Chapter 11

The Basics of Scene Construction

Think about the last time you went to a movie you really loved with your friends. When you came out were you talking about how the Second Act Turning Point fell at just the right moment and how neatly the inner and outer conflicts of the main character tied together? Or were you talking about your favorite scenes and quoting the best dialogue? My guess is the latter.

It's the same for producers and executives. Put yourself in the shoes of a development exec going home with a dozen spec scripts for the weekend. She reads one that is perfectly structured, in a marketable genre, and with a good character arc. She'll probably jot down some very nice notes about that writer. Next she reads one that has several original, fantastic scenes – scenes she's still thinking about on her drive into work. Scenes she can't wait to tell her coworker about as they get their coffee. Which script do you think she's going to fight passionately for in the Monday morning development meeting?

I'm not suggesting your script doesn't need solid structure. But competence with structure is just the buy-in to the poker game of screenwriting. Once you're at the table, success depends a great deal on your ability to deliver things like memorable and compelling scenes.

Of course not every scene will be a fully developed set piece. Some will be simple transitions or quick bits of exposition. We should also distinguish between a *technical scene* and a *dramatic scene*. In a

screenplay, a technical scene is defined by a slug line. You use a new slug line any time you change location or there is a time jump. This is so the production team can organize the shoot – shooting all of the scenes that take place in each location together. (See the Appendix for a guide to screenplay format.)

But for our purposes we're more concerned with dramatic scenes – scenes that are a single unit of dramatic action. They may be made up of multiple technical scenes, such as a car chase that ranges throughout the city, but is still just a single event in the story. More rarely, you may have multiple dramatic scenes that take place within a single technical scene. For this section of the book, when I use the word "scene" I'm talking about a dramatic scene.

So what makes a good scene? It's much the same things that make a good film – a character who wants something, obstacles to that goal, stakes, twists and turns. A good dramatic scene ought to be a miniature story in its own right. Scenes can follow the principles of three-act structure. They can have a Midpoint where the character achieves a measure of success, and then an Act Two Turning Point where all hope is lost (if the character is to fail at the end – reverse it if they are to succeed). Scenes don't have to follow that structure, but if you are having trouble developing a scene, it can help to think of it that way.

I don't believe in over-planning scenes. That risks creating wooden dialogue or characters acting to fulfill plot points. I like to keep a little spontaneity in the process. But just typing the first thing that pops into your head tends to result in underdeveloped scenes that move too linearly to the story goal and are filled with clichés.

You will have undoubtedly considered many of the concepts I will discuss in this chapter during the outlining phase. When it comes time to actually write the first draft of a scene, take a little time to brainstorm some more ideas for what could happen. Start by reminding yourself what the purpose of the scene is in the film: Is it a major plot point? The introduction of a character? A story revelation? A character revelation? A scene of preparation? A scene

of aftermath? Exposition? Of course, it may be more than one of these – *should* be more than one, most often.

Whose Scene Is It?

Next, identify the main character of the scene. This is not necessarily the main character of the movie, even if that main character is in the scene (though the main character of the movie ought to also be the main character of most of the scenes). The main character of the scene is the person whose goal within the scene makes the drama happen. What does this character want?

Now ask what the character is actively doing to get what they want. This action could be in the form of dialogue, of course. The character could be seducing or deceiving or threatening the other characters – that's still active. But the thing the character is doing to achieve their goal is what will drive the scene forward.

Often in good scenes, the character starts doing one thing to achieving their goal, but that approach fails. They reach a moment where they realize they are going to have to try harder. They shift tactics, up their game. More on these "try harder" moments in a bit.

Obstacles

Drama is conflict.

It's a famous saying. Conflict comes from a character having difficulty getting what they want – in other words, obstacles. The obstacles may be internal or external. A character who wants to retrieve treasure from a cave but can't go in because he's claustrophobic faces an internal obstacle. A character who wants to retrieve treasure from a cave but can't go in because an enemy is guarding the entrance faces an external obstacle. Some scenes have both internal and external obstacles.

Ideally, the challenge facing the character should escalate. Sometimes this comes from the obstacle growing – the claustrophobic character summons the courage to enter the cave, only to find it narrows

before he reaches the treasure. More often, other obstacles come in to interfere.

One approach to escalating obstacles is the "out-of-the-frying-pan-into-the-fire" technique. The character overcomes one challenge only to find he's facing an even greater challenge.

The scene in *The Matrix* where Neo, Morpheus, and their team are trying to exit the Matrix after visiting the Oracle demonstrates this. The trouble begins when Neo has déjà vu. The others realize this means the Agents are changing something and our heroes have been found out. Their exit is cut off. They escape this trap by climbing into the wet wall (a vertical crawlspace).

However, this plan goes awry when Cypher sneezes and Agent Smith appears. Morpheus leaps through the wall to fight Smith, sacrificing himself so Neo can escape.

But then when Neo and his pals reach their back-up exit from the Matrix, they discover that Cypher has betrayed them. Back on the ship, he begins unplugging the team one by one, killing them. In this sequence, every time the team has escaped one trap, they find themselves in even greater peril.

Just remember, we want the character to overcome the obstacles through their actions. Deus ex machina endings are no more satisfying for scenes than they are for the whole story.

Scenes That Lack Obvious Conflict

Sometimes, the conflict of a scene is obvious – a cop trying to catch a fleeing criminal, a teenager trying to convince his father to let him go to a party, a wife confronting her husband about lipstick on his collar. But you'll find that not every scene you need in your story suggests such obvious drama.

If you are having trouble finding the conflict in a scene, look to what the characters want. Give two characters mutually exclusive goals. The characters don't have to fight. They don't have to dislike each

other. But if they each want something that interferes with what the other wants, you will have conflict.

Imagine you have to write a scene showing the first blush of romance between two characters on a date. How do you inject conflict into the scene? The obvious approach would be to have the characters argue about something. But that would work against the larger purpose of showing these characters falling in love.

A better solution might be to introduce some kind of outside source of conflict. An annoying waiter, perhaps, or a food allergy. This might work okay if the tone of the story is fairly broad.

But a more sophisticated approach would be to inject conflict on a subtextual level, using each character's goals to create obstacles for the other one. If you find a scene is coming off dramatically flat, try giving your characters stronger goals. Some goals that might fit in a dinner date scene would be:

- To get her to go home with me
- To test him
- To get control of the relationship
- To confess to emotional baggage
- To hide emotional baggage
- To prove my maturity
- To make him work for it
- To stall him
- To impress her

You don't have to pick goals that are diametrically opposed to get conflict, and you don't have to make the conflict overt to have drama. These people are on a date and you want them to end up liking each other. But you can pick goals that are different enough that they will force the characters to deal with the gap in an interesting way.

Consider what kind of scene you might write if you picked the goal "to seduce him" for the woman and "to confess he's unemployed" for the man. Or maybe "to get control of the relationship" for him

and "to test him" for her. Voices never have to rise, nobody has to get angry… but the conversation no longer seems so casual.

You can make things even more complicated by adding an emotional modifier to the goal, such as "fear" or "excitement" or "confidence" or "disgust." So now it can become "to seduce, with anxiety." Note that I'm not talking about anxiety as a technique used to seduce, but rather an emotion the seducer is feeling. Imagine the difference between "to stall, with disgust" and "to stall, with lust."

Setting

Where you set your scene can have a big impact on the drama. The same basic scene from a movie located in New York can be very different from one set in San Antonio, Texas or Venice, Italy. Think about how you might use those three locations to give a unique spin to a big emotional scene about a couple breaking up. In *Gravity*, the setting of the International Space Station gave the filmmakers an opportunity for a dramatic scene – when fire breaks out. (The world of the Deep South was a particularly rich setting for me to mine in the development of *Sweet Home Alabama*.)

Even within the world of your story, you will have choices as to where to set a specific scene. This will often be dictated by your story needs. But to the extent that you have some choice, there are a few things you should consider.

First, what will be visually interesting? Maybe you have a scene of a girl telling her boyfriend she wants to break up. Initially you'll probably think about setting this scene at one of their houses or at a restaurant. But wouldn't it be more visually interesting if they were on a trail above a waterfall? Or attending a NASCAR race?

Second, the setting can enhance the dramatic or comedic elements of the scene. What if the break-up was happening at church during a worship service? Or in front of a line of parents bringing their kids to sit on Santa's lap at the mall?

Finally, the setting can help you tell your story. In *Little Miss Sunshine*, Richard rides from the cheap motel he's staying at with his family to confront Stan Grossman at a conference. The conference hotel is sprawling and luxurious – highlighting the different circumstance between Richard and Stan.

Twists

From your outline you know what has to happen in the scene. Your job now is to figure out the most interesting way for it to happen. A common problem in a first draft is that every scene broadcasts its purpose. You want twists and surprises in a scene so that they're fun and engaging.

You know where you have to end up. Don't start aiming for that conclusion. Point the scene in a different direction and then have something come in to twist things. Use a little misdirection to surprise the character and the audience. If the characters on the date are going to be charmed by each other at the end, have the date start badly. Maybe have one of the characters go into the date with the intention "to get it over with."

There's a technique in screenwriting known as *Preparation-in-Opposition.* This is when you heighten a twist or surprise by setting up the opposite. If you're going to deliver bad news to the character, for example, set them up to be happy. More importantly, set up the audience to believe happy stuff is going to happen. Then the bad news is a greater shock. It sounds simple, but in practice it's very easy to miss opportunities to do this.

One version of this technique has become cliché – if you're watching an action movie and a cop announces he's near retirement and shows someone a picture of his adoring family and/or the boat he's just bought, you can be sure he's about to die. Of course unless you're doing parody, you'll want to avoid such an obvious manipulation.

Would E.T.'s resurrection in *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* be nearly as joyful if we hadn't gone through the whole traumatic bit of Elliott

saying goodbye first? The scene starts sad, which makes the twist powerful.

"Try harder" moments can also create good twists. The character starts the scene taking one kind of action, but at some point they realize that is not going to work. So they have to change tactics.

For example, in *Little Miss Sunshine*, when Richard is talking to the bereavement liaison after his father's death, Richard explains that the family needs to get to California by 3 pm, and that they will come back to fill out the paperwork on their way home. When the liaison insists they cannot leave, Richard realizes he will have to try harder to achieve his goal. This leads to the scheme to steal the body.

Practical Application: Planning Your Scene

- *What is the purpose of the scene? How does the scene change things – how will the story have progressed at the end of the scene?*

- *Who is the main character of the scene? What do they want? What action are they taking to get what they want?*

- *What are the obstacles to the character getting what they want? Brainstorm potential internal and external obstacles. Consider what the other characters want – do they provide appropriate opposition? Make sure the obstacles escalate.*

- *Is there at least one twist in the scene? Could you have a "try harder" moment? Will it help to use preparation-in-opposition?*

- *Finally, brainstorm a bunch of ideas for things that could happen in the scene. You don't have to use them all – you probably shouldn't. But this will help you move past your*

> *first ideas, the ideas everyone else will have, and get to something fresh and interesting.*

Dramatizing the Internal

There's an old writing saying, "show, don't tell." Of course on film, something is always being shown to the audience. But the adage still applies, particularly when it comes to the character's internal thoughts and feelings. We don't want the character to tell us what's going on with them psychologically, we want to see it dramatized. Telling the audience is exposition. Showing is drama.

So, how do we show something internal? The first tool we have is behavior. Actions speak louder than words. We'll believe what a character does more than what they say.

Olive's introduction in *Little Miss Sunshine* is a good example of this. Olive could tell someone in dialogue that she dreams of being a beauty queen. But instead, we open with her watching a videotape of a pageant. The winner is crowned. Then Olive rewinds the tape and pauses. She mimics the winner's pose and expression. We can see that she wants to be one of these women.

Dialogue can be behavior, too, though. What a character says can show how they're feeling without being on the nose. But you need to create a situation that motivates revealing dialogue.

For example, consider the scene in *The Godfather* when Michael and Tom go to Vegas to buy out Mo Green. Fredo has arranged a big party, with girls and a band, but Michael tells him to get rid of all that. When Mo Green shows up, Michael says he wants to buy out Mo's share of the casino. Mo gets angry, tells Michael off. Michael doesn't rise to the argument, but brings up a report that Mo slapped Fredo around in public. Fredo quickly defends Mo, saying, "Mo didn't mean anything by that." Trying to make peace, Fredo appeals to Tom, but Tom defers to Michael. The scene ends with Mo