THE TERMINOLOGY OF STORY DESIGN

When a character steps into your imagination, he brings an abundance of story possibilities. If you wish, you could start the telling before the character is born, then follow him day after day, decade after decade until dead and gone. A character’s life encompasses hundreds of thousands of living hours, hours both complex and multileveled.

From an instant to eternity, from the intracranial to the intergalactic, the life story of each and every character offers encyclopedic possibilities. The mark of a master is to select only a few moments but give us a lifetime.

Starting at the deepest level, you might set the story within the protagonist’s inner life and tell the whole tale inside his thoughts and feelings, awake or dreaming. Or you could shift up to the level of personal conflict between protagonist and family, friends, lovers. Or expand into social institutions, setting the character at odds with school, career, church, the justice system. Or wider still, you could pit the character against the environment—dangerous city streets, lethal diseases, the car that won’t start, time running out. Or any combination of all these levels.

But this complex expanse of life story must become the story told. To design a feature film, you must reduce the seething mass and rush of
life story to just two little hours, more or less, that somehow express everything you left out. And when a story is well told, isn’t that the effect? When friends come back from a film and you ask them what it was about, have you noticed they often put the story told inside life story?

“Great! About a guy raised on a sharecropper’s farm. As a kid he toiled with his family under the hot sun. He went to school but didn’t do too well because he had to get up at dawn, all that weeding and hoeing. But somebody gave him a guitar and he learned to play, write his own songs . . . finally, fed up with this backbreaking life, he ran away, living hand to mouth playing in honky-tonk bars. Then he met a beautiful gal with a great voice. They fell in love, teamed up, and, bang, their careers skyrocketed. But the trouble was the spotlight was always on her. He wrote their songs, arranged, backed her up, but people only came to see her. Living in her shadow, he turned to drink. Finally she throws him out, and there he is back on the road again, until he hits rock bottom. He wakes up in a cheap motel in a dusty Midwest town, middle of nowhere, penniless, friendless, a hopeless drunk, not a dime for the phone and no one to call if he had one.”

In other words, TENDER MERCIES told from birth. But nothing of the above is in the film. TENDER MERCIES begins the morning Robert Duvall’s Mac Sledge wakes up at rock bottom. The next two hours cover the next year in Sledge’s life. Yet, in and between scenes, we come to know all of his past, everything of significance that happens to Sledge in that year, until the last image gives us a vision of his future. A man’s life, virtually from birth to death, is captured between the FADE IN and FADE OUT of Horton Foote’s Oscar-winning screenplay.

**Structure**

From the vast flux of life story the writer must make choices. Fictional worlds are not daydreams but sweatshops where we labor in search of material to tailor a film. Yet when asked “What do you choose?” no two writers agree. Some look for character, others for action or strife, perhaps mood, images, dialogue. But no one element, in and of itself, will build a story. A film isn’t just moments of conflict or activity, per-

sonality or emotionality, witty talk or symbols. What the writer seeks are events, for an event contains all the above and more.

**STRUCTURE is a selection of events from the characters’ life stories that is composed into a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions and to express a specific view of life.**

An event is caused by or affects people, thus delineating characters; it takes place in a setting, generating image, action, and dialogue; it draws energy from conflict producing emotion in characters and audience alike. But event choices cannot be displayed randomly or indifferently; they must be composed, and “to compose” in story means much the same thing it does in music. What to include? To exclude? To put before and after what?

To answer these questions you must know your purpose. Events composed to do what? One purpose may be to express your feelings, but this becomes self-indulgence if it doesn’t result in arousing emotions in the audience. A second purpose may be to express ideas, but this risks solipsism if the audience cannot follow. So the design of events needs a dual strategy.

**Event**

“Event” means change. If the streets outside your window are dry, but after a nap you see they’re wet, you assume an event has taken place, called rain. The world’s changed from dry to wet. You cannot, however, build a film out of nothing but changes in weather—although there are those who have tried. Story Events are meaningful, not trivial. To make change meaningful it must, to begin with, happen to a character. If you see someone drenched in a downpour, this has somewhat more meaning than a damp street.

**A STORY EVENT creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a VALUE.**
To make change meaningful you must express it, and the audience must react to it, in terms of a value. By values I don’t mean virtues or the narrow, moralizing “family values” use of the word. Rather, Story Values refers to the broadest sense of the idea. Values are the soul of storytelling. Ultimately ours is the art of expressing to the world a perception of values.

**STORY VALUES** are the universal qualities of human experience that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive, from one moment to the next.

For example: alive/dead (positive/negative) is a story value, as are love/hate, freedom/slavery, truth/lie, courage/cowardice, loyalty/betrayal, wisdom/stupidity, strength/weakness, excitement/boredom and so on. All such binary qualities of experience that can reverse their charge at any moment are Story Values. They may be moral, good/evil; ethical, right/wrong; or simply charged with value. Hope/despair is neither moral nor ethical, but we certainly know when we are at one end of the experience or the other.

Imagine that outside your window is 1980s East Africa, a realm of drought. Now we have a value at stake: survival, life/death. We begin at the negative: This terrible famine is taking lives by the thousands. If then it should rain, a monsoon that brings the earth back to green, animals to pasture, and people to survival, this rain would be deeply meaningful because it switches the value from negative to positive, from death to life.

However, as powerful as this event would be, it still does not qualify as a Story Event because it happened by coincidence. Rain finally fell in East Africa. Although there’s a place for coincidence in storytelling, a story cannot be built out of nothing but accidental events, no matter how charged with value.

A Story Event creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed and experienced in terms of a value and ACHIEVED THROUGH CONFLICT.

Again, a world of drought. Into it comes a man who imagines himself a “rainmaker.” This character has deep inner conflict between his passionate belief that he can bring rain, although he has never been able to do it, and his terrible fear that he’s a fool or mad. He meets a woman, falls in love, then suffers as she tries to believe in him, but turns away, convinced he’s a charlatan or worse. He has a strong conflict with society—some follow him as if he’s a messiah; others want to stone him out of town. Lastly, he faces implacable conflict with the physical world—the hot winds, empty skies, parched earth. If this man can struggle through all his inner and personal conflicts, against social and environmental forces and finally coax rain out of a cloudless sky, that storm would be majestic and sublimely meaningful—for it is change motivated through conflict. What I have described is THE RAINMAKER, adapted to the screen by Richard Nash from his own play.

**Scene**

For a typical film, the writer will choose forty to sixty Story Events or, as they’re commonly known, scenes. A novelist may want more than sixty, a playwright rarely as many as forty.

A SCENE is an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character’s life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance. Ideally, every scene is a STORY EVENT.

Look closely at each scene you’ve written and ask: What value is at stake in my character’s life at this moment? Love? Truth? What? How is that value charged at the top of the scene? Positive? Negative? Some of both? Make a note. Next turn to the close of the scene and ask, Where is this value now? Positive? Negative? Both? Make a note and compare. If the answer you write down at the end of the scene is the same note you made at the opening, you now have another important question to ask: Why is this scene in my script?
If the value-charged condition of the character's life stays unchanged from one end of a scene to the other, nothing meaningful happens. The scene has activity—talking about this, doing that—but nothing changes in value. It is a nonevent.

Why then is the scene in the story? The answer is almost certain to be "exposition." It's there to convey information about characters, world, or history to the eavesdropping audience. If exposition is a scene's sole justification, a disciplined writer will trash it and weave its information into the film elsewhere.

No scene that doesn't turn. This is our ideal. We work to round every scene from beginning to end by turning a value at stake in a character's life from the positive to the negative or the negative to the positive. Adherence to this principle may be difficult, but it's by no means impossible.

DIE HARD, THE FUGITIVE, and STRAW DOGS clearly meet this test, but the ideal is also kept in subtler, though no less rigorous ways, in REMAINS OF THE DAY and THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST. The difference is that Action genres turn on public values such as freedom/slavery or justice/injustice; the Education genre turns on interior values such as self-awareness/self-deception or life as meaningful/meaningless. Regardless of genre, the principle is universal: If a scene is not a true event, cut it.

For example:

Chris and Andy are in love and live together. They wake up one morning and start to squabble. Their spat builds in the kitchen as they hurry to make breakfast. In the garage, the fight becomes nastier as they climb into their car to drive to work together. Finally words explode into violence on the highway. Andy wrenches the car to the shoulder and jumps out, ending their relationship. This series of actions and locations creates a scene: It takes the couple from the positive (in love and together) to the negative (in hate and apart).

The four shifts of place—bedroom to kitchen to garage to highway—are camera setups but not true scenes. Although they intensify behavior and make the critical moment credible, they do not change the values at stake. As the argument moves through the morning, the couple is still together and presumably in love. But when the action reaches its Turning Point—a slamming car door and Andy's declaration, "It's over!"—life turns upside down for the lovers, activity changes to action, and the sketch becomes a complete scene, a Story Event.

Generally the test of whether a series of activities constitutes a true scene is this: Could it have been written "in one," in a unity of time and place? In this case the answer is yes. Their argument could begin in a bedroom, build in the bedroom, and end the relationship in the bedroom. Countless relationships have ended in bedrooms. Or the kitchen. Or the garage. Or not on the highway but in the office elevator. A playwright might write the scene "in one" because the staging limitations of the theatre often force us to keep the unities of time and place; the novelist or screenwriter, on the other hand, might travel the scene, parsing it out in time and space to establish future locations. Chris's taste in furniture, Andy's driving habits—for any number of reasons. This scene could even cross-cut with another scene, perhaps involving another couple. The variations are endless, but in all cases this is a single Story Event, the "lovers break up" scene.

Beat

Inside the scene is the smallest element of structure, the Beat. (Not to be confused with [beat], an indication within a column of dialogue meaning "short pause").

A BEAT is an exchange of behavior in action/reaction. Beat by Beat these changing behaviors shape the turning of a scene.

Taking a closer look at the "lovers break up" scene: As the alarm goes off, Chris teases Andy and he reacts in kind. As they dress, teasing turns to sarcasm and they throw insults back and forth. Now in the kitchen Chris threatens Andy with: "If I left you, baby, you'd be so miserable . . ." but he calls her bluff with "That's
a misery I’d love.” In the garage Chris, afraid she’s losing him, begs Andy to stay, but he laughs and ridicules her plea. Finally, in the speeding car, Chris doubles her fist and punches Andy. A fight, a squeal of brakes. Andy jumps out with a bloody nose, slams the door and shouts, “It’s over,” leaving her in shock.

This scene is built around six beats, six distinctively different behaviors, six clear changes of action/reaction: teasing each other, followed by a give-and-take of insults, then threatening and daring each other, next pleading and ridicule, and finally exchanges of violence that lead to the last Beat and Turning Point: Andy’s decision and action that ends the relationship, and Chris’s dumbfounded surprise.

Sequence
Beats build scenes. Scenes then build the next largest movement of story design, the Sequence. Every true scene turns the value-charged condition of the character’s life, but from event to event the degree of change can differ greatly. Scenes cause relatively minor yet significant change. The capping scene of a sequence, however, delivers a more powerful, determinant change.

A SEQUENCE is a series of scenes—generally two to five—that culminates with greater impact than any previous scene.

For example, this three-scene sequence:

Setup: A young business woman who’s had a notable career in the Midwest has been approached by headhunters and interviewed for a position with a New York corporation. If she wins this post, it’ll be a huge step up in her career. She wants the job very much but hasn’t won it yet (negative). She is one of six finalists. The corporate heads realize that this position has a vital public dimension to it, so they want to see these applicants on their feet in an informal setting before making the final decision. They invite all six to a party on Manhattan’s East Side.

Scene One: A West Side Hotel where our protagonist prepares for the evening. The value at stake is self-confidence/self-doubt. She’ll need all her confidence to pull off this evening successfully, but she’s filled with doubts (negative). Fear knots her middle as she paces the room, telling herself she was a fool to come East, these New Yorkers will eat her alive. She flings clothes out of her suitcase, trying on this, trying on that, but each outfit looks worse than the one before. Her hair is an uncombable tangle of frizz. As she grapples with her clothes and hair, she decides to pack it in and save herself the humiliation.

Suddenly, the phone rings. It’s her mother, calling to lace a good-luck toast with guilt trips about loneliness and her fear of abandonment. Barbara hangs up, realizing that the piranhas of Manhattan are no match for the great white shark at home. She needs this job! She then amazes herself with a combination of clothes and accessories she’s never tried before. Her hair falls magically into place. She plants herself in front of the mirror, looking great, eyes bright, glowing with confidence (positive).

Scene Two: Under the hotel marquee. Thunder, lightning, pelting rain. Because Barbara’s from Terre Haute, she didn’t know to tip the doorman five bucks when she registered, so he won’t go out into the storm to find a cab for a stiff. Besides, when it rains in New York there are no cabs. So she studies her visitors’ map, pondering what to do. She realizes if she tries to run from the West Eighties over to Central Park West, then all the way down CPW to Fifty-ninth Street, across Central Park South to Park Avenue, and up into the East Eighties, she’ll never get to the party on time. So she decides to do what they warn never, ever to do—to run through Central Park at night. This scene takes on a new value: life/death.

She covers her hair with a newspaper and darts into the night, daring death (negative). A lightning flash and, bang, she’s surrounded by that gang that is always out there, rain
or shine, waiting for the fools who run through the park at night. But she didn’t take karate classes for nothing. She kick-fights her way through the gang, breaking jaws, scattering teeth on the concrete, until she stumbles out of the park, alive (positive).

**Scene Three: Mirrored lobby—Park Avenue apartment building.** The value at stake now switches to social success/social failure. She’s survived. But then she looks in the mirror and sees a drowned rat: newspaper shredded in her hair; blood all over her clothes—the gang’s blood—but blood nonetheless. Her self-confidence plummets past doubt and fear until she bows in personal defeat (negative), crushed by her social disaster (negative).

Taxis pull up with the other applicants. All found cabs; all get out looking New York chic. They take pity on the poor loser from the Midwest and usher her into an elevator. In the penthouse they towel off her hair and find mismatched clothes for her to wear, and because she looks like this, the spotlight’s on her all night. Because she knows she has lost anyway, she relaxes into her natural self and from deep within comes a chutzpah she never knew she had; she not only tells them about her battle in the park but makes jokes about it. Mouths go slack with awe or wide with laughter. At end of the evening, all the executives know exactly who they want for the job: Anyone who can go through that terror in the park and display this kind of cool is clearly the person for them. The evening ends on her personal and social triumphs as she is given the job (doubly positive).

Each scene turns on its own value or values. Scene One: self-doubt to self-confidence. Scene Two: death to life; self-confidence to defeat. Scene Three: social disaster to social triumph. But the three scenes become a sequence of another, greater value that overrides and subordinates the others, and that is **THE JOB**. At the beginning of the sequence she has **NO JOB**. The third scene becomes a Sequence Climax because here social success wins her **THE JOB**. From her point of view **THE JOB** is a value of such magnitude she risked her life for it.

It’s useful to title each sequence to make clear to yourself why it’s in the film. The story purpose of this “getting the job” sequence is to take her from **NO JOB** to **JOB**. It could have been accomplished in a single scene with a personnel officer. But to say more than “she’s qualified,” we might create a full sequence that not only gets her the job but dramatizes her inner character and relationship to her mother, along with insights into New York City and the corporation.

**Act**

Scenes turn in **minor** but significant ways; a series of scenes builds a sequence that turns in a **moderate**, more impactful way; a series of sequences builds the next largest structure, the **Act**, a movement that turns on a **major** reversal in the value-charged condition of the character’s life. The difference between a basic scene, a scene that climaxes a sequence, and a scene that climaxes an act is the degree of change, or, more precisely, the degree of impact that change has, for better or worse, on the character—on the character’s inner life, personal relationships, fortunes in the world, or some combination of all these.

An **ACT** is a series of sequences that peaks in a **climactic** scene which causes a major reversal of values, more powerful in its impact than any previous sequence or scene.

**Story**

A series of acts builds the largest structure of all: the **Story**. A story is simply one huge master event. When you look at the value-charged situation in the life of the character at the beginning of the story, then compare it to the value-charge at the end of the story, you should see the **arc of the film**, the great sweep of change that takes life from one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end. This final condition, this end change, must be **absolute** and **irreversible**.
THE STORY TRIANGLE

In some literary circles "plot" has become a dirty word, tarred with a connotation of hack commercialism. The loss is ours, for plot is an accurate term that names the internally consistent, interrelated pattern of events that move through time to shape and design a story. While no fine film was ever written without flashes of fortuitous inspiration, a screenplay is not an accident. Material that pops up willy-nilly cannot remain willy-nilly. The writer redrafts inspiration again and again, making it look as if an instinctive spontaneity created the film, yet knowing how much effort and unnaturalness went into making it look natural and effortless.

To PLOT means to navigate through the dangerous terrain of story and when confronted by a dozen branching possibilities to choose the correct path. Plot is the writer's choice of events and their design in time.

Again, what to include? Exclude? Put before and after what? Event choices must be made; the writer chooses either well or ill; the result is plot.

When TENDER MERCIES premiered, some reviewers described it as "plotless," then praised it for that. TENDER MERCIES not only has a plot, it is exquisitely plotted through some of the most difficult film terrain of all: a story in which the arc of the film takes place within the mind of the protagonist. Here the protagonist experiences a deep and irreversible revolution in his attitude toward life and/or toward himself.

For the novelist such stories are natural and facile. In either third-person or first-person, the novelist can directly invade thought and feeling to dramatize the tale entirely on the landscape of the protagonist's inner life. For the screenwriter such stories are by far the most fragile and difficult. We cannot drive a camera lens through an actor's forehead and photograph his thoughts, although there are those who would try. Somehow we must lead the audience to interpret the inner life from outer behavior without loading

STORY CLIMAX: A story is a series of acts that build to a last act climax or story climax which brings about absolute and irreversible change.

If you make the smallest element do its job, the deep purpose of the telling will be served. Let every phrase of dialogue or line of description either turn behavior and action or set up the conditions for change. Make your beats build scenes, scenes build sequences, sequences build acts, acts build story to its climax.

The scenes that turn the life of the Terre Haute protagonist from self-doubt to self-confidence, from danger to survival, from social disaster to success combine into a sequence that takes her from NO JOB to JOB. To arc the telling to a Story Climax, perhaps this opening sequence sets up a series of sequences that takes her from NO JOB to PRESIDENT OF THE CORPORATION at the Act One climax. This Act One climax sets up an Act Two in which internecine corporate wars lead to her betrayal by friends and associates. At the Act Two climax she's fired by the board of directors and out on the street. This major reversal sends her to a rival corporation where, armed with business secrets gleaned while she was president, she quickly reaches he top again so she can enjoy destroying her previous employers. These acts are her from the hardworking, optimistic, and honest young professional who opens the film to the ruthless, cynical, and corrupt veteran of corporate wars who ends the film—absolute, irreversible change.
the soundtrack with expository narration or stuffing the mouths of characters with self-explanatory dialogue. As John Carpenter said, “Movies are about making mental things physical.”

To begin the great sweep of change within his protagonist, Horton Foote opens TENDER MERCIES with Sledge drowning in the meaninglessness of his life. He is committing slow suicide with alcohol because he no longer believes in anything—neither family, nor work, nor this world, nor the hereafter. As Foote progresses the film, he avoids the cliché of finding meaning in one overwhelming experience of great romance, brilliant success, or religious inspiration. Instead he shows us a man weaving together a simple yet meaningful life from the many delicate threads of love, music, and spirit. At last Sledge undergoes a quiet transformation and finds a life worth living.

We can only imagine the sweat and pains Horton Foote invested in plotting this precarious film. A single misstep—one missing scene, one superfluous scene, a slight misordering of incident—and like a castle of cards, the riveting inner journey of Mac Sledge collapses into portraiture. Plot, therefore, doesn’t mean ham-handed twists and turns, or high-pressure suspense and shocking surprise. Rather, events must be selected and their patterning displayed through time. In this sense of composition or design, all stories are plotted.

**Archplot, Miniplot, Antiplot**

Although the variations of event design are innumerable, they are not without limits. The far corners of the art create a triangle of formal possibilities that maps the universe of stories. Within this triangle is the totality of writers’ cosmologies, all their multitudinous visions of reality and how life is lived within it. To understand your place in this universe, study the coordinates of this map, compare them to your work-in-progress, and let them guide you to that point you share with other writers of a similar vision.

At the top of the story triangle are the principles that constitute *Classical Design*. These principles are “classical” in the truest sense:

timeless and transcultural, fundamental to every earthly society, civilized and primitive, reaching back through millennia of oral storytelling into the shadows of time. When the epic *Gilgamesh* was carved in cuneiform on twelve clay tablets 4,000 years ago, converting story to the written word for the first time, the principles of Classical Design were already fully and beautifully in place.

**CLASSICAL DESIGN** means a story built around an active protagonist who struggles against primarily external forces of antagonism to pursue his or her desire, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change.

This collection of timeless principles I call the Archplot: Arch (pronounced “ark” as in archangel) in the dictionary sense of “eminently above others of the same kind.”
The Archplot, however, is not the limit of storytelling shapes. In the left corner, I place all examples of minimalism. As the word suggests, minimalism means that the writer begins with the elements of Classical Design but then reduces them—shrinking or compressing, trimming or truncating the prominent features of the Archplot. I call this set of minimalist variations Miniplot. Miniplot does not mean no plot, for its story must be as beautifully executed as an Archplot. Rather, minimalism strives for simplicity and economy while retaining enough of the classical that the film will still satisfy the audience, sending them out of the cinema thinking, “What a good story!”

In the right corner is Antiplot, the cinema counterpart to the antinovel or Nouveau Roman and Theatre of the Absurd. This set of antistucture variations doesn’t reduce the Classical but reverses it, contradicting traditional forms to exploit, perhaps ridicule the very idea of formal principles. The Antiplot-maker is rarely interested in understatement or quiet austerity; rather, to make clear his “revolutionary” ambitions, his films tend toward extravagance and self-conscious overstatement.

The Archplot is the meat, potatoes, pasta, rice, and couscous of world cinema. For the past one hundred years it has informed the vast majority of films that have found an international audience. If we skim through the decades—THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY (USA/1904), THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII (Italy/1913), THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (Germany/1920), GREED (USA/1924), THE BATTLESHIP POTEKIN (USSR/1923), M (Germany/1931), TOP HAT (USA/1935), LA GRANDE ILLUSION (France/1937), BRINGING UP BABY (USA/1938), CITIZEN KANE (USA/1941), BRIEF ENCOUNTER (UK/1945), THE SEVEN SAMURAI (Japan/1954), MARTY (USA/1955), THE SEVENTH SEAL (Sweden/1957), THE HUSTLER (USA/1961), 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (USA/1968), THE GODFATHER, PART II (USA/1974), DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS (Brazil/1978), A FISH CALLED WANDA (UK/1988), BIG (USA/1988), TU DOU (China/1990), THELMA & LOUISE (USA/1991), FOUR WEDDINGS AND A FUNERAL (UK/1994), SHINE (Australia/1996)—we glimpse the staggering variety of story embraced within the Archplot.


**FORMAL DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE STORY TRIANGLE**

Closed Versus Open Endings

The Archplot delivers a closed ending—all questions raised by the story are answered; all emotions evoked are satisfied. The audience