later. It's like the old joke about the writer who keeps waking up in the middle of the night with great story ideas, but by the next morning he couldn't remember them. He was sure that if he scripted one of those story ideas, he could write a hit film. So he put a pad and pen next to his bed. He woke up in the middle of the night with an amazing idea, and wrote it down. The next morning when he got up, he remembered the great idea and grabbed his notepad. Written on it was "Boy meets girl".

When you finish writing your second script and come back to rewrite the first one, you may find that some of it is "Boy meets girl". The following are some things to think about when rewriting your script.

1) Does your script have an interesting, exciting concept? Something we haven't seen before? When you pitch your script or e-query, the concept becomes everything. If they are not interested by the conflict, they are not going to be interested in reading the script.

2) Can you easily condense your concept into a "logline" of 50 words or less? When the development executive pitches your script to her boss, she'll have to sum it up in one or two sentences. If you can't do it, how can you expect her to do it?

3) Does your theme explore a hidden need of the audience (using the "plot seed" theory)? Is there something in your story idea that touches on where we are now? Strange to think that “Taken” fits this – but it did. We had just gone through an economic melt down and were mad as hell... and the lead in “Taken” gets to kick some ass.

4) Is the Villain's plan well motivated? Does it threaten others? Is it believable? The Villain is the fuel for the whole story, so if there's a problem with the Villain, there will probably be a problem with the screenplay.

5) Does your hero belong in this script? Is he/she the most logical one to stop the villain? Are they interesting and different? Not some generic cop or FBI agent – but something we may have not seen before on screen?

6) Is your hero well motivated? Does your hero "grow" throughout the script? (character arc) Or deal with a compelling emotional conflict? Does your character have a compelling emotional struggle? Is there "rooting interest"?

7) Is the first page exciting? Professional readers say they can tell by the end of the first page
if the script will make a good film. So make sure your first page knocks their socks off.

8) The same readers say that by the ten page mark, they've usually made their decision to recommend the script or not. So use those first ten pages to set up your conflict, and thrust your hero into peril. Make a great first impression!

9) Do you have strong act enders, that thrust your story into a new and exciting direction? Or use the Escalator Of Doom to keep your story hopping? I'm not a structure Nazi, but so many script problems can be attributed to poor structure that it's something you really need to consider. One of the biggest problems is over-long Act Ones that take forever to set up the story... and the audience becomes impatient. William Goldman says that screenplays are structure –

so make sure your foundation is string enough to hold up your screenplay.

10) Is there a dramatic mid-point tied into your character's emotional struggle? Sometimes the big dramatic scene ends up at the end of Act Two, and that's fine... just make sure you don't short change the audience on the drama element! Yes, we came for the explosions... but we stay for the characters!

11) Does your third act really blow the roof off? Is it wall-to-wall action, out of the fry pan into the fire? You can have some emotional moments in there, too – always nice to ramp up the conflict by making it personal! But Act Three is no place for long expositional scenes! Get that stuff out of the way in Act Two if you can.

12) Is there a satisfying resolution where the hero vanquishes the villain? There's a Script Tip on my website that pops up every year and a half on the five kinds of endings – and one of them is the Pyrrhic Victory where the hero vanquishes the villain, but dies in the process. That's fine. Nothing says the hero has to live – but we need to know that the villain has been brought down. Loose ends are fine, too!

13) Does your script tell its story *visually*? Is it about people *doing things*? An action flick about people standing around talking is not going to be loved by action fans – and difficult to cut a trailer for! But visual storytelling isn't just for action films, I wrote an article for Script Magazine years ago about one of my favorite movies, “Breaking Away”, which is a coming of age story about a high school kid and his pals in a small town... and *it* is told visually. Film is a visual medium, and no matter what your genre – the story needs to be about people *doing things*!

14) Is your dialogue witty and interesting? Hey, just because we are telling visual stories doesn't mean our characters are mutes! Even men of few words like Clint Eastwood have great, quotable dialogue! Remember – you want *original* dialogue. If you have ever seen that line in another film, get rid of it! Make sure your characters say things that *only* your characters would say! There's 200 pages of dialogue help in the Dialogue Blue Book – check it out of you are having trouble.

15) Is there a whammo about every ten pages? Pacing is the heartbeat of your screenplay – you don't want the heart to stop for long periods of time... it's not healthy! Recently on a messageboard a fellow pro writer said that a producer told him scripts need at least 10 whammos in a meeting. That seems about right – a 100-110 page screenplay would end up with a whammo within every 10 pages. Again – I wrote an article for Script Magazine years ago on pacing and decided to use rom-coms, and all three of my examples had a whammo every ten minutes! Not an explosion - a rom-com whammo. So genre doesn't matter, this is just basic pacing.

16) Have you used an economy of words in your description? Remember to make *every word* count. Imagine your script is a tweet, and you only have 140 characters. Your job is to use as few words as possible to relate *maximum* information. Trim every word you can. And use the exact, right word, not second best. In the original version of this book there was a whole chapter on description/action – but I've broken that out into its own Blue Book so that I could include even more techniques.

17) Is your action description exciting? Will a reader want to skip over the dialogue to get to the next passage of action? You want to make sure that the screenplay is as exciting to read as the film will be to see. No boring sentences! You are not writing a High School Science Movie, you are writing an *action film* - make sure it's an exciting read!

18) Are there twists, reversals, and rugpulls? Is your script unpredictable? The best way to *not* sell a screenplay is to have the reader think they know what will happen next – and be right! You want to keep the reader on their toes! Just when they think they know what will happen, have something else happen! Make sure your twists are logical and motivated and make sense in hindsight... but completely unexpected when they happen.

19) Is there suspense? Cross cutting? Big clocks and scene clocks? Suspense is the anticipation of action – which makes it a great thing to have happen right before that big action scene! In a Thriller screenplay, the “whammos” are suspense set pieces (more on that in my Thriller audio class), but in an Action screenplay a suspense scene can be the “valley” before you hit that action “peak”. A great way to keep your script exciting *between* action scenes. Plus, suspense helps to involve the audience.

20) Do your plants pay off? If there's a gun on the wall in Act One, it has to be used by Act Three. If Q gives James

Bond a parasol that shoots poison gas, it's pretty much required that Bond use it by the end of the film... though maybe just to keep out of the sun on the beach in Miami. Though you can plant things that don't pay off – make sure you don't pay them off *on purpose*. In the Kevin Costner western “Open Range” they make a big deal about putting some spare guns in a barn in case they need them for the big shoot out... then seem to forget they are there in the middle of the big shoot out when they need fresh guns! It made them look stupid... and you don't want the audience thinking your hero is stupid. It would have been fine if they had a scene where Costner tries to get to the spare guns, but the villain controls that territory, so he fails. That would have been a good scene! But if you go to the trouble of setting up those guns, you can't just forget they exist! You've got to tie up all the loose ends (logically) by the end of the film.

21) Set ups and pay offs – part deux: Is everything that pays off set up earlier in the screenplay? The thing I hate most is the “sneaky little gun” that villains often seem to have at the end of Act Three. After a huge set-piece action scene where the Hero and Villain fight hand-to-hand, once the Hero knocks the Villain down and you think he's won, the Villain pulls a “sneaky little gun” from his boot and aims it at the hero. Um, if he always had the gun, why did he wait until now to pull it? Also, if your Hero needs to know how to fly an F-117A Stealth Fighter plane or perform open heart surgery or repair an M1A2 Abrams tank motor, you might want to set that up first. Best method is “Now and Later” like Ripley with the loader in “Aliens”. You don't want to be obvious about your set ups!

22) Are *all* of your characters well motivated? Even the walk ons? Are their actions logical? You want to make sure your characters act and speak like real people. Nothing pulls an audience out of a movie faster than characters who behave in strange ways – usually in order to further the plot. Once you create your characters, you let them loose and they do whatever they would naturally do. Don't try to push the plot through some false character action!

23) Is your script free of coincidence? Part of the above – does your story move logically from A to B to C without the giant hand of the writer manipulating anything with some crazy coincidence? Tennis plotting is your friend! Make sure you don't break Newton's 3rd Law and have something happen from out of the blue. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, which means you should be able to trace any action back to its root!

24) Do each of your characters have unique voices and speech patterns, so that they can be identified by their dialogue, even if the characters headings are covered? Some reader may actually do this to your script. Be prepared. Different characters have different vocabularies! One of the things we love about movies are those clearly defined minor characters – and it's our job as screenwriters to create those people!

25) Have you used advanced dialogue techniques? Do you have an "echo line", which forms a nexus between the hero's inner problem and outer problem? Does the meaning of the echo line change as the hero grows? For more information on echo lines, see Michael Hauge's "Writing Screenplays That Sell" page 98-99 or my Dialogue Blue Book. Have you used “Nexus Words” that carry the theme? Dialogue in a screenplay needs top be *better* than real dialogue. If you were to listen to actual real dialogue, you'd find it full of filler and junk and people who can not form a sentence that makes sense. We only have 110 pages – no time for all of that. It's cool to use “pet words” to individualize your dialogue – but try to make sure your dialogue is crisp and memorable and serves the story.

26) Is there a "take home line" or “catch phrase” in your script? A line so clever that the audience will repeat it the next day at work? "Go ahead, make my day." "I'll be back." "Do you feel lucky, punk?" Though this isn't required, and we really have no way of knowing exactly what line the audience may pick up on (“I'll be back”? Really?) we want to make sure our clever Hero says enough clever things that one might catch. Pat Duncan (“Courage Under Fire”) calls this “bumper sticker dialogue” - and we want to come up with that great line that ends up on bumper stickers and T shirts!

27) Is there a payback line? Again, not required – but cool if you have one. A sentence that the Villain uses to show his power to the Hero, which the Hero can later use to show his power over the Villain is a great way to make the audience cheer.

28) Does your screenplay *flow*? Does one scene lead to the next? One of the great ways to get from one scene to another is by using “match cuts” or “bridge dialogue”. For more information on match cuts and bridges, see Sheldon Tromberg's "Making Money Making Movies" page 26-29 and also in my Scene Blue Book. You want your screenplay to flow from one scene to the next as if it's all part of the same story, not start-and-stop like a car with engine problems. Even though we want one scene to lead logically to the next, we don't want our script to be predictable. There is no contradiction, there. Even the unpredictable has to make sense in hindsight. But if you have two scenes that don't flow –

you can use tools like “match cuts” to create a flow.

29) Does every individual scene move the story forward? Does every scene contribute to the whole? Does every scene contain conflict? Go through your script scene-by-scene, looking at the micro, and rewrite it. Story is conflict – and every scene needs conflict of some sort. Don't make it easy for your Hero! Create obstacles they must overcome. In “Dirty Harry”, Harry can't even have lunch without something happening! In “Back To The Future” Marty can't even order a Pepsi without getting into a conflict with the guy behind the counter. The best way to hide exposition is with conflict!

30) Once your script is rewritten, give it to a half dozen other screenwriters and ask for their input. Listen to what they have to say, then rewrite your script. These other writers can be members of a writer's group or just people you meet online. There's a great feature on the Done Deal Messageboards where you can post 5 pages and get feedback... and post 3 pages and get feedback from working pros like Derek Haas who co-wrote the “3:10 To Yuma” remake and “Wanted”. But when people give you feedback, the automatic human response is to argue or discount it - *don't*. Listen, thank them... then spend some time really considering what they have said. If three people give you the same note – something is wrong. Fix it. One of my little tools is to read my five favorite screenplays of all time... then read *my* screenplay. If one of these things is not like the others – more rewrites are required! Don't be in a rush to get your script out there! Better to query with the very best version of your script ready to go, then with the second best.

When I was ready to go to press with the first version of this book over a dozen years ago, my friend Jim suggested that I come up with some supplemental booklets and list them inside. I jotted down 20 ideas for booklets and went to press. Those 20 booklet ideas and one more became my Blue Book Series – which has *different* material than this Action Book. So if you have a problem with any of those 21 screenwriting elements, there's a Blue Book with the answer. I'm working to get those all expanded as e-books now. Hopefully by the end of 2012 they will all be available – with further help on rewrites and story elements.

Action films are the most popular genre in the world, with plenty of opportunity for talented new screenwriters. As I write this, screenwriter F. Scott Frazier has sold *four* action and thriller spec screenplays in the year 2011. *Four!* That man is a legend! So there *is* a hungry market for Action Screenplays. My first produced screenplay was as action film released in 1984 (and you should avoid it at all costs). Since then, I've earned a reasonably good living writing, and rewriting, action and thriller scripts. By using the practical information in this book, you can write a salable action script which might firmly establish you as a professional screenwriter and lead to a long career.

Now it's time for *you* to swing into action, and get to work on your action script. Set aside a couple of hours a day to work at your computer. Remember, it's only one page at a time. If you only write one page a day, seven days a week, you'll have a completed first draft in about three months. THREE MONTHS! You can write a page a day, right? So start tomorrow, and three months from now, you'll have a new, exciting action script... Maybe the next "Matrix" or "Immortals" or “Bourne”.

Good Luck And Keep Writing!

- Bill

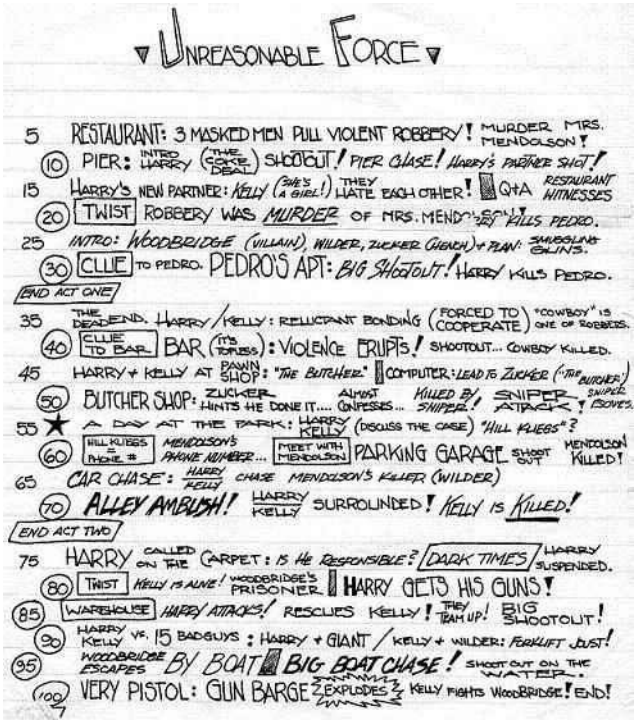
You Have The Write Stuff!

SUPPLIMENTALS: TIMELINES

In the Blue Book expansions I have often included some of my 400 Script Tips that also deal with the same subject, but here I am doing something different. I've decided to include some of the Timelines for my own screenplays – the actual outlines I used when writing them, plus some of the Timelines I have done for other movies to see how they tick. Though you may not be interested in using this outline method for your screenplays, writers are often interested in how other writers work, so I thought it would be fun to share them with you. But before we get to them, I did a blog entry on How To Write A Car Chase a few years ago that used the car chase from my "Black Thunder" movie for Showtime that was remade a decade later with Steven Seagal. That blog entry contains a clip of the car chase, the section of the actual screenplay, and my explanation of why I wrote the screenplay the way I did. It's fun in that it shows you what is on the page and how that ends up on screen. So here is a link to that blog entry:

Black Thunder Car Chase Blog Entry.

Hope that helps! And now on to the Timelines and then subgenres...



HARD EVIDENCE

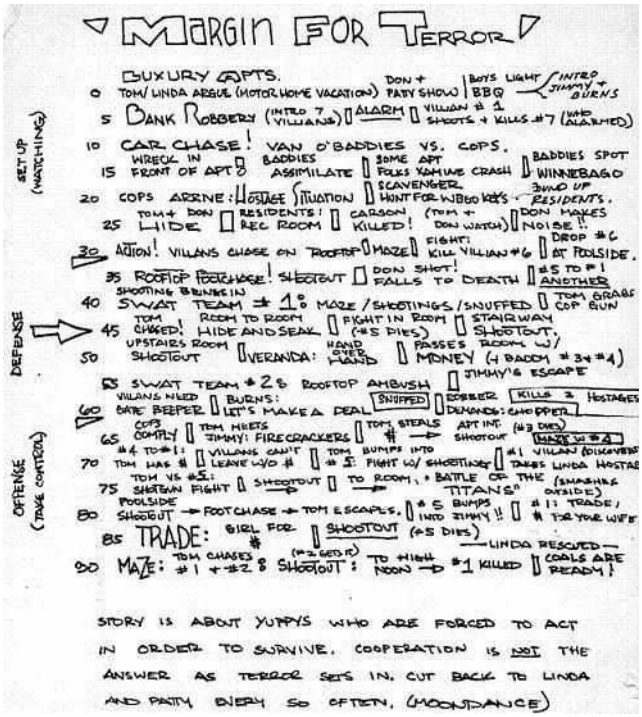
0 KEN + MARILYN: MARRIAGE ON THE ROCKS.
5 OFFICE: LENNY'S HAD OFFER ON OPEN SPACE | KEN'S DULL LIFE | LENNY / KEN DRINKING.
10 KEN GOES TO CINDY'S: ROMANCE / CINDY'S BIZ TRIP | KEN TO MARILYN: 4 DAY BIZ TRIP
15 KEN / LENNY: COVER 4 ME | FLYING DOWN TO ACAPULCO. | UNPACKING: KEN SPOTS GUN.
20 SEX W/ CINDY / FUN IN THE SUN | CINDY'S WORK.
25 THE DRUG BUY: TWIST / STANWYCK IS DEA | THE SHOOTING !
30 COPS/PANIC/ESCAPE | CINDY: I'LL GET RID OF GUN.
35 HOME: KEN / MARILYN MOR | PHONE CALL FROM DIETRICH: "I HAVE GUN W/ YOUR PRINTS" "PAY $750,000 OR GO TO JAIL"
40 KEN / CINDY CONFRONT: SHE GAVE GUN TO BOSS / PAY HIM, HE'S A KILLER | WIFE CONFRONTS: I FOLLOWED YOU TODAY - YOU WEREN'T ON BIZ...
45 KEN CONFESSES TO AFFAIR | MARILYN WANTS A DIVORCE | KEN / LENNY $750,000 ? | SELL THE OPEN SPACE LAND... NO, MAYBE.
50 KEN TAILS CINDY... TO STANWYCK (HE'S ALIVE!) KEN SNAPS A PICTURE.
55 KEN MEETS DIETRICH: NO PAY... PHOTO OF STANWYCK. | KEN / LENNY (PHONE) NO LOAN / I'LL SELL LAND.
60 KEN / MARILYN MOR | DIETRICH CALLS - READ PAPER | PAPER: CINDY MURDERED ! | DIETRICH: NOW WILL YOU PAY ?
65 KEN BREAKS DOWN, ADMITS ALL TO MARILYN: WILL YOU HELP ME? | LENNY SELLS LAND... GIVES KEN $ ... + GUN
70 MONROE: Q + A | KEN / MARILYN: MEET DIETRICH, $ FOR GUN | DIETRICH HAS ANOTHER GUN! | KEN SHOOTS HIM | CLUE TO STANWYCH
75 KEN CALLS STANWYCH: GUN 4 $? | THEY SET DETAILS | MONROE DOGS KEN: SHOOTING, WHERE WERE YOU? MARILYN ALIBIS
80 KEN + MARILYN: SEX, ROMANCE ... | MEET WITH STANWYCK ... $ FOR GUN.... STANWYCK GRABS WIFE.
85 KEN SHOOTS STANWYCK W/ CINDY'S GUN ! RESCUES WIFE... CLUES TO LENNY !
90 KEN CONFRONTS LENNY | FIGHT OVER GUN... | LENNY SHOOTS KEN! (BLANKS) | MONROE CUFFS LENNY | KEN / MARILYN: THEY USE AIRPLANE TIX.

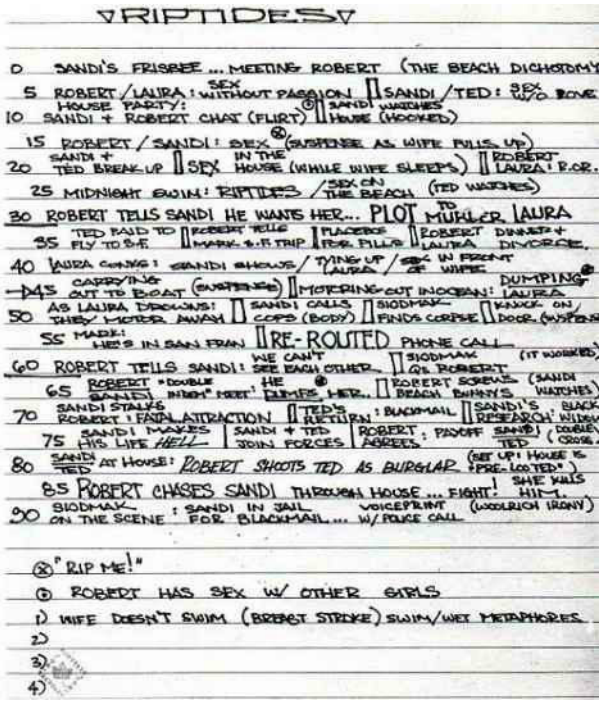
⊕ THINK "OBSESSION": HERO WON'T SELL LAND, LENNY SETS HIM UP TO SELL IT.

CRASH DIVE

SCRATCH

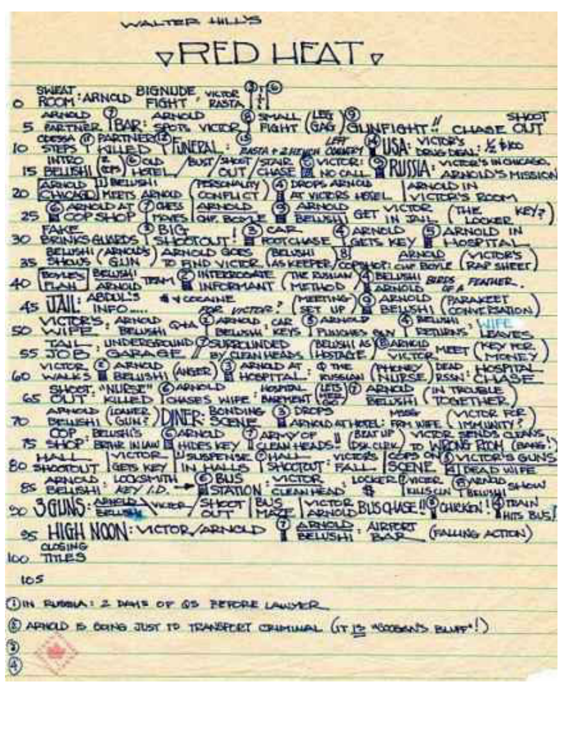
5 INTRO: DEREK FAMILY \ SUB CREW (OUR CAST OF REGULARS SET UP RELATIONSHIPS)
10 DISTRESS SIGNAL: RESCUE OR LEAVE 'EM? | COB'S RECMNDTN: SAVE THEM | THE RESCUE
15 TWIST: TERRORISTS! | GASSING CREW / SHOOTING DEREK \ LAUNCH KEY #1 | XO ESCAPES ! CHASE IN SUB... KILLED
20 2 KEYS: LAUNCH MODE / RADIOS SUB COMMAND W/ DEMANDS | GET CARTER ! (SUB COMMAND)
25 INTRO: CARTER (BOOKWORM / MR MEMORY) / CARTER / ADMIRAL: DUPLICATE KEYS THE PLAN / THE TEAM
30 RADIO GIRL / EQUIP WETSUIT @ SCENE / GOOD LUCK | CARTER DROPPED ! SNEAKING ONTO SUB (AIR TANK SUSPENSE)
35 ASSEMBLING THE TEAM ONBOARD (SUSPENSE !) WILL THEY BE DISCOVERED?
40 THE PLAN: RE-PATCH COMPUTERS | GREG DISCOVERED ! SILENT FIGHT (FIRST KILL) (HENCH #3)
45 BODY DISCOVERED / FIGHTER: SEARCH SUB... KILL HIM (HIDE + GO SEEK SUSPENSE)
50 THE GUN LOCKER | PLOTTING NEW MISSILE COURSE | COMPUTER TEAM MEMBER DISCOVERED / KILLED (HENCH #1)
55 RADIOING INFO ON TER | PLAN BEGINS UNRAVELING / CARTER ON THE RUN. | INFO ON TERRORISTS (SUSPENSE! TERRISTS INTRCPT
60 NOT GOING AFTER GOLD | DESTROYING THE RADIO | MISSILE CO-ORDS... N.Y. NOT WASHINGTON ! (
65 RICHTERS REAL PLAN: DESTROY THE U.N. | CARTER SIDEKICK / SIGNAL BOUY | CAPTURED BY HENCH #2 - TAKEN TO RICHTER
70 RICHTER: KILL THEM ! SIDEKICK KILLED ! CARTER ESCAPES W/ LAUNCH KEY !
75 HIDE + GO SEEK ON SUB | TORPEDOING SIGNAL BOUY | IT'S ALL UP TO CARTER ! TO FIRE CONTROL ....
80 CARTER FIGHTS HENCH #1 (PAYOFF) | TWIST: COB IS VILLAIN (TAKES KEY + CARTER)
85 RICHTER GETS KEY... LAUNCH SEQ. BEGINS ! | CARTER / COB FIGHT TO THE DEATH !
90 CRASH DIVE: MISSILE OFF COURSE | CARTER / RICHTER HIGH NOON | FALLING ACTION (AT SUB COMMAND)


MARGIN FOR TERROR
LUXURY APTS.
0 TOM/LINDA ARGUE (MOTOR HOME VACATION) DON + PATTY SHOW | BOYS LIGHT BBQ (INTRO JIMMY + BURNS)
5 BANK ROBBERY (INTRO 7 VILLAINS) | ALARM | VILLIAN #1 SHOOTS + KILLS #7 (WHO ALARMED)
10 CAR CHASE! VAN O'BADDIES VS. COPS.
15 WRECK IN FRONT OF APT 0 | BADDIES ASSIMILATE | SOME APT FOLKS X-MUVE CRASH | BADDIES SPOT WINNEBAGO
20 COPS ARRIVE: | STAGE | SITUATION | SCAVENGER HUNT FOR WBGO KEYS | WIND UP RESIDENTS.
25 TOM + DON RESIDENTS! | REC ROOM | CARSON KILLED! (TOM + DON WATCH) | DON MAKES NOISE!!
30 ACTION! VILLANS CHASE ON ROOFTOP | MAZE | FIGHT: KILL VILLIAN #6 | DROP #6 AT POOLSIDE.
35 ROOFTOP FOOTCHASE! SHOOTOUT | DON SHOT! FALLS TO DEATH | #5 TO #1 ANOTHER
40 SWAT TEAM # 1° MAZE / SHOOTINGS / SNUFFED | TOM GRABS COP GUN
45 TOM CHASED! HIDE AND SEAK | ROOM TO ROOM | FIGHT IN ROOM (#5 DIES) | STAIRWAY SHOOTOUT.
50 UPSTAIRS ROOM SHOOTOUT | VERANDA: HAND OVER HAND | PASSES ROOM W/ MONEY (4 BADDY # 3+#4)
55 SWAT TEAM #2 & ROOFTOP AMBUSH | JIMMY'S ESCAPE
60 VILLANS NEED BATE BEEPER | BURNS: LET'S MAKE A DEAL | SNUFFED | ROBBER DEMANDS: CHOPPER | KILLS 2 HOSTAGES
65 COPS COMPLY | TOM MEETS JIMMY: FIRECRACKERS | TOM STEALS # | APT INT. SHOOTOUT (#3 DIES) | MAKE W #4
70 TOM HAS #4 TO #1 | VILLANS CAN'T LEAVE W/O # | TOM BUMPS INTO #5: FIGHT W/ SHOOTINGS | #1 VILLAN DISCOVERS TOM'S LINDA HOSTAGE
75 TOM VS #5: SHOTGUN FIGHT | SHOOTOUT | TO ROOM, + BATTLE OF THE TITANS" (SMASHES OUTSIDE)
80 POOLSIDE SHOOTOUT → FOOTCHASE → TOM ESCAPES. | #5 BUMPS INTO JIMMY !! | #1: TRADE, # FOR YOUR WIFE
85 TRADE: GIRL FOR # | SHOOTOUT (#5 DIES) — LINDA RESCUED —
90 MAZE: TOM CHASES #1 + #2 & (#2 GETS IT) SHOOTOUT: TO HIGH NOON → #1 KILLED | COALS ARE READY!
SET UP (WATCHING)
DEFENSE
OFFENSE (TAKE CONTROL)
STORY IS ABOUT YUPPYS WHO ARE FORCED TO ACT IN ORDER TO SURVIVE. COOPERATION IS NOT THE ANSWER AS TERROR SETS IN. CUT BACK TO LINDA AND PATTY EVERY SO OFTEN. (MOONDANCE)


RIPTIDES
0 SANDI'S FRISBEE ... MEETING ROBERT (THE BEACH DICHOTOMY)
5 ROBERT/LAURA: SEX WITHOUT PASSION | SANDI/TED: SEX W/O BOWL
10 HOUSE PARTY: SANDI + ROBERT CHAT (FLIRT) ⊙ | SANDI WATCHES HOUSE (HOOKED)
15 ROBERT/SANDI: SEX ⊗ (SUSPENSE AS WIFE PULLS UP)
20 SANDI + TED BREAK-UP | SEX IN THE HOUSE (WHILE WIFE SLEEPS) | ROBERT LAURA! P.O.R.
25 MIDNIGHT SWIM: RIPTIDES / SEX ON THE BEACH (TED WATCHES)
30 ROBERT TELLS SANDI HE WANTS HER... PLOT TO MURDER LAURA
35 TED PAID TO FLY TO SAE | ROBERT TELLS MARK $ + TRIP | PLACEBO FOR PILLS | ROBERT DINNER + LAURA DIVORCE.
40 LAURA GONE! SANDI SHOWS / TYING UP LAURA / ⊙ IN FRONT OF WIFE
45 CARRYING OUT TO BOAT (SUSPENSE) | MOORING OUT IN OCEAN: LAURA DUMPING ⊗
50 AS LAURA DROWNS: THEY MOTOR AWAY | SANDI CALLS COPS (BODY) | SIODMAK FINDS CORPSE | KNOCK ON DOOR (SUSPENSE)
55 MADE: HE'S IN SAN FRAN | RE-ROUTED PHONE CALL
60 ROBERT TELLS SANDI: WE CAN'T SEE EACH OTHER. | SIODMAK (IT WORKED) & ROBERT
65 ROBERT "DOUBLE SANDI" MEET: HE DUMPS HER.. | ROBERT SCREWS (SANDI WATCHES) BEACH BUNNYS.
70 SANDI STALKS ROBERT: FATAL ATTRACTION | TED'S RETURN: BLACKMAIL | SANDI'S BLACK RESEARCH WIDOW
75 SANDI MAKES HIS LIFE HELL | SANDI + TED JOIN FORCES | ROBERT: PAYOFF SANDI (DOUBLE CROSS) TED
80 SANDI & TED AT HOUSE: ROBERT SHOOTS TED AS BURGLAR (SET UP: HOUSE IS "PRE-LOOTED")
85 ROBERT CHASES SANDI THROUGH HOUSE ... FIGHT! SHE KILLS HIM.
90 SIODMAK ON THE SCENE: SANDI IN JAIL FOR BLACKMAIL ... W/ VOICEPRINT (WOODRICH IRONY)
⊗ "RIP ME!"
⊙ ROBERT HAS SEX W/ OTHER GIRLS
1) WIFE DOESN'T SWIM (BREAST STROKE) SWIM/WET METAPHORES
2)
3)
4)

48 HOURS

0 CHAIN GANG / BILLY BEAR / SHOOT OUT ESCAPE! ④ INTRO: CATES (GIRLFRIEND PROBLEMS)
5 GANCE BILLY (POISON MURDER) ‖ CATES G.F. ‖ LUTHER GETS KIDNAPPED: GANCE WANTS $ (THEY KEEP LUTHER'S GIRL)
10 HOTEL: CATES REPUTATION UP TO ROOM GANCE HOOKER (CARTOONS) / COP KNOCKS ON DOOR....
15 SHOOTOUT: STAIRS ELEVATOR CHASE | LOBBY STANDOFF | DON'T GIVE THE GUN! | GANCE CATES FACE OFF BLAM
20 COP SHOP: CATES GETS CHEWED OUT ⑤ INTRO REGGIE Q+A REGGIE CATES (PERSONALITY CONFLICT)
25 REGGIE'S DEAL: GET ME OUT! / 48 HOURS ⑦ GETTING REGGIE OUT (WE AIN'T BUDDYS) ⑨ DRIVE TO LUTHER'S
30 LUTHER'S APT. SHOOT OUT! / CHASE / REG CATCHES | CATES Q'S ② COP SHOP: LUTHER JAILED | CATES G.F. PROBS | CATES REGGIE DINE
35 REGGIE Q'S CATES' SEX LIFE TORCHY'S: EXT: THE PUSSY DEAL ⑨ INT: COWBOY BAR! NOT A POPULAR PLACE 4 BROTHE
40 REGGIE TAKES CHARGE (NEW SHERIFF IN TOWN) ④ CATES DISARMS REGGIE
45 CHINA TOWN: BILLY'S GIRL (GIRLS WITH GUNS!) DEAD END ⑨ REGGIE CATES ARGUE
50 R/C FIST FIGHT BONDING THRU BEATING ② COPS ③ REGGIE ADMITS TO $ (WE AIN'T BROTHERS)
55 STAKE OUT: REGGIES CAR ⑦ LUTHER SHOWS ⑧ REGGIES CAR / TAIL JOB ..... LUTHER PARKS... THE $
60 BART: LUTHER $ ... ② GANCE SHOWS... ③ BIG SHOOTOUT! R CHASES LUTHER C CHASES BILLY/G | GANCE BILLY GONE
65 NIGHT CLUB: REGGIE CAN'T GET LAID ⑦ COP SHOP: CATES AT WORK... G.F. PROBLEMS... REGGIE'S CALL....
70 NIGHT CLUB: CATES REGGIE (BECOME FRIENDS) REG + GIRL GO TO HOTEL FOR SEX... LUTHER! LEAVES!
75 BUS: GANCE LUTHER DEAL: $ GIRL | LUTHER KILLED | CHASE! SHOOT OUT... CRASH! ⑧ CATES GETS CHEWED
80 BAR: BONDING LAST DRINK: BILLY'S GIRL? ② CHINA TOWN: ③ GIRL'S APT: BIG SHOOT OUT!! (BILLY KILLED)
85 ALLEYS MAZE SHOOTOUT ROOF TOPS ⑦ HIGH NOON: CATES GANCE BANG!
90 FALLING ACTION: RAGTOP MAN

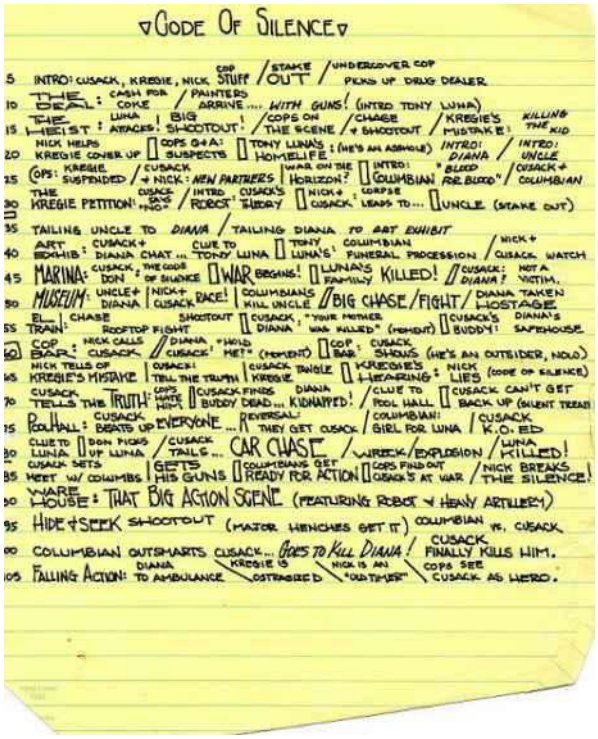


WALTER HILL'S

RED HEAT

0 SWEAT ROOM: ARNOLD BIGNUDE FIGHT, VICTOR RASTA ③ ⑥
5 ARNOLD PARTNER ⑦ BAR: ARNOLD SPOTS VICTOR ⑧ SMALL FIGHT (LEG GAG) ⑨ GUNFIGHT!! CHASE SHOOT OUT
10 ODESSA STEPS ⑪ PARTNER KILLED ⑫ FUNERAL: ⑬ RASTA + 2 HENCH LEFT COUNTRY ⑭ USA: VICTOR'S DRUG DEAL: ½ $100
15 INTRO BELUSHI (2 COPS) ⑥ OLD HOTEL / BUST / SHOOT OUT / STAIR CHASE ⑦ VICTOR: NO CALL ⑨ RUSSIA: VICTOR'S IN CHICAGO, ARNOLD'S MISSION
20 ARNOLD CHICAGO ⑪ BELUSHI MEETS ARNOLD (PERSONALITY CONFLICT) ④ DROPS ARNOLD AT VICTORS HOTEL | ARNOLD IN VICTOR'S ROOM
25 ⑥ ARNOLD AT COP SHOP ⑦ CHESS MOVES | ARNOLD CHF. BOYLE ⑨ ARNOLD BELUSHI GET VICTOR IN JAIL (THE LOCKER KEY?)
30 FAKE BRINKS GUARDS ② BIG SHOOTOUT! ③ CAR FOOTCHASE ④ ARNOLD GETS KEY ⑤ ARNOLD IN HOSPITAL
35 BELUSHI SHOWS (ARNOLD'S GUN) ARNOLD GOES TO FIND VICTOR (BELUSHI AS KEEPER) ⑧ COPSHOP: ARNOLD CHF BOYLE (VICTOR'S RAP SHEET)
40 BOYLE'S PLAN BELUSHI ARNOLD TEAM ② INTERROGATE INFORMANT (THE RUSSIAN METHOD) ④ BELUSHI ARNOLD BIRDS OF A FEATHER.
45 JAIL: ABDUL'S INFO.... $ 4 COCAINE FOR VICTOR? (MEETING SET UP) ⑨ ARNOLD BELUSHI (PARAKEET CONVERSATION)
50 VICTOR'S WIFE: ARNOLD BELUSHI Q+A ② ARNOLD BELUSHI: CAR KEYS ③ ARNOLD PUNCHES GUY ④ BELUSHI RETURNS: WIFE LEAVES
55 TAIL JOB: UNDERGROUND GARAGE ⑦ SURROUNDED BY CLEAN HEADS (BELUSHI AS HOSTAGE) ⑧ ARNOLD VICTOR MEET (KEY FOR MONEY)
60 VICTOR WALKS ② ARNOLD BELUSHI (ANGER) ③ ARNOLD AT HOSPITAL: ④ THE RUSSIAN (PHONEY NURSE) DEAD RSSN: HOSPITAL CHASE
65 SHOOT OUT: "NURSE" KILLED ⑥ ARNOLD CHASES WIFE: HOSPITAL BASEMENT (LETS HER GO) ⑦ ARNOLD BELUSHI (IN TROUBLE TOGETHER)
70 ARNOLD BELUSHI (LOANER GUN?) DINER: BONDING SCENE ③ DROPS ARNOLD AT HOTEL: MSG FRM WIFE (VICTOR FOR IMMUNITY?)
75 COP SHOP: BELUSHI'S BRTHR IN LAW ⑥ ARNOLD HIDES KEY ⑦ ARMY OF CLEAN HEADS!! (BEAT UP DSK CLERK) VICTOR SENDS CLEANS TO WRONG ROOM (BANG!)
80 HALL SHOOTOUT | VICTOR GETS KEY | SUSPENSE IN HALLS ⑦ HALL SHOOTOUT: VICTOR'S FALL | COPS ON SCENE ⑤ VICTOR'S GUNS ⑥ DEAD WIFE
85 ARNOLD BELUSHI: LOCKSMITH KEY I.D. → ⑥ BUS STATION: VICTOR CLEAN HEAD: LOCKER $ ⑦ VICTOR KILLS GUN ⑧ ARNOLD BELUSHI SHOW
90 3 GUNS: ARNOLD BELUSHI \ VICTOR / SHOOT OUT | BUS MAZE | VICTOR ARNOLD BUS CHASE!! ⑧ CHICKEN! ⑨ TRAIN HITS BUS!
95 HIGH NOON: VICTOR/ARNOLD ⑦ ARNOLD BELUSHI: AIRPORT BAR (FALLING ACTION)
100 CLOSING TITLES
105

① IN RUSSIA: 2 DAYS OF Q'S BEFORE LAWYER
② ARNOLD IS GOING JUST TO TRANSPORT CRIMINAL (IT IS "SOBAN'S BLUFF"!)
③
④


▽CODE OF SILENCE▽
5 INTRO: CUSACK, KREGIE, NICK COP STUFF / STAKE OUT / UNDERCOVER COP PICKS UP DRUG DEALER
10 THE DEAL: CASH FOR COKE / PAINTERS ARRIVE.... WITH GUNS! (INTRO TONY LUNA)
15 THE HEIST: LUNA ATTACKS! / BIG SHOOTOUT! / COPS ON THE SCENE / CHASE + SHOOTOUT / KREGIE'S MISTAKE! KILLING THE KID
20 NICK HELPS KREGIE COVER UP / COPS Q+A: SUSPECTS / TONY LUNA'S HOMELIFE: (HE'S AN ASSHOLE) INTRO: DIANA / INTRO: UNCLE
25 COPS: KREGIE SUSPENDED / CUSACK + NICK: NEW PARTNERS / WAR ON THE HORIZON? / INTRO: COLUMBIAN "BLOOD RE BLOOD" / CUSACK + COLUMBIAN
30 THE KREGIE PETITION: CUSACK SAYS "NO" / INTRO: CUSACK'S ROBOT / CUSACK'S THEORY / NICK + CUSACK: CORPSE LEADS TO... / UNCLE (STAKE OUT)
35 TAILING UNCLE TO DIANA / TAILING DIANA TO ART EXHIBIT
40 ART EXHIB: CUSACK + DIANA CHAT... CLUE TO TONY LUNA / TONY LUNA'S COLUMBIAN FUNERAL PROCESSION / NICK + CUSACK WATCH
45 MARINA: CUSACK, DON: THE CODS OF SILENCE / WAR BEGINS! / LUNA'S FAMILY KILLED! / CUSACK: DIANA? NOT A VICTIM.
50 MUSEUM: UNCLE + DIANA / NICK + CUSACK RACE! / COLUMBIANS KILL UNCLE / BIG CHASE/FIGHT/ DIANA TAKEN HOSTAGE
55 EL TRAIN: CHASE / ROOFTOP FIGHT / SHOOTOUT / CUSACK, DIANA / "YOUR MOTHER WAS KILLED" (MOMENT) / CUSACK'S BUDDY! / DIANA'S SAFEHOUSE
60 COP BAR: NICK CALLS CUSACK / DIANA "HOLD ME!" (MOMENT) / COP BAR: CUSACK SHOWS (HE'S AN OUTSIDER, NOLO)
65 KREGIE'S MISTAKE: NICK TELLS OF / CUSACK: TELL THE TRUTH / CUSACK TANGLE KREGIE / KREGIE'S HEARING: NICK LIES (CODE OF SILENCE)
70 CUSACK TELLS THE TRUTH: COPS HATE NICK / CUSACK FINDS BUDDY DEAD... DIANA KIDNAPPED! / CLUE TO POOL HALL / CUSACK CAN'T GET BACK UP (SILENT TREAT)
75 POOL HALL: CUSACK BEATS UP EVERYONE... / REVERSAL: THEY GET CUSACK / COLUMBIAN: GIRL FOR LUNA / CUSACK K.O. ED
80 CLUE TO LUNA / DON PICKS UP LUNA / CUSACK TAILS... CAR CHASE / WRECK/EXPLOSION / LUNA KILLED!
85 CUSACK SETS MEET W/ COLUMBS / GETS HIS GUNS / COLUMBIANS GET READY FOR ACTION / COPS FIND OUT CUSACK'S AT WAR / NICK BREAKS THE SILENCE!
90 WARE HOUSE: THAT BIG ACTION SCENE (FEATURING ROBOT + HEAVY ARTILLERY)
95 HIDE + SEEK SHOOTOUT (MAJOR HENCHES GET IT) COLUMBIAN VS. CUSACK
00 COLUMBIAN OUTSMARTS CUSACK... GOES TO KILL DIANA! CUSACK FINALLY KILLS HIM.
05 FALLING ACTION: DIANA TO AMBULANCE / KREGIE IS OSTRACIZED / NICK IS AN "OLD TIMER" / COPS SEE CUSACK AS HERO.

ACTION SUBGENRES

Let's look at some popular subgenres in action movies. I'm not talking about films like "Run Silent Run Deep" or "The Enemy Below" or "Destination Tokyo" or my films "Crash Dive!" and "Steel Sharks"... though maybe I am, there are certainly enough submarine movies to qualify for a Sub subgenre! Action movies cover a lot of ground... from buddy comedies like "48 Hours" to graphic violent revenge flicks like "Rolling Thunder"... and new subgenres like Found Footage Films are popping up every day.

So I decided to come up with a list of popular action subgenres, a quick look at what makes them tick, plus a few example films to view. With new action subgenres popping up all of the time and old ones cycling into temporary obscurity, there is no possible way to discuss every subgenre. So these are thirty-something you're most likely to bump into while writing your next action script.

1) STRAIGHT ACTION. People, people who punch people, are the luckiest people, in the world. Your typical action flick boils down to the "man against man" conflict. A protagonist and an antagonist battling it out. Examples include “Face/Off”, all of those Jason Statham flicks, "Commando", "Shaft's Big Score", plus stylish John Woo shoot 'em ups like "A Better Tomorrow" and "Hard Boiled." This is your basic, no- frills, action flick. Standard recipe.

2) ADVENTURE. Climb every mountain, ford every sea. The "man against nature" conflict fuels the Adventure subgenre. Movies like "Mountains On The Moon" about exploring the Nile, "White Dawn" about a group of American whalers trying to survive in the Arctic, and the mountain climbing adventure "Vertical Limit" fit this spoke of the action wheel. These films focus on survival and exploration in rugged terrains. Not common these days, but every time you think a subgenre is dead a new film comes out that brings it back.

3) ACTION ADVENTURE. Stir it up! The "man against man" conflict *plus* the "man against nature" conflict! This is my favorite subgenre because it offers two kinds of threats. People are climbing mountains and fighting each other at the same time! "The Guns Of Navarone", "Bridge On The River Kwai", "Raiders Of The Lost Ark", and "Where Eagles Dare" are some of my favorites. These films often have an epic scope and larger than life heroes and plots and stories about quests.

4) CHASE THRILLERS. The entire film is a chase. Usually a wrongly accused hero has to outrun the police and find the real killer. “Minority Report”, “Salt”, the “Bourne” movies, "North By Northwest", "The Fugitive", and "The Big Steal" are wrongly accused man on the run scripts. But "Dark Of The Sun" (1968) and "The Naked Prey" feature non-stop chases where the hero is just trying to outrun the villains to survive.

5) HEIST FILMS. Bad guy protagonists! A group of thieves with guns rob banks, casinos, armored cars... anyplace where money can be found. These films focus on the planning, the robbery, then what goes wrong. “Inception”, “Fast Five”, “The Town”, "5 Against The House", "The Killing", "Heat" and "Charley Varrick" are good examples. Check out the novels of Richard Stark (Don Westlake) for more on this subgenre.

6) CAPER FILMS. The flipside of the Heist Film subgenre. Usually lighter in tone, sometimes even comic. Burglary instead of robbery. Not smash and grab, but a clever plan to bypass alarms and steal some priceless item from a high security environment. "Topkapi", "11 Harrow House", "$", "The Hot Rock" and "Bankshot" fit this subgenre, as do "Entrapment" and "The Thomas Crown Affair". Some of these films tease the audience with a list of strange items required to pull of the burglary. In "11 Harrow House" they needed five different colors of nail polish, a dozen cockroaches, an industrial vacuum cleaner, and several other weird devices to steal half of the world's diamonds from an ultra-security underground vault. Check out the novels of Don Westlake for great comic capers.

7) BUDDY COPS. Bickering, mismatched pairs of heroes. "Rush Hour", "48 Hours", "Lethal Weapon", "Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid", and hundreds of others. There are two sub- subgenres to the Buddy Cop subgenre which are discussed in the Sidekicks chapter. Sapir & Murphy's "Destroyer" novels feature a great pair of bickering heroes.

8) COPS & ROBBERS. Police pursue criminals. Sometimes FBI or Military Police or some other law enforcement

branch. "Dirty Harry", "The Line Up", "Code Of Silence", "Bullitt", and hundreds of others. A staple of the action genre, there will always be films about cops and crooks... though you really need to come up with a new wrinkle these days. Check out the films of Don Siegel, the best director who ever worked in the genre.

9) PROCEDURALS. Just the facts, ma'am. Ultra-realistic cops & robbers stories dealing with the actual procedures involved in solving crimes. Often using a documentary style. Think TVs "Dragnet", or "NYPD Blue" or "Law & Order". "The French Connection" is a police procedural, "T-Men" and "The FBI Story" show the inner workings of the FBI, "Manhunter" displays criminal profiling techniques, "Call Northside 777" follows an investigative reporter, and "The Friends Of Eddie Coyle" is a crook procedural. Check out Ed McBain's "87th Precinct" novels for a great example of the police procedural... McBain's books often contain photocopies of arrest records and crime scene reports to add to the realism. Cool! The FANTASTIC made for TV movie that introduced Kojak, "The Marcus-Nelson Murders", is one of the best police procedurals I have ever seen. The first "Prime Suspect" mini-series is also a fantastic example of this subgenre... too bad the new TV series didn't work out. This is another subgenre that seems prime for a major revival considering the popularity of Reality TV.

10) DETECTIVE MYSTERIES. Detectives use clues to solve crimes in this mystery based subgenre. Private eyes like Philip Marlowe in "The Big Sleep" and "Murder, My Sweet" or Jake Gittes in "Chinatown" or Lew Harper in "Harper". Homicide detective David Jansen follows the clues to solve a complex murder in "Warning Shot" as does detective Dana Andrews in "Laura". The new “Sherlock Holmes” movies with Robert Downey, jr. are detective mysteries that are *heavy* on the action... Can't wait to see Miss Marple played by Angelina Jolie with an Uzi!

11) TECHNO THRILLERS. Action films centered around technology. Tom Clancy didn't invent this subgenre, but he sure made it popular! "The Hunt For Red October" and "Patriot Games" feature stealth submarines, spy-in-the-sky satellites, and other high tech devices. "Blue Thunder" and my own "Steel Sharks" are also part of the Techno Thriller subgenre. Check out the novels of Dale Brown and Tom Clancy for some thrilling examples. They keep trying to bring the Tom Clancy novels back – but so far without much success.

12) FOUND FOOTAGE. This is a new subgenre spawned by “Blair Witch” and “Cloverfield”. The idea is that everything we see is from “natural” source like a police car dash-camera or a soldier's helmet-cam. Movie like “Rec” (excellent!) have used the news camera as the eyes of the audience for a horror flick, but at the time I write this I don't think any action movies have been made with this technique except “The Contenders: Series 7”... though lots of spec scripts have been sold, including F. Scott Frazier's “Line Of Sight” which is told through several soldier's helmet-cams. I think this subgenre grew out of reality shows like “Cops!” and movies like “Blair Witch”... and may be here to stay.

13) CONTAINED THRILLERS. Another seemingly new subgenre, though Hitchcock did it in “Lifeboat” and “Rope”. Recent movies like “Buried” and “Phone Booth” and “Panic Room” trap characters in a location where all of the action takes place. On the action side, movies like John Carpenter's “Assault On Precinct 13” traps a group of people in a police station during an all-out gang war. There are plenty of contained action films like “Sahara” that current Hollywood execs probably have never heard of, but the subgenre is hot – especially with “stunt” type stories like “Buried”. One of F. Scott Frazier's other spec sales in 2011 was “Autobahn” - a race against time story that takes place entirely in the protagonist's car, similar to the bank robbery sequence in “Gun Crazy” - but for an entire film! This is a tough subgenre to write, because you can't cut away from the location to keep things exciting.

14) GONZO ACTION. For people who love Road Runner cartoons, but hate animation! Movies like the two “Crank” movies, “Shoot “em Up”, and others where the action is just crazy stuff and the pacing is relentless. The problem with this subgenre is that the characters *are* cartoons – and often difficult to identify with. But I thought both “Crank” movies were a lot of fun, and the subgenre is open to silly things like the Godzilla fight in “Crank 2”.

15) SUPERHERO MOVIES. Every time you think they've burned out, they come back! The “Spider-Man” movies started out great and went down hill with every new entry... so they've rebooted the series. “Iron Man” was great, the sequel was no great. So far, both “Batman Begins” and “The Dark Knight” have been excellent, and the footage from the new film looks great. “The Avengers” looks like fun, but “Green Lantern” and some of the others have crashed and burned. The issue with Superhero movies is that we can not legally write them as spec scripts – we have to be hired by the studio that owns the rights. And *original* superheroes are a mixed bag - the disappointing “Hancock” to the excellent “Super”.

16) BATTLE ROYALE. I almost didn't include this as a subgenre, but there have been so many of them! A group of warriors on an island or course of some sort in a fight to the death. There's a “Most Dangerous Game” element here. “Running Man” and “The Tenth Victim” are the prototypes, but plenty of B movies use this scenario... not to mention “Hunger Games”.

17) DIE HARD IN A _____. The proof that a couple of similar films can suddenly start a subgenre. Devos take note! "Die Hard" spawned "Under Siege" (Die Hard on a battleship), "Sudden Death" (Die Hard at the Stanley Cup finals) and a remake of "Desperate Hours" (Die Hard in a house), and a new subgenre was born. Dozens of low budget "Die Hard" clones have popped up, as well as "Air Force One", "Beverly Hills Cop 3" (Die Hard at Disneyland), and my own contribution the HBO World Premiere movie "Crash Dive!" (Die Hard on a submarine). There's a joke around Hollywood about a Devo who bought "Die Hard in a very tall building"... which is just "Die Hard"! Okay, and now “Tower Heist”!

18) DOOMSDAY THRILLERS. It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine. The villain's plan is REALLY BIG - it may end life as we know it! "The Satan Bug" deals with germ warfare, as does "Outbreak" and "The Crazies". "Peacemaker" and a bunch of early 1960s films deal with world nuclear war. "Fail Safe" has one foot in the Techno Thriller subgenre and the other in the Doomsday Thriller subgenre. It's almost a guarantee that the President Of The United States will be a character in these films.

19) EROTIC THRILLERS/FILM NOIR. A spider woman lures a man to his doom. "Body Heat", "Double Indemnity", "Basic Instinct", "Sea Of Love", "Out Of The Past". I have a class on CD audio on this subgenre that combines sex and violence in a most exciting way. These films usually depend on what James M. Cain called a "love rack" (the reason why the man MUST have the spider woman is the same reason why he SHOULDN'T have her.) Film Noir is filled with people who do the wrong thing and have to pay for it. Happy endings are rare. In my "Hard Evidence" a real estate developer cheats on his wife and ends up killing a man. Now he must cover up the affair to cover up the crime. But a vicious group of blackmailers will turn him over to the police unless he pays them a cool million. Now the real estate developer must fight the blackmailers while evading the police... and repairing the damage to his marriage. Just when you thought it was dead, Joe Eszterhas returns to Hollywood with a stack of new spec scripts. For more on FILM NOIR, check out my class on Audio CD.

20) MEDICAL THRILLERS. More thriller than action, but chases are a major part of this subgenre and they can edge into action territory at times. Doctors are usually the leads, and they stumble onto some medical conspiracy throwing their lives into peril. "Coma" is the still the best. Runners up include the classic "Green For Danger" (1946), "The Sleeping City" (1950), and "Intent To Kill" (1958). With novelist Robin Cook always on the best sellers list and "E.R." was a hit on TV, medical based thrillers may be the next big thing. They are certainly under- used at this time, except for the occasional bomb like "Extreme Measures". Recently we had “Contagion” which really may have kick-started the subgenre again.

21) WAR MOVIES. Military action films from "The Dirty Dozen" to "Platoon" to "The Great Escape". Shoot outs, fist fights, chases... but the heroes are soldiers and the villains are the enemy. A staple in the 1940s, resurrected in the 60s and 70s with Viet Nam as the backdrop. "Hell Is For Heroes", "Fixed Bayonets", "The Steel Helmet", "The Big Red One", "The Boys In Company C", "The Longest Day", "A Bridge Too Far", "Saving Private Ryan", and "They Were Expendable" all fit this subgenre.

22) SCI-FI ACTION. The shoot outs may use laser guns and the chases may be in space ships, but underneath the sci-fi elements these films are really action movies, "Total Recall" is a great example, as are "Westworld", "The Terminator", "Terminator 2", "They Live", my own "Grid Runners" and The Wachowski Brothers' "The Matrix". "The Matrix" takes the cool choreography of John Woo shoot outs, the acrobatic stunts of Jackie Chan kung fu scenes, and the slow-mo stylings of Sam Pechinpah's westerns and marries them into a fantastic futuristic story. The flick was produced by the King Of The Modern Action Film, Joel Silver ("48 Hours", "Lethal Weapon 1-4", "Die Hard", etc.). In the 1950s they used to remake cop movies as westerns, in the 1990s and 2000s they'll be remaking action movies as sci-fi. "Minority Report" is a detective film in a sci-fi skin.

23) WESTERN ACTION. The shoot outs are the same, but the chases use horses rather than cars. Pechinpah films like "The Wild Bunch" and "Ride The High Country", plus the remake of “3:10 To Yuma”, "The Professionals", "The Wild Wild West" (buddy, western, sci-fi, doomsday... talk about mixed genres!), and "The Magnificent Seven". Films

that use the west as a background for an action based story. It was common in the 1940s and 1950s to rework old cops and robbers scripts as westerns, creating some really weird movies like "The Fiend Who Walked The West" about a serial killer cowboy based on "Kiss Of Death".

24) MOB FILMS. Action films about organized crime. "The Valachi Papers", "Scarface", "The Big Combo", "The Sicilian Clan", "Pay Or Die", and "The Public Enemy". I'm leaving off "The Godfather" movies because they are basically family sagas with shoot outs. When the focus of the film isn't about the crime, but the criminal organization and often the guy who runs it and the guy who brings him down. "The Roaring 20s" is my favorite film in this subgenre, and one of the best action flicks ever made.

25) SWASHBUCKLERS. Period action films. Swords instead of guns. From classic Warner Bros. films like "Captain Blood" (Errol Flynn as pirate) and "The Adventures Of Robin Hood" (Errol Flynn as Robin) to more realistic recent films like "Rob Roy" (Liam Neeson as Scottish bandit) and "Flesh + Blood" (Rutger Hauer as Knight in rusted armor) to romantic desert films like "The Wind And The Lion" (Sean Connery as a sheik) and high adventure like "The Man Who Would Be King" (Sean Connery as King) to romantic action like "The Flame And The Arrow" (Burt Lancaster as an Italian version of Robin Hood) and "The Crimson Pirate" (Burt Lancaster as a pirate). Every time I think this genre is dead, a brilliant film like Terry Rossio and Ted Elliot's "The Mask Of Zorro" and “Pirates Of The Caribbean” series comes along and revives it!

26) POLITICAL THRILLERS. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't really out to get you! The post-Watergate era was filled with films about government conspiracies and the innocent people caught in the middle, but recent films like "Enemy Of The People" and bombs like "Murder At 1600" and "Absolute Power" have shown renewed interest in this subgenre. Another of my favorite subgenres, with films like "The Parallax View", "The Manchurian Candidate", "The Conversation" and "Three Days Of The Condor" on my best list.

27) MARTIAL ARTS. Ain't that a kick in the head? The roots of this genre go back to films like "Across The Pacific" (1942) which featured mysterious Eastern fighting styles. Imports like "Fists Of Fury" and TV shows like "The Green Hornet" and "Kung Fu" lead to "Enter The Dragon"... and the Martial Arts Film was officially born. With so many ass-kicking stars like Jet Li, Jackie Chan, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal, Don "The Dragon" Wilson and Chuck Norris this was a very active subgenre. Now that MMA is hot, I'm waiting for the next generation of Martial Arts Stars to bring the subgenre back to life. Maybe “Haywire” will be the film that accomplishes that.

Unfortunately, too many people try to imitate "Enter The Dragon" which has resulted in hundreds of practically identical "ring fighting movies" like "Ring Of Fire", "Lionheart", "The Quest", "Blood Sport", "Death Match", "Blood Fist", "Blood Fist 2", etc.

These films are nothing more than a series of no-rules fights... often featuring a guy who enters the competition after his brother was killed in the ring. The key to writing a good film in this subgenre: Think of martial arts as the weapon, not the plot. Come up with a great action story, but have the hero use his hands & feet instead of guns. Some great examples are "Avenging Force" and "Above The Law"... You could remove the martial arts from either film and it would still work.

28) UNDERCOVER. People pretending to be somebody else... will they be discovered and killed? Cops undercover, reporters undercover, FBI agents undercover. Sometimes the person going undercover is impersonating someone (as in Don Winslow's "The Death And Life Of Bobby Z" novel – made into a forgettable movie), but usually they are just pretending to be criminals when they are not. This subgenre creates instant suspense in every scene, because there's ALWAYS a chance of slipping up. "Donnie Brasco" is the best of the recent films, with classics like "Street With No Name" (Mark Stevens is a cop who joins the mob) and "House Of Bamboo" (Robert Stack joins a vicious gang of post WW2 black marketeers) plus flicks like "Deep Cover" (Lawrence Fishburne works for drug kingpin Jeff Goldblum) and "No Man's Land" (D.B. Sweeny steal cars for Charlie Sheen - script by "Law & Order's Dick Wolf) as other good examples. My original script for "The Base" fit this subgenre.

29) REVENGE. Tired of taking it, they begin dishing it out. In "Death Wish" Paul Kersey's wife is killed and he tracks the scum who did it... and kills them. When Lee Marvin is shot by his wife and best friend in "Point Blank", he rises from the dead to track them down in Los Angeles, killing anything that gets in his way. In "Ms. 45" a woman is gang raped, but doesn't take it lying down - wearing a variety of disguises she gains each of her attacker's trust... then

kills them. In "Kill Bill" the Bride is killed on her wedding day... but comes back to get even! After the mob kills Glenn Ford's wife and daughter, he becomes a one man army in "The Big Heat". Revenge is the way to have your cake and eat it, too.The audience gets to cheer people doing really mean things.

30) DISASTER MOVIES. Here's a subgenre I thought was long dead, until a rash of fairly recent films brought it back - “2012” and the rest. Recently John Sweetnam sold a spec that mixes the Disaster and Found Footage subgenres titled “Cat 6” - and Disaster films seem hot again. Past hits "Armageddon" and "Deep Impact" have traces of the disaster subgenre in them. In these films some gigantic natural disaster is the background for a story of survival. A cousin to the Adventure Movie in that both are man against nature. Usually there is a strong conflict within the group of survivors - a question of leadership or responsibility for the disaster. Best disaster movie ever made is still "San Francisco" (1936), with the all-star "Towering Inferno" and "Airport" - better examples than more films like "Daylight", "Dante's Peak" and "Volcano"

31) ACTION + COMEDY. The most common action hybrid isn't Action-Adventure, it's Action-Comedy. Films like “48 Hours”, “Knight & Day”, and the “Rush Hour” movies work as both comedies and action films – and confuse the heck out of Blockbuster employees. I never know which shelf to look on for my favorite films! Lately we've had some films like “Pineapple Express” which didn't do a great job of mixing the genres but was still fun. The key to an Action Comedy (or any hybrid) is that the more structured genre needs to be dominant. When an audience watches these films, they see them as *both* genres – so the story has to work in both genres. In a comedy you can get away with all kinds of wild coincidences and crazy plotting, but those things *don't* work in an action film. If half of your script isn't working – that can be a problem. The way “48 Hours” came to be was that it began life as a straight action script – with an action screenplay's solid structure – then was rewritten to be more comedy when Eddie Murphy was hired. So the jokes and comedy were added to an action script that worked. No matter what two genres you mix (and more on mixed genres in a moment) the more structed genre needs to be dominant. Clues mystery + action? The *mystery* has to work.

32) SPOOFS. Action played for laughs. The Austin Powers" movies are great examples - they make fun of all of the conventions of the action movie while strictly adhering to them. The Kentucky Fried Theater guys are the masters of this subgenre, from spoofs of disasters movies like "Airplane!" to spoofs of spy flicks like "Top Secret!" to cops and robbers spoofs like the "Naked Gun" movies and that wicked martial arts spoof in "Kentucky Fried Movie". Some of my favorites in this subgenre are "The Liquidator" (based on the first of John Gardner's Boysie Oakes novels), "Our Man Flint" and "Royal Flash" (a swashbuckler spoof based on George MacDonald Frasier's Flashman novels). The key to a good spoof is (oddly enough) to take the conventions of the genre seriously. What makes the "Enter The Dragon" parody in "Kentucky Fried Movie" so funny is that it's right on the money!

33) SPIES. Except for James Bond movies and the “Bourne” films, this genre seems to be dormant, but if James Cameron decides to do another "True Lies" movie that may change. This is a catch-all subgenre for foreign intrigue movies, from the glossy exploits of Bond in movies like "Goldfinger", "Goldeneye" and "The World Is Not Enough" to more cerebral films like "The Spy Who Came In From The Cold" and my favorite "The Ipcress File". Exotic locations, double crosses, and questions of loyalty. Check out the novels of Charles McCarry ("The Secret Lovers") for an interesting look at the spy business. For a more realistic look at spies on film, “Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy” has an amazing performance by Gary Oldman.

34) WAR WITH ALIENS. Though we've had movies like the original “War Of The Worlds” in the past, lately we've had a bunch of war movies about alien invasions. “Battle: Los Angeles” gave us a realistic war movie... with an alien invasion. There are a bunch of similar films in the pipeline, as well as “Battleship: The Movie” - which is based on the board game and has Liam Neeson commanding a battleship against a bunch of wet alien ships. We'll see what happens with that one.

35) POST APOCALYPSE. What happens after a Doomsday Thriller. Civilization as we know it is over. There is no society, no rules, no law. People have to fight to survive. I could list a dozen films that fit this genre, but I've decided only to list the best - "Road Warrior" ("Mad Max 2"). Max comes from the anarchy of the outback, joins a make-shift society, and ends up fighting the anarchy he was a part of. It's the quintessential Post Apocalypse Action flick. We've had flops like “Waterworld” and art house flicks like “The Road” and just about everything in between. I think this is a great subgenre, ready to be reborn with the right film. Maybe the new Mad Max film “Fury Road” will be the one?

36) SURVIVAL. In that gray area between adventure and disaster movies you'll find this subgenre about a group of

people forced to work together to survive the elements (including angry natives). These movies usually rely on drama more than action, but the fight for survival creates a fair amount of action. Fights, shoot outs, chases. "Deliverance" is a prime example, but it all started with 1939's "Five Came Back" and 1934's "The Lost Patrol". Don't miss "Southern Comfort", "Sahara", and my personal favorite "Flight Of The Phoenix".

37) MIXED GENRE. Not it's own subgenre, but another umbrella covering those weird hybrids of action and some other genre. Take one genre and add action for a whole new subgenre. Though it's hard to imagine combing the musical with action, "Streets Of Fire" is a kick-ass action musical. Shakespeare and action? Try "Joe MacBeth" (1955). There have been several films combining sports and action, most notably "Rollerball". How about an action monster movie... like "The Mummy"? My "Night Hunter" is a vampire action film with World Kickboxing champ Don "The Dragon" Wilson shooting, kicking, and staking a group of villainous vampires... years later "Blade" parroted the idea at a much higher budget with a much dumber script. "End Of Days" combines the Satanic horror subgenre and the action flick so that Ah-nuld can trade gunfire with Satan (Gabriel Byrne) on the streets of New York. "The Longest Yard" and "Victory" combine the prison action movie and the sports subgenre to create an interesting mixed genre. By mixing genres you can come up with something seemingly original, yet action packed enough to fill the theater on Friday night.

There are dozens of other action subgenres, but not enough space to mention all of them. The remake of "Gone In 60 Seconds" starring Nick Cage didn't revive the "car crash subgenre"... but the “Fast And Furious” series has brought back the car racing subgenre and now morphed into a heist series. Meanwhile a new version of "Smokey And The Bandit" is supposedly in the works, maybe resurrecting the "trucker chase subgenre" that was popular in the late 1970s, early 1980s. And there are disaster movies in outer space in production! Who knows, maybe someone will make another prison-sports movie! Every few years, a new subgenre is born. Maybe you'll be the lucky father or mother of the next trend! Don't be afraid to mix it up and do something different!

Now let's look at one of the best Action Films ever made...

DIE HARD ANALYSIS

Since its release in 1988, "Die Hard" has become a benchmark of action films, frequently cited as one of the best action films of the past twenty years. The film has also become part of Hollywood vocabulary, used to describe other films: "Die Hard" at the Stanley Cup. "Die Hard" on a bus. "Die Hard" on a warship. "Die Hard" in a hospital. "Die Hard" on a train. "Die Hard" in a luxury condo complex. "Die Hard" on a submarine (which is my film “Crash Dive!”). And “Die Hard” in a very tall building but as a comedy (which is “Tower Heist”).

Why has this film received such an elevated degree of recognition and respect? Why is it still considered a classic almost 25 years later? That's a quarter of a century, folks! Why are they working on “Die Hard 5” as I write this? The answer lies in the multi layered characters and complex-yet-organic script by Jeb Stuart and Steven E. deSouza. Every nuance, every twist and reversal, every shading of character is spelled out on the page; making "Die Hard" the ideal learning screenplay for the action genre. It was one of those early scripts I bought, and one of the scripts (along with “48 Hours” by Walter Hill) that influenced me.

But first a little history. When I first moved to Los Angeles I joined the Mystery Writers of America and began going to their regular meetings. They always put me at the “kids table” along with not-yet famous writers like Jan Burke (the great Irene mysteries) and Claudia Puig (now film critic for USA Today) and newspaper reporter Michael Connolly while he was coming up with Harry Bosche. The Holiday Party was the big meeting every year, held at the old Sportsmans Lodge in Studio City (down the street from where I live). At those parties you could hang out with the “Big Dogs” who seldom came to the monthly meetings. One year I hung out with Rod Thorp who wrote the novel that “Die Hard” was based on, “Nothing Lasts Forever”. Because I had hoped he would be there, I had the paperback in my pocket and got him to sign it. I had a half dozen paperbacks in my pockets and got a bunch of autographs that night. Over a few drinks, he told me the backstory...

"Die Hard" began life as a sequel to another movie. In 1968, Roderick Thorp's best selling novel "The Detective" had been made into a film starring Frank Sinatra and Lee Remick, released by 20th Century Fox. When the film became a hit, the producers told Thorp if he wrote a sequel, they would buy it. Thorp's response was "I'm writing one now." Then he went home and started writing a new chapter in the life of the detective played by Frank Sinatra. He had read a book titled "The Glass Tower" (which would eventually be made into the film "The Towering Inferno") about a group of people trapped on the top floor of a high rise office building by a raging fire, and found the idea of people trapped above the reach of rescue equipment intriguing.

In that time period, the newspaper headlines seldom reported fires. What they did report was civil unrest, the latest bombings by the Weather Underground, and the latest kidnapping or bank robbery committed by the Red Army terrorist group. So Thorp substituted terrorists for fire, his Detective for the firemen... and "Nothing Lasts Forever" was born.

Fox made a "back loaded" purchase deal with Thorp, with the majority of his payment coming when the film went into production. This didn't bother Thorp, as the hardback book would certainly become a best seller as soon as the film was officially announced. Thorp was on easy street.

Until Frank Sinatra turned down the film. And the hardback book (without the heat of the film deal) didn't become a best seller. "Nothing Lasts Forever" didn't even go to paperback until 1979, and even with good reviews ("Single mindedly brilliant in concept and execution" - Los Angeles Times) it did not sell well.

Fifteen years later, Joel Silver was looking for a project they could make on the cheap. He found "Nothing Lasts Forever" in the Fox archives and commissioned a script.

The first person they offered the lead to was, of course, Frank Sinatra. He had played the character in the hit film "The Detective", after all. Sinatra turned it down again. Silver offered it to Robert Mitchum. Mitchum thought there was too much running and jumping for a man his age, and declined.

With the clock ticking, Silver decided to change the story from the father/estranged daughter conflict of the novel to a husband/estranged wife conflict, and hire a younger man. Steven deSouza made revisions, and turned "Nothing Lasts Forever" into "Die Hard". Bruce Willis was paid the unbelievable fee of five million dollars for his first film role... And Roderick Thorp's novel finally became a paperback best seller!

STRUCTURE

The key to "Die Hard"s success is its adherence to the special structure of action films. The most important single element in an action script is not the protagonist, but the Villain's Plan. We can excise John McClane from "Die Hard" and we would still have a group of hostages held on the 30th floor of the Nakatomi Building by terrorist/"exceptional thief" Hans Gruber. Officer Powell might then become the protagonist. If we remove Powell from the scene, the protagonist might become FBI Agent Johnson (no, the other one). Or Holly Genero might become the protagonist, using level-headed strength to save her fellow captives. Only Hans Gruber and his plan to rob the Nakatomi Building on Christmas Eve remains the constant.

In an action script, the protagonist is reactive; it is the villain who has the active role. When Hans and his team take over the Nakatomi Building to rob its vault of 640 million dollars in negotiable bonds, they take the Christmas party crowd on the 30th floor hostage. We find out later, the hostages are an integral part of their plan. The hostages bring in the FBI, and Hans needs the FBI to shut off the power grid (which will open the vault). When Holly Genero is taken hostage, she is part of Hans' plan. One of the actions he has taken which will lead to the robbery of the Nakatomi vault.

McClane has a reactive role. His estranged wife has been taken, and he sets out to rescue her. Before Hans took her hostage, he had no reason to rescue her. His motivation exists only because of Hans' actions. The most important character in "Die Hard" is Hans Gruber, and the character motivations for the success of the script are his. Not McClane's.

But what makes "Die Hard" into a superior script is the nexus between the Villain's Plan and the Protagonist's character arc. Though we could remove McClane from the story and still have a film, it is John McClane who turns "Die Hard" into the quintessential model for action scripts.

ORGANIC ACTION

What makes John McClane the perfect protagonist for "Die Hard" is that the external conflict forces him to confront and solve an internal conflict, leading to a single solution which solves both problems and brings peace to the protagonist.

John McClane is estranged from his wife Holly because he will not accept her as a career woman. Her career comes second to his, and his attitude is expressed in this exchange (pg 7, 8):

***

ARGYLE
So, your lady live out here?

McCLANE
The past six months.
ARGYLE
(thinking about that)
Meanwhile, you still live in New York?
McCLANE
You're nosey, you know that, Argyle?
ARGYLE
So, you divorced, or what?

McClane gives up.

McCLANE
She had a good job, it turned into a
great career.

ARGYLE
But meant her moving here.

McCLANE
Closer to Japan. You're fast.

ARGYLE
So, why didn't you come?

McCLANE
'Cause I'm a New York cop who used to
be a New York kid, and I got six months
backlog of New York scumbags I'm still
trying to put behind bars. I don't just
get up and move.

ARGYLE
(to the point)
You mean you thought she wouldn't make
it out here and she'd come crawling on
back, so why bother to pack?

McCLANE

Like I said, Argyle.... You're fast.

***

McClane wants Holly to come to him both physically (note the number of times he uses New York in his exchange) and metaphorically (Argyle's observation that McClane would like her to come crawling back to him). He doesn't feel the need to meet her halfway, and we get the feeling he has flown to Los Angeles in the hopes of taking her back to New York with him. When they meet, McClane and Holly have this exchange (from page 16 &17).

***

McCLANE
I remember this one particular married
woman, she went out the door so fast
there was practically a jet wash...I
mean, talk about your windchill factor...

HOLLY
Didn't we have this same conversation in
July? Damn it, John, there was an opportunity
out here... I had to take it...

McCLANE
No matter what it did to out marriage?

HOLLY
My job and my title and my salary did
nothing to our marriage except change
your idea of what it should be....
You want to know my idea of a marriage?
It's a partnership where people help
each other over the rough spots, console
each other when there's a down... and when
there's an up, hell, a little Goddamn applause
or an attaboy wouldn't be too bad.
(quietly)
I needed that, John.
(pause)
I deserved that.

There's a clumsy pause as if she's challenging him to say...
something, but he sets his jaw, says nothing.

***

Without being antagonistic, McClane refuses to meet Holly halfway. He refuses to come to her. It is only when Hans' Plan puts Holly in danger, that McClane finally realizes how much he loves her, and how uncompromising his stance concerning their marriage has become (his "Hamlet Moment"). Witness this exchange with Officer Powell from page 94:

***

McCLANE
Look... I'm getting a bad feeling up
here... I'd like you to do something
for me. Look up my wife... and tell her...

tell her... I've been a jerk. When things
panned out for her, I should have been
behind her all the way... We had something
great going until I screwed it up. She was
the best thing that ever happened to a
bum like me. She's heard me say I Love You
a thousand times, but she never got to
hear this... honey, I'm sorry.

***

It is only after he faces and conquers this internal conflict that he becomes strong enough to take on Hans (his external conflict) and rescue Holly and the other hostages. Without the external conflict from Hans' Plan, McClane would not have been forced to resolve this problem, and their marriage would have ended. The resolution for the external conflict and internal conflict intersect, creating a strong, organic plot.

THEME

The theme of "Die Hard" is probably dealing with greed and need and love. McClane starts out wanting to drag Holly and the kids back to New York City kicking and screaming, but learns he would risk his life for the love of his wife. Many other characters echo the green and need and love theme throughout the script and find themselves risking their lives for the things they love.

Holly has a love of self reliance and independence so strong that she risks her life by standing up to the terrorists, as in the scene on page 54-I and 54-J where Holly confronts Hans, slyly calling him an idiot and stating that "Personally, I don't enjoy being this close to you," in order to get medical help and bathroom privileges for the other hostages.

Ellis loves to make deals, which is referred to when his character is introduced on page 12, and on page 67 where he attempts to deal with the terrorists. His love for deal making leads to his death, when the deal sours.

The terrorist Karl loves his brother Tony. When Tony is killed by McClane, Karl vows vengeance. From this point on, Karl's sole motivation is revenge against McClane for his brother's death. He is no longer an active participant in Hans' Plan, except when it intersects his own goals.

The reporter Thornburg loves breaking stories. When he first hears of the Nakatomi Tower takeover, he dumps his girlfriend to cover the story (page 53). Even after getting punched in the nose, Thornburg's response is "Did you get that?" to the camera man. Story before self.

Deputy Chief Dwayne T. Robinson loves to be officious. He would risk the lives of the hostages just for the chance of adding a little red tape to the negotiations.

Even a minor Terrorist's love for junk food takes him to the extreme of snagging a candy bar during a shoot out scene... but that may be greed and need as well.

Hans, of course, loves material possessions. He could discuss men's fashions all day, but they are here to rob the vault of 640 million dollars. After the robbery has soured and Hans has been tossed out a broken window, what does he grab hold of? Holly's gold Rolex. He's still grabbing at possessions, even on his way down to the pavement.

VILLAIN'S SUPERIORITY

Before he reaches the pavement, Hans Gruber has shown himself to be superior in every way. Not only is his plan well thought out and ingenious, he is actually several moves ahead of everyone else. He knows the FBI will cut the power, and has planned ahead. He has a plan for every move McClane makes, from setting the fire alarms to radioing the police. His plan to open the vault at Nakatomi is complex and flawless. Hans' forethought, his "exactness and attention to every detail" has supplied a solution for every conceivable problem.

And Hans is clever enough to think on his feet. When McClane stumbles upon him on the top floor of the building, here's what happens:

***

Hans turns, looks up.
The transformation in his expression and bearing are mind-boggling. Hands shaking, eyes filled with fear, he swallows, looks up at McClane and in a perfect American accent says:

HANS
...OhGodplease...don'tkill me...don't kill me... you're one of them, I know it...

McCLANE
Whoa, easy man. I won't hurt you.

***

This scene turns into a multi-reversal. Hans talks McClane into giving him a gun. Hans then reveals his identity and aims the gun at McClane. But McClane has removed the clip, making the gun useless. But Hans has alerted Karl and Franco, who attack McClane. Which leads to the glass shooting sequence, where Hans proves his strategic superiority, and presses McClane to his point of no return which leads into the third act.

This is the first time that McClane and Hans come face to face, and it happens fairly late in the script (page 78). The relationship between hero and villain in "Die Hard" doesn't follow the "Flipside" model traditionally used in action films, where the hero and villain's similarities are accentuated. Instead, "Die Hard" harkens back to the social consciousness films of the 1930s, like Warner Brother's "Captain Blood", where the differences between hero and villain are highlighted... which again may play into the need and greed and love.

McClane and Hans are almost opposites. McClane with his working class, blue collar back ground; and Hans with his classical education and Saville Row suits. This is a battle of style and substance, with McClane's street experience pitted against what Hans read about in Time Magazine or Forbes and saw on 60 Minutes (pg 24, 68, 74). McClane and Hans' first conversation (pg 54-A) points out the contrasts between the two. Hans' dialogue is refined, he refers to McClane as a 'party crasher'. McClane, on the other hand, makes references to game shows and cowboys, calling himself "Just the fly in the ointment, the monkey in the wrench, the pain in the ass".

One of the keys to the success of "Die Hard" is John McClane himself. He speaks in a language we can understand, rather than the stuffy, dry, pseudo intellectual and professorial language of Hans. He IS a cowboy: an individualistic man whose character is earthy and grounded in reality. A multi layered hero, who isn't afraid to admit to his fear. In his introduction (pg 1), we see him white knuckled as the 747 lands in Los Angeles. When a fellow passenger comments on his fear of flying, McClane makes a joke about it at his own expense. He is a man who acknowledges his fears and weaknesses and has learned to live with them.

When McClane is faced with dangerous situations later on, this fear humanizes him. He is not some super human hero; but a husband, father, and very mortal man who must overcome his fears to survive. He feels as we would in his situation. McClane must grow into a hero to survive. That growth is the key to a successful action script, as witnessed by both "The Fugitive" and "In The Line Of Fire" which follow the same pattern.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the most impressive aspect's of Steven deSouza's writing in "Die Hard" is the ending, where a dozen sub plots are brought to conclusion in 4 quick pages. From Hans' death, to the Nakatomi Bonds falling like Christmas snow, to Holly giving up her gold Rolex (and all the greed is symbolizes), to Argyle the limo driver's smashing the getaway car in the underground garage, to the first face-to-face meeting of hero and sidekick (McClane and Powell), to Thornburg getting punched in the nose (for being too nosey), to Dpt. Chief Robinson's officiousness being completely ignored, to Karl's last ditch revenge for his brother's death, to Sgt. Powell regaining his ability to shoot his gun, to Holly and McClane reuniting... All of this and more in the space of four flowing pages. DeSouza makes this complex web seem effortless and elegant.

By weaving together the big action story fueled by the plan of a larger than life villain, with the smaller, personal story of a husband who must find the courage to admit he is wrong before he can reconcile with his estranged wife; Steven deSouza has turned "Die Hard" into a classic action film, the model of what a genre script should strive for, and the barometer with which to measure all future action films.

FADE OUT

The version of the script cited in theis article is the Second Revised Draft, Revision #17, dated January 27, 1988.

AFTERWORDS

I never set out to write screenwriting articles and books, I'm a working pro screenwriter with a couple of producers wondering where their script is... But back in 1991 I complained to the editor of a screenwriting newsletter that no one writing for them had ever sold a script that got made... and ended up being an unpaid writer for them. Now I had to figure out how to explain how screenplays worked and why they sometimes didn't work. Suddenly I found myself writing about writing for a bunch of publications including Writers Digest and Movie Maker and the Independent Film Channel Magazine. Oh, and Script Magazine. Some written advice I gave some fellow pro writers ended up becoming my book “The Secrets Of Action Screenwriting” and the Blue Book series followed. Once I began looking at how scripts worked (or did not work) I couldn't stop writing articles – and now have a website and a blog and about 7 books worth of screenwriting articles on my hard drive.

If you liked the information in THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING and want more - for *free* - check out my Script Tip of the day at http://www.ScriptSecrets.Net - there are 380 of them in rotation, and when I get to 500 I'm putting it on automatic and going to the beach.

I also have a blog where I chronicle my adventures in Hollywood and talk about my favorite films and generally complain a lot. http://sex-in-a-sub.blogspot.com Don't let the title fool you, there is no sex involved, it's a terrible note I got from HBO on my rash Dive! movie. You can read about it on the blog.

You can also follow me on Twitter at http://www.twitter.com/wcmartell every once in a while I might say something funny, and I often post links to articles from my vault.

And if you could do could do me a favor and *write a review of this Action Book at Amazon*, that would be great. I'm not asking you to lie and write a good review if you didn't like it – be honest! Any problems you had with the book will be used to improve the next version (which you will probably plug right into your skull). But if you *did* like the book, if you would be so kind as to tweet your friends, FB status them, mention it on message boards, Google Plus your circles, and call everyone in your cell phone contact list at 4am while drunk and tell them you liked it; that would be great! The Secrtets Of Action Screenwriting Book has always been a word of mouth thing – no advertizing, people who like them tell their screenwriting friends. Which is how all of the pro writers got hold of it - friends told them if was good. So if you liked it, please don't keep it a secret!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William C. Martell just handed in the first draft for the studio remake of a classic 1980s horror film, and has written 19 films that were carelessly slapped onto celluloid: 3 for HBO, 2 for Showtime, 2 for USA Net, and a whole bunch of CineMax Originals (which is what happens when an HBO movie goes really, really wrong). He's been on some film festival juries, including Raindance in London (twice - once with Mike Figgis and Saffron Burrows, once with Lennie James and Edgar Wright – and was called back to "jury duty" in October of 2009). Roger Ebert discussed his work with Gene Siskel on his 1997 "If We Picked The Winners" Oscar show. He's quoted a few times in Bordwell's great book "The Way Hollywood tells It". He has written a column for Script Magazine since 1991, and is now “Editor At Large” (which he suspects may be a dig at his weight) and has a column in every issue. His USA Net flick HARD EVIDENCE was released on video the same day as the Julia Roberts' film Something To Talk About and out-rented it in the USA. In 2007 he had two films released on DVD on the same day (one from Lions Gate, one from Sony) and both made the top 10 rentals.

His book “The Secrets Of Action Screenwriting” is an industry standard. Last year a copy of his book THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING sold on e-bay for $999.00 – he didn't make a cent off the deal.

Mr. Martell has been interviewed in Variety (February 24, 1997), featured in The Hollywood Reporter's first Writers Special Issue (February 1994), was the cover interview in The Hollywood Scriptwriter (October 1996), and was interviewed in the first issue of ScreenTalk Magazine (Denmark). Entertainment Today (March 23, 2001) named his website ScriptSecrets.Net the Best On The Web for screenwriters... and his blog was selected as one of the best by Bachelor's Degree Org.

Past students of Martell's big two day class have sold scripts to Miramax, George Clooney's Section Eight Productions, Joel Silver Films, and the amazing Steve Robinson took what he learned in the class and wrote the winner of the Nokia International Short Film Competition, "Have I Passed?".

Mr. Martell has taught screenwriting courses at Sherwood Oaks College in Los Angeles, for Project Greenlight in Los Angeles, at the Cripple Creek (Colorado) Film Festival, the Ft. Lauderdale (Florida) Film Festival, the Temecula (California) Film Festival, several times at the Santa Fe Screenwriters Conference along side Oscar winners William Kelley (WITNESS), David S. Ward (THE STING), and Oscar nominees Chris DeVore (THE ELEPHANT MAN) and Mark Medoff (CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD), twice at the Las Vegas Screenwriting Conference along side Steven Katz (SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE), Shane Black (LETHAL WEAPON), and Ross LaManna (RUSH HOUR), and three times taught classes at the Sacramento (California) Film Festival.

Mr. Martell's book, THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING has been called: "The best book on the practical nuts-and-bolts mechanics of writing a screenplay I've ever read." - Ted Elliott, co-writer "The Mask Of Zorro", "Shrek", all of the "Pirates Of The Caribbean" movies.

"William C. Martell knows the action genre inside out. Learn from an expert!" - Mark Verheiden, screenwriter, "Time Cop", "The Mask" and TV's "Smallville" and “Falling Skies”.

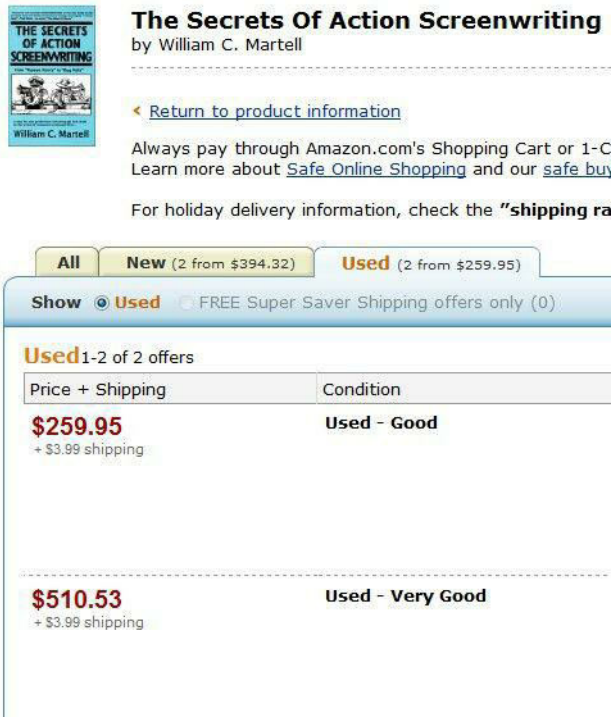
"This book is dangerous. I feel threatened by it." -Roger Avary, Oscar winning screenwriter, "Pulp Fiction".

"My only complaint with SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING is that it wasn't around when I was starting out. The damned thing would have saved me years of trial and error!" - Ken Wheat, screenwriter, "Pitch Black" and "The Fly 2".

"Finally a screenwriting book written by a working professional screenwriter. Bill Martell really knows his stuff, showing you how to write a tight, fast screenplay." - John Hill, screenwriter, "Quigley Down Under".

Mr. Martell was born in the same hospital, in the same month, as Tom Hanks. Many believe they were switched at birth, and Bill should be the movie star. He lives in Studio City, California, and can be found most

afternoons at some coffee shop writing some darned new script on his laptop.



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#12 SUPPORTING CHARACTER SECRETS -- Creating memorable supporting characters. Individualizing characters. More!

#13 ACT 2 SECRETS -- Get rid of the Act 2 blues with these top tips! Why Act 2 is the *easy* act to write! Midpoints. Character conflict Act 2s vs. Plot conflict Act 2s.

#14 WRITE A BLOCKBUSTER -- Write a big summer blockbuster! Using "Gladiator", "Planet Of The Apes" and other examples!

#15 TITLES, NAMES, GENRES (under construction - coming soon!) ***

#16 GRAND FINALES -- Creating great endings for your scripts. The different types on endings. Resolving conflicts.

#17 REWRITES -- How to cut your script, rewrite to strengthen character and theme, and get your script ready for market. How to trim that long script down to size!

#18 RESEARCH GUIDE (under construction - coming soon!) ***

#19 TREATMENTS AND LOGLINES -- How to write a logline, treatment, synopsis, one pager, leave

behind, and one paragraph synopsis!

#20 SELLING YOUR SCRIPT -- From Query Letters and e-queries to Guerrilla Marketing and from Agents to Managers.

#21 PITCHING YOUR SCRIPT -- Tips on the "Elevator Pitch", the "Pitching Pyramid", longer form pitches and how to find producers to pitch to!

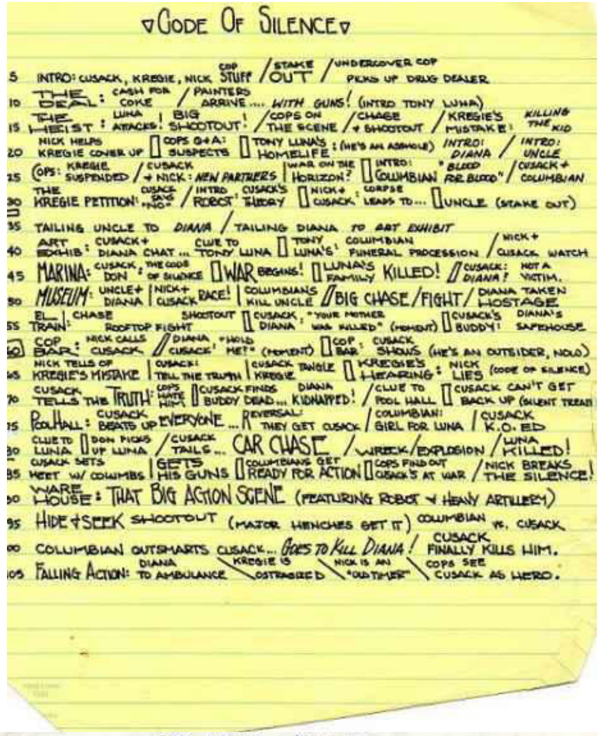
The Next 6 Blue Books to be expanded into Kindle/Nook versions are: VISUAL STORYTELLING, SUPPORTING CHARACTERS, ACT 2, HOOK 'EM WITH YOUR FIRST TEN PAGES, STRUCTURE, STORY, and OUTLINES. Look for them in early 2012!

THE SECRETS OF ACTION SCREENWRITING – revised for 2011. The screenwriting book recommended by Oscar winners and screenwriters of mega-hit movies. "The Secrets Of Action Screenwriting is the best book on the practical nuts-and-bolts mechanics of writing a screenplay I've ever read," Ted Elliott, co-writer of the "Pirates Of The Caribbean" movies, "Shrek", "Mask Of Zorro", and many others.

COMING SOON

EXPERIMENTS IN TERROR: SCREENWRITING LESSONS FROM HITCHCOCK – Hitchcock films experimented with form, structure, and story, and this book uses twenty of his films as examples and illustrations of advanced and experimental screenwriting techniques.

Http://www.ScriptSecrets.Net



▽CODE OF SILENCE▽

5 INTRO: CUSACK, KREGIE, NICK COP STUFF / STAKE OUT / UNDERCOVER COP PICKS UP DRUG DEALER
10 THE DEAL: CASH FOR COKE / PAINTERS ARRIVE.... WITH GUNS! (INTRO TONY LUNA)
15 THE HEIST: LUNA ATTACKS! | BIG SHOOTOUT! / COPS ON THE SCENE / CHASE + SHOOTOUT / KREGIE'S MISTAKE: KILLING THE KID
20 NICK HELPS KREGIE COVER UP [] COPS Q+A: SUSPECTS [] TONY LUNA'S HOMELIFE: (HE'S AN ASSHOLE) INTRO: DIANA / INTRO: UNCLE
25 COPS: KREGIE SUSPENDED / CUSACK + NICK: NEW PARTNERS | WAR ON THE HORIZON? [] INTRO: COLUMBIAN "BLOOD FOR BLOOD" / CUSACK + COLUMBIAN
30 THE KREGIE PETITION: CUSACK SAYS "NO" / INTRO ROBOT: CUSACK'S THEORY [] NICK + CUSACK: CORPSE LEADS TO... [] UNCLE (STAKE OUT)
35 TAILING UNCLE TO DIANA / TAILING DIANA TO ART EXHIBIT
40 ART EXHIB: CUSACK + DIANA CHAT... CLUE TO TONY LUNA [] TONY LUNA'S: COLUMBIAN FUNERAL PROCESSION / NICK + CUSACK WATCH
45 MARINA: CUSACK, DON: THE CODE OF SILENCE [] WAR BEGINS! [] LUNA'S FAMILY KILLED! // CUSACK: DIANA! NOT A VICTIM.
50 MUSEUM: UNCLE + DIANA | NICK + CUSACK RACE! | COLUMBIANS KILL UNCLE // BIG CHASE / FIGHT / DIANA TAKEN HOSTAGE
55 EL TRAIN: CHASE | ROOFTOP FIGHT SHOOTOUT [] CUSACK, DIANA: "YOUR MOTHER WAS KILLED" (MOMENT) [] CUSACK'S BUDDY: DIANA'S SAFEHOUSE
60 COP BAR: NICK CALLS CUSACK // DIANA, CUSACK: "HOLD ME?" (MOMENT) [] COP BAR: CUSACK SHOWS (HE'S AN OUTSIDER, NOW)
65 NICK TELLS OF KREGIE'S MISTAKE | CUSACK: TELL THE TRUTH | CUSACK KREGIE TANGLE [] KREGIE'S HEARING: NICK LIES (CODE OF SILENCE)
70 CUSACK TELLS THE TRUTH: COPS HATE HIM [] CUSACK FINDS BUDDY DEAD... DIANA KIDNAPPED! / CLUE TO POOL HALL [] CUSACK CAN'T GET BACK UP (SILENT TREAT...
75 POOL HALL: CUSACK BEATS UP EVERYONE... REVERSAL: THEY GET CUSACK / COLUMBIAN: GIRL FOR LUNA / CUSACK K.O.ED
80 CLUE TO LUNA [] DON PICKS UP LUNA / CUSACK TAILS... CAR CHASE / WRECK / EXPLOSION / LUNA KILLED!
85 CUSACK SETS MEET W/ COLUMBS | GETS HIS GUNS [] COLUMBIANS GET READY FOR ACTION [] COPS FIND OUT CUSACK'S AT WAR / NICK BREAKS THE SILENCE!
90 WAREHOUSE: THAT BIG ACTION SCENE (FEATURING ROBOT + HEAVY ARTILLERY)
95 HIDE + SEEK SHOOTOUT (MAJOR HENCHES GET IT) COLUMBIAN VS. CUSACK
100 COLUMBIAN OUTSMARTS CUSACK... GOES TO KILL DIANA! CUSACK FINALLY KILLS HIM.
105 FALLING ACTION: DIANA TO AMBULANCE \ KREGIE IS OSTRACIZED \ NICK IS AN "OLD TIMER" \ COPS SEE CUSACK AS HERO.

▽CRASH DIVE▽ SCRATCH

5 INTRO: DEREK FAMILY \ SUB CREW (OUR CAST OF REGULARS SET UP RELATIONSHIPS)
10 DISTRESS SIGNAL: RESCUE OR LEAVE 'EM? | COB'S RECMNDTN: SAVE THEM | THE RESCUE
15 TWIST: TERRORISTS! GASSING CREW / SHOOTING DEREK \ LAUNCH KEY #1 | XO ESCAPES! CHASE IN SUB... KILLED
20 2 KEYS: LAUNCH MODE // RADIOS SUB COMMAND W/ DEMANDS [] GET CARTER! (SUB COMMAND)
25 INTRO: CARTER (BOOKWORM / MR MEMORY) // CARTER / ADMIRAL: DUPLICATE KEYS THE PLAN / THE TEAM
30 RADIO GIRL / EQUIP WETSUIT @ SCENE / GOOD LUCK [] CARTER DROPPED! SNEAKING ONTO SUB (AIR TANK SUSPENSE)
35 ASSEMBLING THE TEAM ONBOARD (SUSPENSE!) WILL THEY BE DISCOVERED?
40 THE PLAN: RE-PATCH COMPUTERS [] OREG DISCOVERED! SILENT FIGHT (FIRST KILL) (HENCH #3)
45 BODY DISCOVERED / RICHTER: SEARCH SUB... KILL HIM (HIDE + GO SEEK SUSPENSE)
50 THE GUN LOCKER | PLOTTING NEW MISSILE COURSE [] COMPUTER TEAM MEMBER DISCOVERED / KILLED (HENCH #1)
55 RADIOING INFO ON TERR [] PLAN BEGINS UNRAVELING / CARTER ON THE RUN. [] INFO ON TERRORISTS (SUSPENSE! TERRSTS INTRCPT
60 NOT GOING AFTER GOLD [] DESTROYING THE RADIO [] MISSILE CO-ORDS... N.Y. NOT WASHINGTON! (
65 RICHTERS REAL PLAN: DESTROY THE U.N. [] CARTER SIDEKICK / SIGNAL BOUY [] CAPTURED BY HENCH #2 — TAKEN TO RICHTER
70 RICHTER: KILL THEM! SIDEKICK KILLED! CARTER ESCAPES W/ LAUNCH KEY!
75 HIDE + GO SEEK ON SUB [] TORPEDOING SIGNAL BOUY [] IT'S ALL UP TO CARTER! TO FIRE CONTROL ....
80 CARTER FIGHTS HENCH #1 (PAYOFF) [] TWIST: COB IS VILLAIN (TAKES KEY + CARTER)
85 RICHTER GETS KEY... LAUNCH SEQ. BEGINS! [] CARTER / COB FIGHT TO THE DEATH!
90 CRASH DIVE: MISSILE OFF COURSE [] CARTER / RICHTER HIGH NOON [] FALLING ACTION (AT SUB COMMAND)

∇HARD EVIDENCE∇

0 KEN + MARILYN: MARRIAGE ON THE ROCKS.
5 OFFICE: LENNY'S HAD OFFER ON OPEN SPACE ∇ KEN'S DULL LIFE △ LENNY / KEN DRINKING.
10 KEN GOES TO CINDY'S: ROMANCE / CINDY'S BIZ TRIP ▯ KEN TO MARILYN: 4 DAY BIZ TRIP
15 KEN / LENNY: COVER 4 ME ▯ FLYING DOWN TO ACAPULCO. ∇ UNPACKING: KEN SPOTS GUN.
20 SEX w/ CINDY / FUN IN THE SUN ∇ CINDY'S WORK.
25 THE DRUG BUY: TWIST / STANWYCK IS DEA ▯ THE SHOOTING ∇
30 COPS/PANIC/ESCAPE ∇ CINDY: I'LL GET RID OF GUN.
35 HOME: KEN MARILYN MOR ▯ PHONE CALL FROM DIETRICH: "I HAVE GUN W/ YOUR PRINTS" "PAY $750,000 OR GO TO JAIL"
40 KEN / CINDY CONFRONT: SHE GAVE GUN TO BOSS / PAY HIM, HE'S A KILLER ∇ WIFE CONFRONTS: I FOLLOWED YOU TODAY – YOU WEREN'T ON BIZ...
45 KEN CONFESSES TO AFFAIR | MARILYN WANTS A DIVORCE ∇ KEN / LENNY: $750,000? ∇ SELL THE OPEN SPACE LAND... NO. MAYBE.
50 KEN TAILS CINDY... TO STANWYCK (HE'S ALIVE!) KEN SNAPS A PICTURE.
55 KEN MEETS DIETRICH: NO PAY... PHOTO OF STANWYCK. ∇ KEN / LENNY (PHONE) NO REASON... SELL LAND.
60 KEN / MARILYN MOR | DIETRICH CALLS – READ PAPER ∇ PAPER: CINDY MURDERED! ∇ DIETRICH: NOW WILL YOU PAY?
65 KEN BREAKS DOWN, ADMITS ALL TO MARILYN: WILL YOU HELP ME? ∇ LENNY SELLS LAND... GIVES KEN $ ... + GUN
70 MONROE: Q + A ∇ KEN / MARILYN: MEET DIETRICH, $ FOR GUN | DIETRICH HAS ANOTHER GUN! | KEN SHOOTS HIM | CLUE TO STANWYCK
75 KEN CALLS STANWYCK: GUN $? ∇ THEY SET DETAILS ∇ MONROE DOGS KEN: SHOOTING, WHERE WERE YOU? MARILYN ALIBIS
80 KEN + MARILYN: SEX, ROMANCE.... ▯ MEET WITH STANWYCK... $ FOR GUN.... STANWYCK GRABS WIFE.
85 KEN SHOOTS STANWYCK W/ CINDY'S GUN! RESCUES WIFE... CLUES TO LENNY!
90 KEN CONFRONTS LENNY | FIGHT OVER GUN... | LENNY SHOOTS KEN! (BLANKS) ∇ MONROE CUFFS LENNY ▯ KEN / MARILYN: THEY USE AIRPLANE TIX.

⊕ THINK "OBSESSION": HERO WON'T SELL LAND, LENNY SETS HIM UP TO SELL IT.

▽ MARGIN FOR TERROR ▽

LUXURY APTS.

SET UP (WATCHING)

0 TOM/LINDA ARGUE (MOTOR HOME VACATION) DON + PATTY SHOW | BOYS LIGHT BBQ — INTRO JIMMY + BURNS
5 BANK ROBBERY (INTRO 7 VILLIANS) ▯ ALARM ▯ VILLIAN #1 SHOOTS + KILLS #7 (WHO ALARMED)
10 CAR CHASE! VAN O' BADDIES VS. COPS.
15 WRECK IN FRONT OF APT ▯ BADDIES ASSIMILATE ▯ SOME APT FOLKS XAMINE CRASH ▯ BADDIES SPOT WINNEBAGO
20 COPS ARRIVE: HOSTAGE SITUATION ▯ SCAVENGER HUNT FOR WBGO KEYS · ROUND UP RESIDENTS.
25 TOM + DON HIDE ▯ RESIDENTS! REC ROOM ▯ CARSON KILLED! (TOM + DON WATCH) ▯ DON MAKES NOISE!!
30 ACTION! VILLANS CHASE ON ROOFTOP ▯ MAZE ▯ FIGHT: KILL VILLIAN #6 ▯ DROP #6 AT POOLSIDE.

DEFENSE

35 ROOFTOP FOOTCHASE! SHOOTOUT ▯ DON SHOT! FALLS TO DEATH ▯ #5 TO #1 ANOTHER
40 SHOOTING BRINGS IN SWAT TEAM #1: MAZE / SHOOTINGS / SNUFFED ▯ TOM GRABS COP GUN
45 TOM CHASED! ROOM TO ROOM HIDE AND SEAK ▯ FIGHT IN ROOM (#5 DIES) ▯ STAIRWAY SHOOTOUT.
50 UPSTAIRS ROOM SHOOTOUT ▯ VERANDA: HAND OVER HAND ▯ PASSES ROOM W/ MONEY (4 BADDY #3 + #4)
55 SWAT TEAM #2: ROOFTOP AMBUSH ▯ JIMMY'S ESCAPE
60 VILANS NEED BATE BEEPER ▯ BURNS: LET'S MAKE A DEAL [SNUFFED] ▯ ROBBER DEMANDS: CHOPPER [KILLS 2 HOSTAGES]

OFFENSE (TAKE CONTROL)

65 COPS COMPLY ▯ TOM MEETS JIMMY: FIRECRACKERS ▯ TOM STEALS $ → APT INT. (#3 DIES) SHOOTOUT [MAZE W/ #4]
70 #4 TO #1: TOM HAS $ ▯ VILLANS CAN'T LEAVE W/O $ ▯ TOM BUMPS INTO #5: FIGHT W/ SHOOTING ▯ #1 VILLAN (DISCOVERS) TAKES LINDA HOSTAGE
75 TOM VS #5: SHOTGUN FIGHT ▯ SHOOTOUT → ▯ TO ROOM, → "BATTLE OF THE TITANS" (SMASHES OUTSIDE)
80 POOLSIDE SHOOTOUT → FOOTCHASE → TOM ESCAPES. ▯ #5 BUMPS INTO JIMMY!! ▯ #1: TRADE, $ FOR YOUR WIFE
85 TRADE: GIRL FOR $ ▯ SHOOTOUT (#5 DIES) — LINDA RESCUED —
90 MAZE: TOM CHASES #1 + #2: SHOOTOUT (#2 GETS IT): TO HIGH NOON → #1 KILLED ▯ COALS ARE READY!

STORY IS ABOUT YUPPYS WHO ARE FORCED TO ACT IN ORDER TO SURVIVE. COOPERATION IS NOT THE ANSWER AS TERROR SETS IN. CUT BACK TO LINDA AND PATTY EVERY SO OFTEN. (MOONDANCE)

▼ UNREASONABLE FORCE ▼

5 RESTAURANT: 3 MASKED MEN PULL VIOLENT ROBBERY! MURDER MRS. MENDOLSON!

(10) PIER: INTRO HARRY (THE COPS ARE DEAD) SHOOTOUT! PIER CHASE! HARRY'S PARTNER SHOT!

15 HARRY'S NEW PARTNER: KELLY (SHE'S A GIRL!) THEY HATE EACH OTHER! ‖ Q+A RESTAURANT WITNESSES

(20) TWIST ROBBERY WAS MURDER OF MRS. MENDOLSON! KELLY KILLS PEDRO.

25 INTRO: WOODBRIDGE (VILLAIN), WILDER, ZUCKER (HENCH) + PLAN: SMUGGLING GUNS.

(30) CLUE TO PEDRO. PEDRO'S APT: BIG SHOOTOUT! HARRY KILLS PEDRO.

END ACT ONE

35 THE DEAD END. HARRY / KELLY: RELUCTANT BONDING (FORCED TO COOPERATE) "COWBOY" IS ONE OF ROBBERS.

(40) CLUE TO BAR BAR (IT'S TOPLESS): VIOLENCE ERUPTS! SHOOTOUT... COWBOY KILLED.

45 HARRY + KELLY AT PAWN SHOP: "THE BUTCHER." ‖ COMPUTER: LEAD TO ZUCKER ("THE BUTCHER")

(50) BUTCHER SHOP: ZUCKER HINTS HE DONE IT.... ALMOST CONFESSES... KILLED BY SNIPER! SNIPER ATTACK! SNIPER ESCAPES

55 ★ A DAY AT THE PARK: HARRY KELLY (DISCUSS THE CASE) "HILL KLEGG"?

(60) HILL KLEGG = PHONE # MENDOLSON'S PHONE NUMBER... MEET WITH MENDOLSON PARKING GARAGE SHOOT OUT MENDOLSON KILLED!

65 CAR CHASE: HARRY KELLY CHASE MENDOLSON'S KILLER (WILDER)

(70) ALLEY AMBUSH! HARRY KELLY SURROUNDED! KELLY IS KILLED!

END ACT TWO

75 HARRY CALLED ON THE CARPET: IS HE RESPONSIBLE? DARK TIMES HARRY SUSPENDED.

(80) TWIST KELLY IS ALIVE! WOODBRIDGE'S PRISONER ‖ HARRY GETS HIS GUNS!

(85) WAREHOUSE HARRY ATTACKS! RESCUES KELLY! THEY TEAM UP! BIG SHOOTOUT!

(90) HARRY KELLY VS. 15 BADGUYS: HARRY + GIANT / KELLY + WILDER: FORKLIFT DUST!

(95) WOODBRIDGE ESCAPES BY BOAT ‖ BIG BOAT CHASE! SHOOT OUT ON THE WATER.

(100) VERY PISTOL: GUN BARGE SUBMARINE EXPLODES KELLY FIGHTS WOODBRIDGE! END!

▼ RIPTIDES ▼

0 SANDI'S FRISBEE ... MEETING ROBERT (THE BEACH DICHOTOMY)

5 ROBERT / LAURA: SEX WITHOUT PASSION ‖ SANDI / TED: SEX W/O BOND

10 HOUSE PARTY: SANDI + ROBERT CHAT (FLIRT) ⓒ ‖ SANDI WATCHES HOUSE (HOOKED)

15 ROBERT / SANDI: SEX ⊗ (SUSPENSE AS WIFE PULLS UP)

20 SANDI + TED BREAK-UP ‖ SEX IN THE HOUSE (WHILE WIFE SLEEPS) ‖ ROBERT LAURA! R.O.R.

25 MIDNIGHT SWIM: RIPTIDES / SEX ON THE BEACH (TED WATCHES)

30 ROBERT TELLS SANDI HE WANTS HER... PLOT TO MURDER LAURA

35 TED PAID TO FLY TO D.F. ‖ ROBERT TELLS MARK + H.F. TRIP ‖ FACEBOOK FOR PILLS ‖ ROBERT DINNER + LAURA DIVORCE.

40 LAURA COMING! SANDI SHOWS / TYING UP LAURA / SEX IN FRONT OF WIFE

45 CARRYING OUT TO BOAT (SUSPENSE) ‖ MOORING OUT IN OCEAN: DUMPING ⓒ LAURA

50 AS LAURA DROWNS: THEY MOTOR AWAY ‖ SANDI CALLS COPS (BODY) ‖ SIODMAK FINDS CORPSE ‖ KNOCK ON DOOR (SUSPENSE)

55 MADE: HE'S IN SAN FRAN ‖ RE-ROUTED PHONE CALL

60 ROBERT TELLS SANDI: WE CAN'T SEE EACH OTHER ‖ SIODMAK ON ROBERT (IT WORKED)

65 ROBERT "DOUBLE SANDI INTO" MEET! HE ⊗ DUMPS HER... ‖ ROBERT SCREWS BEACH BUNNYS (SANDI WATCHES)

70 SANDI STALKS ROBERT: FATAL ATTRACTION ‖ TED'S RETURN: BLACKMAIL ‖ SANDI'S RESEARCH: BLACK WIDOW

75 SANDI MAKES HIS LIFE HELL — SANDI + TED JOIN FORCES — ROBERT AGREES: PAYOFF SANDI! (DOUBLE CROSS) TED

80 SANDI + TED AT HOUSE: ROBERT SHOOTS TED AS BURGLAR (SET UP! HOUSE IS "PRE-LOADED")

85 ROBERT CHASES SANDI THROUGH HOUSE ... FIGHT! SHE KILLS HIM.

90 SIODMAK ON THE SCENE: SANDI IN JAIL FOR BLACKMAIL.... VOICEPRINT W/ POLICE CALL (WOODRICH IRONY)

⊗ "RIP ME!"

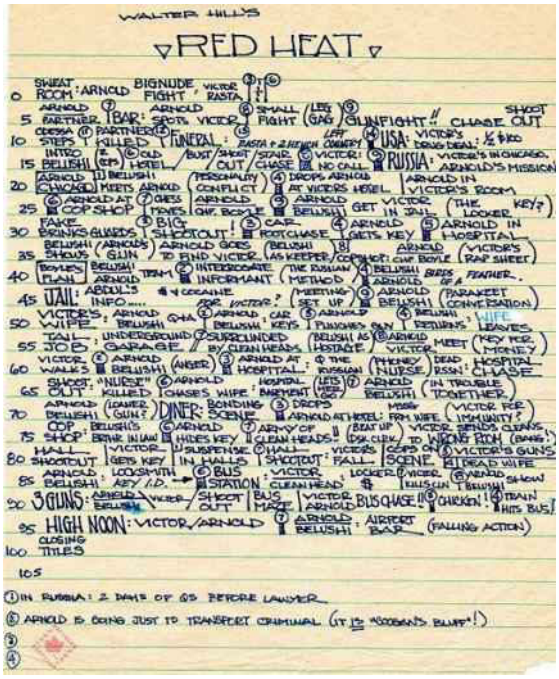
ⓒ ROBERT HAS SEX W/ OTHER GIRLS

1) WIFE DOESN'T SWIM (BREAST STROKE) SWIM/WET METAPHORES

2)

3)

4)


WALTER HILL'S
RED HEAT
SWEAT
ROOM: ARNOLD
BIGNUDE
FIGHT
VICTOR
RASTA
ARNOLD
BAR: SHOTS
VICTOR
FIGHT
SMALL
GAG
GUNFIGHT!!
CHASE
OUT
SHOOT
PARTNER
COBRA
STEPS
KILLED
FUNERAL:
RASTA + 2 HENCH
COUNTRY
USA:
VICTOR'S
DRUG DEAL: ½ TON
INTRO
BELUSHI
OLD
HOTEL
BUST
SHOOT
OUT
STAIR
CHASE
VICTOR:
NO CALL
RUSSIA: VICTOR'S IN CHICAGO.
ARNOLD'S MISSION
ARNOLD
SHOCKED
BELUSHI
MEETS ARNOLD
PERSONALITY
CONFLICT
DROPS ARNOLD
AT VICTOR'S HOTEL
ARNOLD IN
VICTOR'S ROOM
ARNOLD AT
COP SHOP
CHESS
MOVES
ARNOLD
CHF. BOYLE
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
GET VICTOR
IN JAIL
(THE LOCKER KEY?)
FAKE
DRUNK
BIG
SHOOTOUT!
CAR
CHASE
ARNOLD
GETS KEY
ARNOLD IN
HOSPITAL
BELUSHI
SHOWS
(ARNOLD'S
GUN
ARNOLD GOES
TO FIND VICTOR
BELUSHI
AS KEEPER
ARNOLD
CONTACT: CHF BOYLE
(VICTOR'S
RAP SHEET)
BOYLE'S
FLASH
BELUSHI
ARNOLD
TEAM
INTERROGATE
INFORMANT
THE RUSSIAN
METHOD
BELUSHI
ARNOLD
BIRDS OF A FEATHER..
JAIL
ABDUL'S
INFO....
4 ¼ COCAINE
VICTOR?
MEETING
SET UP
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
(PAROLEE
CONFIRMATION)
VICTOR'S
WIFE
BELUSHI
ARNOLD
CHA
ARNOLD
CAR
KEYS
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
PURCHASES GUN
BELUSHI
RETURNS
LIFE
LEAVES.
TAIL
JOB
UNDERGROUND
GARAGE
SURROUNDED
BY CLEAN HEADS
(BELUSHI AS
HOSTAGE)
ARNOLD
VICTOR
MEET
(KEY FOR
MONEY)
VICTOR
WALKS
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
(ANGER)
ARNOLD AT
HOSPITAL
@ THE
RUSSIAN
(PHONE)
NURSE
DEAD
BSN!
HOSPITAL
CHASE
SHOOT
OUT
"NURSE"
KILLED
ARNOLD
CHASES WIFE
HOSPITAL
BASEMENT
(LETS
HER GO)
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
(IN TROUBLE
TOGETHER)
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
(LOWER
GUN?)
DINER:
BONDING
SCENE
DROPS
ARNOLD AT HOTEL
MEET
FBI
(VICTOR FOR
IMMUNITY?
COP
SHOP
BELUSHI'S
BROTHER IN LAW
ARNOLD
HIDES KEY
ARMY OF
CLEAN HEADS
(BEAT UP
DR. CLERK)
VICTOR SENDS GUARDS
TO WRONG HOTEL (BANG!)
HALL
SHOOTOUT
VICTOR
GETS KEY
SUSPENSE
IN HALLS
HALL
SHOOTOUT
VICTORS
FALL
COPS ON
SCENE
VICTOR'S GUNS
DEAD WIFE
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
LOCKSMITH
ADV. I.D.
BUS
STATION
VICTOR
CLEAN HEAD
LOCKER
$
VICTOR
KILLS ON
BELUSHI
ARNOLD
SHOW
3 GUNS:
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
VICTOR
SHOOT
OUT
BUS
MAZE
VICTOR
ARNOLD
BUS CHASE!!
CHICKEN!!
TRAIN
HITS BUS!
HIGH NOON:
VICTOR/ARNOLD
ARNOLD
BELUSHI
AIRPORT
BAR
(FALLING ACTION)
CLOSING
TITLES
1 IN RUSSIA: 2 DAYS OF 65 BEFORE LAWYER
2 ARNOLD IS GOING JUST TO TRANSPORT CRIMINAL (IT IS "GOODBYE BLUES"!)
3
4