

# 10

## SCENE DESIGN

This chapter focuses on the components of scene design: *Turning Points*, *Setups/Payoffs*, *Emotional Dynamics*, and *Choice*. Chapter 11 will analyze two scenes to demonstrate how Beats, changing character behaviors, shape a scene's inner life.

### TURNING POINTS

A scene is a story in miniature—an action through conflict in a unity or continuity of time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character's life. In theory there's virtually no limit to a scene's length or locations. A scene may be infinitesimal. In the right context a scene consisting of a single shot in which a hand turns over a playing card could express great change. Conversely, ten minutes of action spread over a dozen sites on a battlefield may accomplish much less. No matter locations or length, a scene is unified around desire, action, conflict, and change.

In each scene a character pursues a desire related to his immediate time and place. But this *Scene-Objective* must be an aspect of his *Super-Objective* or Spine, the story-long quest that spans from Inciting Incident to Story Climax. Within the scene, the character acts on his Scene-Objective by choosing under pressure to take one action or another. However, from any or all levels of conflict comes a reaction he didn't anticipate. The effect is to crack open the gap between expectation and result, turning his outer fortunes, inner life, or both from the positive to the negative or the

negative to the positive in terms of values the audience understands are at risk.

A scene causes change in a minor, albeit significant way. A *Sequence Climax* is a scene that causes a moderate reversal—change with more impact than a scene. An *Act Climax* is a scene that causes a major reversal—change with greater impact than Sequence Climax. Accordingly, we never write a scene that’s merely a flat, static display of exposition; rather we strive for this ideal: to create a story design in which every scene is a minor, moderate, or major *Turning Point*.

**TRADING PLACES:** The value at stake is wealth. Inspired by *Porgy and Bess*, Billy Ray Valentine (Eddie Murphy) begs on the streets, pretending to be a paraplegic on a skateboard. A gap opens when police try to bust him, then widens enormously when two elderly businessmen, the Duke brothers (Ralph Bellamy and Don Ameche), suddenly intervene with the cops to save him. Billy’s begging has caused his world to react differently and more powerfully than he expected. He doesn’t resist, but wisely chooses to surrender to the gap. CUT TO: A walnut-paneled office where the Duke brothers have dressed him in a three-piece suit and made him a commodities broker. Billy’s financial life goes from beggar to broker around this delightful *Turning Point*.

**WALL STREET:** The values at stake are wealth and honesty. A young stockbroker, Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), secures a meeting with billionaire Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas). Bud lives from paycheck to paycheck, but his integrity is intact. When he proposes legitimate business ideas, his sales pitch provokes forces of antagonism he couldn’t anticipate as Gekko retorts: “Tell me something I don’t know.” Suddenly Bud realizes Gekko doesn’t want to do honest business. He pauses, then reveals a corporate secret that his own father had told him. Bud chooses to join Gekko in an unlawful conspiracy, reversing his inner nature from honest to criminal and his fortunes from poor to rich around this powerful and ironic *Turning Point*.

The effects of *Turning Points* are fourfold: *surprise*, *increased curiosity*, *insight*, and *new direction*.

When a gap opens between expectation and result, it jolts the audience with surprise. The world has reacted in a way neither character nor audience had foreseen. This moment of shock instantly provokes curiosity as the audience wonders “Why?”

TRADING PLACES: Why are these two old men saving this beggar from the police? WALL STREET: Why is Gekko saying: “Tell me something I don’t know.” In an effort to satisfy its curiosity, the audience rushes back through what story it’s seen so far, seeking answers. In a beautifully designed story, these answers have been quietly but carefully layered in.

TRADING PLACES: Our thoughts flit back to previous scenes with the Duke brothers and we realize that these old men are so bored with life they’ll use their wealth to play sadistic games. Further, they must have seen a spark of genius in this beggar or they wouldn’t have picked him to be their pawn.

WALL STREET: The “why?” provoked by Gekko’s “Tell me something I don’t know” is instantly answered by this insight: Of course Gekko’s a billionaire, he’s a crook. Almost no one becomes immensely rich honestly. He too likes games . . . of a criminal kind. When Bud joins him, our memory dashes back to previous scenes at his office, and we realize that Bud was too ambitious and greedy—ripe for a fall.

The nimble and perceptive mind of the audience finds these answers in a flash of understanding. The question “Why?” propels it back through the story, and what it’s seen so far instantly clicks into a new configuration; it experiences a rush of insight into character and world, a satisfying layer of hidden truth.

Insight adds to curiosity. This new understanding amplifies the questions “What’s going to happen next?” and “How will this turn out?” This effect, true in all genres, is vividly clear in *Crime Stories*. Someone goes to a closet for a clean shirt and a dead body falls out. This huge gap triggers a fusillade of questions: “Who committed this murder? How? When? Why? Will the killer be caught?” The writer must now satisfy the curiosity he’s created. From each point of changed value, he must move his story in a new direction to create Turning Points yet to come.

**KRAMER VS. KRAMER:** The moment we see that a thirty-two-year-old man can't make breakfast the scene turns. The question "Why?" sends us back through the few minutes of film that precede the gap. Armed with our life experience and common sense, we seek answers.

First, Kramer's a workaholic, but many workaholics make excellent breakfasts at five A.M. before anyone else is up. More, he's never contributed to his family's domestic life, but many men don't and their wives remain loyal, respecting their husbands' efforts to provide income. Our deeper insight is this: Kramer is a child. He's a spoiled-rotten brat whose mother always made breakfast for him. Later her role was filled by girlfriends and waitresses. Now he's turned his wife into a waitress/mother. Women have spoiled Kramer all his life and he's been only too happy to let them. Joanna Kramer was, in essence, raising two children, and overwhelmed by the impossibility of a mature relationship, she abandoned the marriage. What's more, we feel she was right to do it. New direction: Kramer's growth into manhood.

The Climax of *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK* propels the longest rush for insight I know. As Darth Vader (David Prowse/James Earl Jones) and Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) fight to the death with light sabers, Vader steps back and says: "You can't kill me, Luke, I'm your father." The word "father" explodes one of the most famous gaps in film history and hurls the audience back through two whole films separated by three years. Instantly we grasp why Ben Obi-Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) was so worried about what would happen if Darth and Luke ever met face to face. We know why Yoda (voice of Frank Oz) was so desperate to teach Luke command of the Force. We realize why Luke's had so many close escapes: His father has been secretly protecting him. Two films that made perfect sense to this moment now have a new, deeper layer of meaning. New direction: *RETURN OF THE JEDI*.

**CHINATOWN:** Before the Act Two Climax we believe that Mulwray was murdered either for financial gain or in a jealous rage. But when Evelyn says: "She's my sister and my daughter . . ." the gap splits with a shock. To understand her words, we race back

through the film and gain a powerful set of insights: incest between father and daughter, the real motivation for the murder, and the identity of the killer. New direction: the corkscrew twists of Act Three.

### **The Question of Self-Expression**

A storyteller puts a friendly arm around the audience, saying: "Let me show you something." He takes us to a scene, such as the one in CHINATOWN, and says: "Watch Gittes drive to Santa Monica, intent on arresting Evelyn. When he knocks on her door, do you think he'll be invited in? Watch this. Now the beautiful Evelyn comes downstairs, happy to see him. Think he'll soften and let her off the hook? Watch this. Next she fights to protect her secret. Think she'll keep it? Watch this. As he listens to her confession, will he help her or arrest her? Watch this."

The storyteller leads us into expectation, makes us think we understand, then cracks open reality, creating surprise and curiosity, sending us back through his story again and again. On each trip back, we gain deeper and deeper insight into the natures of his characters and their world—a sudden awareness of the inef-fable truths that lie hidden beneath the film's images. He then takes his story in a new direction in an ever-escalating progression of such moments.

To tell story is to make a promise: If you give me your concentration, I'll give you surprise followed by the pleasure of discovering life, its pains and joys, at levels and in directions you have never imagined. And most important, this must be done with such seeming ease and naturalness that we lead the audience to these discoveries as if spontaneously. The effect of a beautifully turned moment is that filmgoers experience a rush of knowledge *as if they did it for themselves*. In a sense they did. Insight is the audience's reward for paying attention, and a beautifully designed story delivers this pleasure scene after scene after scene.

Yet, if we were to ask writers how they express themselves, more often than not they'll reply: "With my words. My descriptions

of the world and the dialogue I create for my characters. I'm a writer. I express myself in language." But language is merely our text. First, last, and always, self-expression occurs in the flood of insight that pours out of a Turning Point. Here the writer opens his arms to the world, saying: "This is my vision of life, of the nature of the human beings that inhabit my world. This is what I think happens to people in these circumstances for these reasons. My ideas, my emotions. Me." Our most powerful means of self-expression is the unique way we turn the story.

Then come words. We apply our literary talent with vividness and skill, so that when a beautifully written scene is acted, the audience is carried willingly and pleasurably through our Turning Points. As important as language is, however, it's only the surface by which we capture the reader to lead him to the inner life of the story. Language is a tool for self-expression and must never become a decorative end of its own.

Imagine now the difficulties of designing a story so that thirty, forty, fifty times over, scenes turn in minor, moderate, or major ways, each expressing an aspect of our vision. This is why weak storytellers resort to substituting information for insight. Why many writers choose to explain their meanings out of the mouths of their characters, or worse, in voice-over narration. Such writing is always inadequate. It forces characters to a phony, self-conscious knowledge rarely found in actuality. More important, even exquisite, perceptive prose cannot substitute for the global insight that floods the mind when we match our life experiences against an artist's well-placed setup.

## SETUPS/PAYOFFS

To express our vision scene by scene we crack open the surface of our fictional reality and send the audience back to gain insight. These insights, therefore, must be shaped into *Setups* and *Payoffs*. To set up means to layer in knowledge; to pay off means to close the gap by delivering that knowledge to the audience. When the gap between expectation and result propels the audience back

through the story seeking answers, it can only find them if the writer has prepared or planted these insights in the work.

**CHINATOWN:** When Evelyn Mulwray says: “She’s my sister and my daughter,” we instantly remember a scene between her father and Gittes in which the detective asks Noah Cross what he and his son-in-law were arguing about the day before Mulwray was murdered. Cross replies, “My daughter.” The first time we hear this, we think he means Evelyn. In a flash, we now realize he meant Katherine, his daughter by his daughter. Cross said it knowing that Gittes would draw the wrong conclusion, and, by implication, would suspect Evelyn of the murder he committed.

**THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK:** When Darth Vader reveals that he’s Luke’s father, we rush back to the scenes in which Ben Kenobi and Yoda are greatly troubled over Luke’s command of the Force, fearing, we presume, for the young man’s safety. We now realize that Luke’s mentors were actually concerned for his soul, dreading that his father would seduce him to the “dark side.”

**SULLIVAN’S TRAVELS:** John L. Sullivan is a film director with a string of hits such as *So Long*, *Sarong* and *Ants in Your Pants of 1939*. Conscience-stricken by the appalling condition of the world, Sullivan determines that his next film must have “social significance.” Angry studio bosses point out that he’s from Hollywood and therefore doesn’t know anything about “social significance.”

So Sullivan decides to do research. He trudges off into America, followed by an air-conditioned travel van, equipped with his butler, cook, secretary, girlfriend, and a press agent intent on turning Sullivan’s lunatic adventure into a publicity stunt. Then, in a case of mistaken identity, Sullivan’s thrown on a chain gang in the swamps of Louisiana. Suddenly he’s up to his nostrils in “social significance” without a dime to call his agent.

One evening Sullivan hears uproarious laughter coming from a building in the prison compound and discovers a makeshift movie theatre filled with his fellow prisoners laughing themselves helpless at a Mickey Mouse cartoon. His face drops as he realizes that these men do not need “social significance” from him. They have

more than enough in their lives already. What they need is what he does best—good light entertainment.

With this brilliant reversal, we're swept back through the film coming to Sullivan's insight . . . and much more. As we gather in all the scenes that satirize Hollywood aristocracy, we realize that commercial films that presume to instruct society on how to solve its shortcomings are certain to be false. For, with few exceptions, most filmmakers, like Sullivan, are not interested in the suffering poor as much as the picturesque poor.

Setups must be handled with great care. They must be planted in such a way that when the audience first sees them, they have one meaning, but with a rush of insight, they take on a second, more important meaning. It's possible, in fact, that a single setup may have meanings hidden to a third or fourth level.

CHINATOWN: When we meet Noah Cross, he's a murder suspect, but he's also a father worried about his daughter. When Evelyn reveals their incest, we then realize Cross's true concern is Katherine. In Act Three, when Cross uses his wealth to block Gittes and capture Katherine, we realize that under Cross's previous scenes lurked a third level, a madness driven by the virtually omnipotent power to escape justice while committing murder. In the final scene, when Cross draws Katherine into the shadows of Chinatown, we realize that festering under all this grotesque corruption has been Cross's lust to have incest with the offspring of his own incest.

Setups must be planted firmly enough so that when the audience's mind hurls back, they're remembered. If setups are too subtle, the audience will miss the point. If too heavy-handed, the audience will see the Turning Point coming a mile away. Turning Points fail when we overprepare the obvious and underprepare the unusual.

Additionally, the firmness of the setup must be adjusted to the target audience. We set up more prominently for youth audiences, because they're not as story literate as middle-aged filmgoers. Bergman, for example, is difficult for the young—not because they couldn't grasp his ideas if they were explained, but because Bergman never explains. He dramatizes his ideas subtly, using



setups intended for the well-educated, socially experienced, and psychologically sophisticated.

Once the setup closes the gap, that payoff will, in all probability, become yet another setup for payoffs ahead.

**CHINATOWN:** When Evelyn reveals her child by incest, she repeatedly warns Gittes that her father is dangerous, that Gittes doesn't know what he's dealing with. We then realize that Cross killed Mulwray in a fight for possession of the child. This Act Two payoff sets up an Act Three Climax in which Gittes fails to apprehend Cross, Evelyn is killed, and the father/grandfather pulls the terrified Katherine into the darkness.

**THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK:** When Darth Vader reveals himself to Luke, this pays off multiple setups strung back through two films. In an instant, however, this also becomes the setup for Luke's next action. What will the young hero do? He chooses to try to kill his father, but Darth Vader cuts off his son's hand—a payoff to set up the next action. Now defeated, what will Luke do? He hurls himself out of the sky city, trying to commit an honorable suicide—a payoff to set up the next action. Will he die? No, he's rescued virtually in mid-air by his friends. This stroke of luck pays off the suicide and becomes the setup for a third film to resolve the conflict between father and son.

**SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS:** When Sullivan realizes what a pretentious fool he's been, this pays off all the arrogant folly underlying the previous acts. It in turn sets up his next action. How will he escape the chain gang? His discovery of who he really is puts his head back in the Hollywood groove. He realizes, like any Hollywood pro, that the way out of prison, indeed out of any trouble, is publicity. Sullivan confesses to a murder he didn't commit to get back into court and the limelight of the press so the studio bosses and their powerhouse attorneys can rescue him. This payoff sets up the Resolution scene where we see Sullivan back in the Hollywood harness, making the fluffy entertainment films he has always made—but now he knows why.

The juggling act of setting up, paying off, setting up again and paying off again often sparks our most creative flashes.

Suppose you were developing a story about orphaned brothers, Mark and Michael, who are raised from infancy in a brutal institution. The brothers are inseparable, protecting and supporting each other through the years. Then they escape the orphanage. Now on the streets they struggle to survive while always defending each other. Mark and Michael love each other, and you love them. But you have a problem: no story. This is a portrait entitled: "Two brothers against the world." The only variation in the repetitious demonstration of their fraternal loyalty is its location. Nothing essential changes.

But, as you stare at your open-ended chain-link of episodes, you have a crazy idea: "What if Mark stabbed Michael in the back? Ripped him off, took his money, his girl . . ." Now you're pacing, arguing: "That's stupid! They love each other. Fought the world together. Makes no sense! Still, it'd be great. Forget it. But it'd be a hell of a scene. Cut it out. It's not logical!"

Then the light goes on: "I could make it logical. I could go back through everything and layer that in. Two brothers against the world? What about Cain and Abel? Sibling rivalry? I could rewrite from the opening and under every scene slip a bitter taste of envy in Mark, superiority and arrogance in Michael. All quietly there behind the sweet loyalty. If I do it well, when Mark betrays Mike, the audience will glimpse that repressed jealousy in Mark and it'll all make sense."

Now your characters aren't repeating but growing. Perhaps you realize you're finally expressing what you really feel toward your own brother and couldn't admit. Still, it's not over. Suddenly, out of the blue, a second thought: "If Mark betrays Mike, that could be the Penultimate Climax. And that Climax could set up a last act Story Climax in which Mike takes his revenge and . . ." You've found your story because you've allowed yourself to think the unthinkable. In storytelling, logic is retroactive.

In story, unlike life, you can always go back and fix it. You can set up what may seem absurd and make it rational. Reasoning is secondary and postcreativity. Primary and preconditional to everything else is imagination—the willingness to think any crazy idea, to let images that may or may not make sense find their way to you.

Nine out of ten will be useless. Yet one illogical idea may put butterflies in your belly, a flutter that's telling you something wonderful is hidden in this mad notion. In an intuitive flash you see the connection and realize you can go back and make it make sense. Logic is child's play. Imagination takes you to the screen.

## EMOTIONAL TRANSITIONS

We do not move the emotions of an audience by putting glistening tears in a character's eyes, by writing exuberant dialogue so an actor can recite his joy, by describing an erotic embrace, or by calling for angry music. Rather, we render the precise experience necessary to *cause* an emotion, then take the audience through that experience. For Turning Points not only deliver insight, they create the dynamics of emotion.

The understanding of how we create the audience's emotional experience begins with the realization that there are only two emotions—pleasure and pain. Each has its variations: joy, love, happiness, rapture, fun, ecstasy, thrill, bliss, and many others on one hand, and anguish, dread, anxiety, terror, grief, humiliation, malaise, misery, stress, remorse, and many others on the other hand. But at heart life gives us only one or the other.

As audience, we experience an emotion when the telling takes us through a transition of values. First, we must empathize with the character. Second, we must know what the character wants and want the character to have it. Third, we must understand the values at stake in the character's life. Within these conditions, a change in values moves our emotions.

Suppose a comedy were to begin with a poverty-stricken protagonist at the negative in terms of the value of wealth. Then over scene, sequence, or act, his life undergoes change to the positive, a transition from poor to rich. As the audience watches this character move toward his desire, the transition from less to more will lift it into a positive emotional experience.

As soon as this plateau is reached, however, emotion quickly dissipates. An emotion is a relatively short-term, energetic experi-

ence that peaks and burns and is over. Now the audience is thinking: “Terrific. He’s rich. What happens next?”

Next, the story must turn in a new direction to shape a transition from positive to negative that’s deeper than his previous peniless state. Perhaps the protagonist falls from riches into debt to the mafia, far worse than poverty. As this transition moves from more to less than nothing, the audience will have a negative emotional response. However, once the protagonist owes all to a loan shark, the audience’s emotion wanes as it thinks: “Bad move. He blew the money and owes the mob. What’s going to happen next?”

Now the story must turn in yet another new direction. Perhaps he escapes his debt by impersonating the Don and taking over the mob. As the telling makes the transition from the doubly negative to the ironically positive, the audience has an even stronger positive emotion. Story must create these dynamic alternations between positive and negative emotion in order to obey the *Law of Diminishing Returns*.

The Law of Diminishing Returns, true in life as well as in story, is this: *The more often we experience something, the less effect it has.* Emotional experience, in other words, cannot be repeated back-to-back with effect. The first ice cream cone tastes great; the second isn’t bad; the third makes you sick. The first time we experience an emotion or sensation it has its full effect. If we try to repeat this experience immediately, it has half or less than half of its full effect. If we go straight to the same emotion for the third time, it not only doesn’t have the original effect, it delivers the opposite effect.

Suppose a story contains three tragic scenes contiguously. What would be the effect? In the first, we shed tears; in the second, we sniffle; in the third, we laugh . . . loudly. Not because the third scene isn’t sad—it may be the saddest of the three—but because the previous two have drained us of grief and we find it insensitive, if not ludicrous, of the storyteller to expect us to cry yet again. The repetition of “serious” emotion is, in fact, a favorite comic device.

Although comedy may seem the exception to this principle in that we often seem to laugh repeatedly, it’s not. Laughter is not an

emotion. Joy is an emotion. Laughter is a criticism we hurl at something we find ridiculous or outrageous. It may occur inside any emotion, from terror to love. Nor do we laugh without relief. A joke has two parts: setup and punch. The setup raises the tension in the audience, if only for a moment, through danger, sex, the scatological—a host of taboos—then the punch explodes laughter. This is the secret to comic timing: When is the setup ripe to hit the punchline or gag? The comic senses this intuitively, but one thing he learns objectively is that he can't deliver punch, punch, punch without wearing out his welcome.

There is, however, one exception: a story can go from positive to positive or negative to negative, *if* the contrast between these events is so great, in retrospect the first takes on shades of its opposite. Consider these two events: Lovers argue and break up. Negative. Next, one kills the other. The second turn is so powerfully negative that the argument begins to seem positive. In the light of the murder, the audience will look back at the breakup and think: "At least they were talking then."

If the contrast between emotional charges is great, events can move from positive to positive without sentimentality, or from negative to negative without forced seriousness. However, if the progression changes only by degree, as it normally would, then a repeated emotion has half its expected effect, and if repeated yet again, the charge unfortunately reverses itself.

The Law of Diminishing Returns is true of everything in life, except sex, which seems endlessly repeatable with effect.

Once a transition of value creates an emotion, feeling comes into play. Although they're often mistaken for each other, feeling is not emotion. Emotion is a short-term experience that peaks and burns rapidly. Feeling is a long-term, pervasive, sentient background that colors whole days, weeks, even years of our lives. Indeed, a specific feeling often dominates a personality. Each of the core emotions in life—pleasure and pain—has many variations. So which particular negative or positive emotion will we experience? The answer is found in the feeling that surrounds it. For, like adding pigment to a pencil sketch or an orchestra to a melody, feeling makes emotion specific.

Suppose a man is feeling good about life, his relationships and career both going well. Then he receives a message that his lover has died. He'll grieve but in time recover and go on with life. On the other hand, suppose his days are dark, stressed, and depressed by everything he tries. Then suddenly he receives a message that his lover has died. Well . . . he might join her.

In film, feeling is known as mood. Mood is created in the film's text: the quality of light and color, tempo of action and editing, casting, style of dialogue, production design, and musical score. The sum of all these textural qualities creates a particular mood. In general, mood, like setups, is a form of foreshadowing, a way of preparing or shaping the audience's anticipations. Moment by moment, however, while the dynamic of the scene determines whether the emotion it causes is positive or negative, the mood makes this emotion specific.

This sketch, for example, is designed to create a positive emotion: Estranged lovers haven't spoken to each other for over a year. Without her, his life's taken a dangerous turn. Desperate and broke, he comes to her, hoping to borrow money. The scene begins at the negative in two values: his survival and their love.

He knocks on her door. She sees him on the step and refuses to let him in. He makes a noise loud enough to disturb the neighbors, hoping to embarrass her into letting him in. She picks up a phone and threatens to call the police. He calls her bluff, shouting through the door that he is in such deep trouble prison may be the only safe place for him. She shouts back that that's fine with her.

Frightened and angry, he smashes through the door. But from the look on her face, he realizes this is no way to borrow money from anybody. He frantically explains that loan sharks are threatening to break his arms and his legs. Rather than sympathizing, she laughs and tells him she hopes they break his head as well. He bursts into tears and crawls to her, begging. The mad look on his face frightens her and she takes a gun out of a drawer to scare him off. He laughs, saying he remembers giving her the gun a year ago and the firing pin was broken. She laughs, saying she had it fixed and blows up the lamp next to him to prove it.

He grabs her wrist and they fall to floor wrestling for the gun, rolling over each other, until suddenly an emotion they haven't felt for over a year ignites and they start to make love on the floor next to the smashed lamp and shattered door. A little voice in his head says, "This could work," but then a gap opens between him . . . and his body. That, she thinks, smiling, is his real problem. Moved to pity and affection, she decides to take him back into her life. The scene ends on the positive: He has her help to survive, their love is restored.

If the audience empathizes with these characters, the movement from the negative to the positive will create a positive emotion. But *which*? There are many.

Suppose the writer calls for a summer's day, brightly colored flowers in window boxes, blossoms on the trees. The producer casts Jim Carrey and Mira Sorvino. The director composes them in head-to-foot shots. Together they've created a comic mood. Comedy likes bright light and color. Comics need full shots because they act with their whole bodies. Carrey and Sorvino are brilliant zanies. The audience will feel tingling fear spiced with laughter as Carrey bangs through the door, as Sorvino pulls a gun, as these two try to make love. Then a burst of joy when she takes him back.

But suppose the scene were set in the dead of night, the house spackled with shadows of trees blowing in the wind, moonlight, street light. The director shoots tight, canted angles and orders the lab to mute the colors. The producer casts Michael Madsen and Linda Fiorentino. Without changing a beat, the scene is now drenched in a *Thriller* mood. Our hearts will be in our throats as we fear that one of these two isn't getting out of this alive. Imagine Madsen bulling his way in, Fiorentino grabbing a gun, those two fighting for it. When they're finally in each other's arms, we'll breathe a sigh of relief.

The arc of the scene, sequence, or act determines the basic emotion. Mood makes it specific. *But mood will not substitute for emotion.* When we want mood experiences, we go to concerts or museums. When we want meaningful emotional experience, we go to the storyteller. It does the writer no good to write an exposition-filled scene in which nothing changes, then set it in a garden at

sundown, thinking that a golden mood will carry the day. All the writer has done is dump weak writing on the shoulders of the director and cast. Undramatized exposition is boring in any light. Film is not about decorative photography.

## THE NATURE OF CHOICE

A Turning Point is centered in the choice a character makes under pressure to take one action or another in the pursuit of desire. Human nature dictates that each of us will always choose the “good” or the “right” *as we perceive the “good” or the “right.”* It is impossible to do otherwise. Therefore, if a character is put into a situation where he must choose between a clear good versus a clear evil, or right versus wrong, the audience, understanding the character’s point of view, will know in advance how the character will choose.

**The choice between good and evil or between right and wrong is no choice at all.**

Imagine Attila, King of the Huns poised on the borders of fifth-century Europe, surveying his hordes and asking himself: “Should I invade, murder, rape, plunder, burn, and lay waste . . . or should I go home?” For Attila this is no choice at all. He must invade, slay, plunder, and lay waste. He didn’t lead tens of thousands of warriors across two continents to turn around when he finally came within sight of the prize. In the eyes of his victims, however, his is an evil decision. But that’s their point of view. For Attila his choice is not only the right thing to do, but probably the moral thing to do. No doubt, like many of history’s great tyrants, he felt he was on a holy mission.

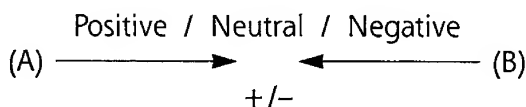
Or, closer to home: A thief bludgeons a victim on the street for the five dollars in her purse. He may know this isn’t the moral thing to do, but moral/immoral, right/wrong, legal/illegal often have little to do with one another. He may instantly regret what he’s done. But at the moment of murder, *from the thief’s point of view*, his arm won’t move until he’s convinced himself that this is the right choice.



If we do not understand that much about human nature—that a human being is only capable of acting toward the right or the good as he has come to believe it or rationalize it—then we understand very little. Good/evil, right/wrong choices are dramatically obvious and trivial.

*True choice is dilemma.* It occurs in two situations. First, *a choice between irreconcilable goods*: From the character's view two things are desirable, he wants both, but circumstances are forcing him to choose only one. Second, *a choice between the lesser of two evils*: From the character's view two things are undesirable, he wants neither, but circumstances are forcing him to choose one. How a character chooses in a true dilemma is a powerful expression of his humanity and of the world in which he lives.

Writers since Homer have understood the principle of dilemma, and realized that the story of a two-sided relationship cannot be sustained, that the simple conflict between Character A and Character B cannot be told to satisfaction.

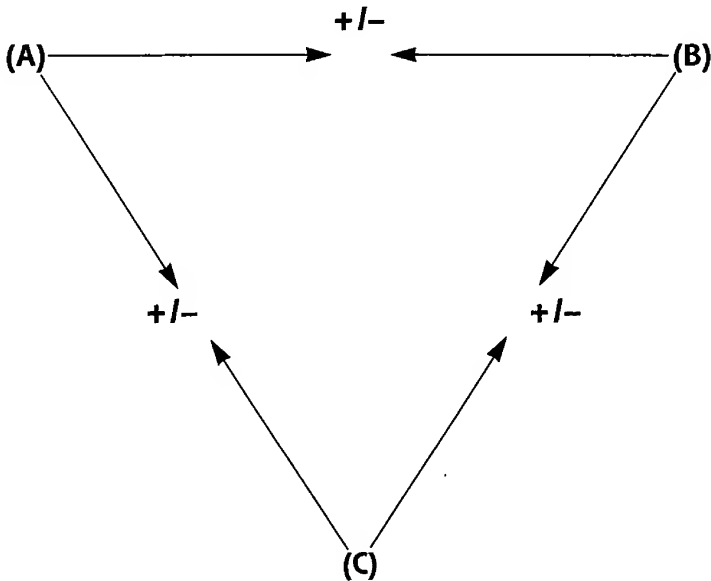


A two-sided conflict is not dilemma but vacillation between the positive and the negative. “She loves me/she loves me not, she loves me/she loves not,” for example, swings back and forth between good and bad, and presents insoluble story problems. It isn’t only tediously repetitious, but it has no ending.

If we try to climax this pattern on the positive with the protagonist believing “She loves me,” the audience leaves thinking, “Wait till tomorrow when she’ll love you not again.” Or if on the negative “She loves me not,” the audience exits thinking, “She’ll come back. She always did.” Even if we kill the loved one, it’s not a true ending because the protagonist is left wondering, “She loved me? She loved me not?” and the audience exits groping for a point that was never made.

For example, here are two stories: one that wavers back and forth between inward states of pleasure and pain and one of inner dilemma. Compare *BETTY BLUE* with *THE RED DESERT*. In the former, Betty (Beatrice Dalle) slides from obsession to madness to catatonia. She has impulses but never makes a true decision. In the later *Giuliana* (Monica Vitti) faces profound dilemmas: retreat into comforting fantasies versus making meaning out of a harsh reality, madness versus pain. *BETTY BLUE'S* “mock-minimalism” is an over two-hour long snapshot of a helpless victim of schizophrenia that mistakes suffering for drama. *IL DESERTO ROSSO* is a minimalist masterpiece that delineates a human being grappling with the terrifying contradictions within her nature.

To construct and create genuine choice, we must frame a three-sided situation. As in life, meaningful decisions are triangular.



The moment we add C we generate ample material to avoid repetition. First, to the three possible relationships between A and B: positive/negative/neutral, love/hate/indifference, for example, we add the same three between A and C and between B and C. This gives us nine possibilities. Then we may join A and B against C; A

and C against B; B and C against A. Or put them all in love or all in hate or all indifferent. By adding a third corner, the triangle breeds over twenty variations, more than enough material to progress without repetition. A fourth element would produce compound interlocking triangles, a virtual infinitude of changing relationships.

What's more, triangular design brings closure. If a telling is two-sided so that A vacillates between B and no-B, the ending is open. But if choice is three-sided so that A is caught between B and C, A's choice of one or the other closes the ending with satisfaction. Whether B and C represent the lesser of two evils or irreconcilable goods, the protagonist can't have both. A price must be paid. One must be risked or lost to gain the other. If, for example, A relinquishes C to have B, the audience feels a true choice has been taken. C has been sacrificed, and this irreversible change ends the story.

The most compelling dilemmas often combine the choice of irreconcilable goods with the lesser of two evils. In the *Supernatural Romance* DONA FLOR AND HER TWO HUSBANDS, for example, Dona (Sonia Braga) faces a choice between a new husband who's warm, secure, faithful, but dull versus an ex-husband who's sexy, exciting, but dead, yet his ghost appears to her in private as flesh and blood and sexually insatiable as ever. Is she hallucinating or not? What's the widow to do? She's caught in the dilemma between a boringly pleasant life of normality versus a bizarre, perhaps mad, life of emotional fulfillment. She makes the wise decision: She takes both.

An original work poses choices between unique but irreconcilable desires: It may be between two persons, a person and a lifestyle, two lifestyles, two ideals, two aspects of the innermost self—between any conflicting desires at any level of conflict, real or imagined, the writer may devise. But the principle is universal: Choice must not be doubt but dilemma, not between right/wrong or good/evil, but between either positive desires or negative desires of equal weight and value.