

Screen Writing

for Film, Television & Computer



John Alexander

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Screen Writing

Storytelling for Audiovisual Media



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Screen Writing: Storytelling for Audiovisual Media

First published 2001.

Revised, expanded second edition 2007.

Also by John Alexander

All in the Script: Dramatic Structure in Narrative Film (1991)

Televisions: Narrative Structure in Television (1992)

The Films of David Lynch (1993)

The Sitcom Workshop (1996)

Screen Play: Audiovisual Narrative and Viewer Interaction (1999)

The Inside Story: How Storytelling Inspires Change in Organisations, Companies and People (2000)

Corporate Narrative: Communicating Values with Stories (2006)

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InterMedia Publications

London and Stockholm

ISBN 0-906756-07-3

www.johnalexander.se

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Introduction

Writing stories is easy. Plot, character, structure. Writing good stories is something else. Inspiration, craft, passion. Not so easy.

What about medium? Medium means 'what comes in between.' It is the process that connects the story to the person; the tale to the listener. The audiovisual story connects us with sounds and pictures. Film, television, computer. Big screens and small screens. But understanding the medium? Is your story a film story? Or for television? Or a story for interactive digital media?

A good story. The right medium. This book sets out to provide some guidelines on what makes a good story and how to choose the best medium.

I start with film because the cinema began the process of audiovisual storytelling. But if we can give a historical date to the first film screenings, finding a date for when the cinema's narrative form emerged is less apparent. The Lumiere brothers demonstration of the *cinematographe* in Paris, December 1895, opened up new possibilities for storytellers, but it took about a quarter of a century for writers to realise those possibilities. Around the 1920s the film studios emerged, and the screenplay became the defining standard of the feature film.

Television was first demonstrated in 1928. Scottish inventor John Logi Baird astounded Oxford Street shoppers with a device he called a *televisor* in the window of Selfridges department store. In 1936 the BBC began regular live television broadcasting for a select few London viewers. The opening of the 1936 Berlin Olympics was televised. In Europe the second world war brought a halt to television, but by the 1940s television was being broadcast in the major US east coast cities. And what was being broadcast? In essence radio programmes. The soap, the sitcom, the weekly drama – they all began on radio. It's easy to put dates on broadcasting, network openings, and events that mark the 'television era.' The 1947 World Series in the USA, the 1953 Coronation in the UK, the 1956 Olympics in Australia, the 1958 World Cup in Sweden. But just like the cinema here was a new medium with new possibilities for writers. How long before writers realised the potentials of television? How long before television's narrative form emerged? A generation?

Computers have been around since the 1940s, but the home computer made its entry in the 1980s, together with the first computer games. Then Internet in the 1990s and with it, the web-site.

New audiovisual media with the potential that a new technology promises. Writers, producers and consumers explore the possibilities that a new storytelling medium offers. We are the generation that is defining a new narrative form. Like the scenarists of the cinema a century ago, and the television scriptwriters of a half century. There is nothing new or extraordinary in this process. When Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, it was not until some 30 years later that the paginated book form emerged. Which in turn led to a new narrative form – the novel. Cervantes Don Quixote – arguably the first novel to emerge in the west – was published in the early 1600s.

Nothing comes from nothing – there is always some precedent that provides guidelines for the next step. The turn of the century scenarist turned to theatre for guidelines. Hence today's screenplay terminology of 'acts' and 'scenes' and 'dramatic arcs.' Television writers found inspiration from radio and the Hollywood B-pictures of the 30s and 40s. Radio writers from vaudeville, music hall and tabloid journalism. Today's dramatists working with digital media – computer games, web sites and interactive DVDs – fuse elements from film, television, computer programming flow-charts and hypertext to create a new narrative form.

21st century screenwriting calls for new ways to best use the new medium. What exactly is an interactive narrative? What sort of choices does the viewer/player/ user actually have? Is it a question of choosing between four or five possible endings? or providing a framework for creating individual stories to match individual desires?

Today's screenwriter faces new challenges – new ways to apply their creative talents to capture the imagination of a new kind of viewer. A story alone is not enough. We need to create story environments – a personal 'play space' for a whole new kind of interacting. The role of the cyber screenwriter is to transform the screen into an environment of narrative possibilities.

To look forward we need to look back. How do we write a script for film? For television? A computer game or a web-site? Whatever the medium, the basics apply. Plot, character, structure. And a good story? Let's explore what's possible in the realms of screen play.

I

STORY

1. What Makes a Good Story?

The Story of Lucy

Lucy is a young woman who lives in a house by the river. She is in love with Peter who lives on the other side of the river. She doesn't know what to do so she goes to her friend William and asks for advice.

'If you love him, go and tell him', says William.

'Yes' says Lucy, and goes to the river where she meets David, the boatman. 'Please take me across the river David.'

'Yes', says David, 'But what time do you need to return?'

'I'm not sure,' says Lucy. 'Why do you need to know?'

'I must be downriver at another port of call at six. If you want the ferry back you must be at the landing stage before then.'

They cross the river and Lucy goes to Peter's house. Peter opens the door. 'Peter, I love you', says Lucy. Peter cannot resist the temptation and makes love with Lucy.

When she recovers from the occasion Lucy is upset at the thought that Peter has taken advantage of her. She runs from the house and to the house where Michael lives.

Michael is in love with Lucy. He opens the door and welcomes her in. Lucy tells him the whole story, whereupon Michael is filled with bitterness and asks Lucy to leave.

She arrives at the river landing stage just after six. David has cast off and is rowing away. Lucy calls out: 'David, please take me back.'

David looks at his watch and calls back: 'Sorry Lucy - I did warn you.' And he rows off downstream.

Lucy decides to swim home. In midstream, she drowns.

There are five characters to this story. Rank each character, one to five, in order of who is most responsible for the death of Lucy. For example, if Michael is most responsible, he is placed first, then the other characters accordingly:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

Before television, before the cinema and the radio, people entertained themselves with other forms of storytelling. In late 19th century Europe the theatre, magic lantern shows and morality tale parlour games were occasion for stories for entertainment and moral guidance. The Story of Lucy is one such 'story game' - a dilemma tale where the listener is invited to 'interact' with the narrative. Who is responsible for Lucy's fate?

There are many ways to read this story. Readers from different cultural backgrounds often rate characters according to their own national cultural priorities. In northern Europe Lucy ranks high ('an individual should be responsible for their own life'); in Latin American countries, low ('poor Lucy – no-one to look after her!') And whereas in Latin America and Southern Europe, David might be held accountable ('couldn't he have even waited two minutes?'), in countries like Germany and Switzerland he is often at the bottom of the list. ('He was just doing his job.')

For the Victorian parlour game players each character represents a moral value - Lucy (love), Peter (passion), William (wisdom), David (duty), Michael (morality) – the reader's values will determine the interpretation of character's culpability, just as assessing the story provides a means of evaluating the reader's moral predilections. Women frequently place Peter high ('he's a selfish cad'), men low ('a passionate guy').

If there is a film to this text it is the film constructed in the mind of the reader. How would you feel about the characters if, say, Peter was a 50 year old professor, and Lucy a 14 year old school girl? Or if David laughed out loud or pleaded apologetically as he shouted back, 'Sorry Lucy...'? Or if the river was a raging torrent, or a gentle stream? Is it summer or winter? Is the story setting a hundred years ago, or the present?

A good story needs to engage us, whether we're listening, reading or watching. A good story provides us with 'space' – where our thoughts and attitudes can play around with characters and events. A story is like a game, and a viewer is like a player. Play, however, doesn't necessarily exclude seriousness of intent. We can talk about how much we enjoyed a story; perhaps we laughed, but perhaps we were gripped with suspense, or wept with grief. A good story needs to stimulate our thoughts and engage our feelings whatever the medium.

Are you writing a 120 page feature film script or a 60 second advertisement? A half hour situation comedy. a journalistic reportage or a story-based computer game? Whatever the narrative form, there are certain basics to any story. Character. Plot. Structure. That's the easy part. But a good story? A list of essentials would, I think, include:

- *a conflict*
- *an engaging character*
- *a strong opening*
- *a satisfying ending*
- *a consistent plot (it makes sense!)*
- *a premise (or moral, or theme... it's about something!)*

Let's start with these. Later we can consider other components of writing for film, television and interactive media. Like humour, like genre, dialogue, multiple plot lines, and so on; narrative elements which might not be essential for all stories, but may be useful for our own chosen narrative form. For whatever our chosen narrative form, we need conflict, character, a beginning and an end, a logical plot and a premise.

Here is an example of a 60 second television advertisement. An anti-drug commercial screened on French television in the early 1990s, showed the following:

A school playground. Lots of kids. A boy, about 12, ignores his friends – he's watching a pretty girl, about the same age. Unfortunately she's walking away with a big kid, about 15, and heading toward the toilet block. He follows them and watches the big kid cutting up some white powder on a sink. The girl looks on. The younger boy walks up, picks up the envelope of white powder, walks toward the toilet bowl, and flushes it down the toilet. 'Le drogue c'est le merde!' reads the caption. And the young boy walks off arm in arm with the young girl, smiling radiantly.

It's a simple enough story with a clear message. (A premise). There is plot, structure, conflict, and characters that engage our interest. (Particularly the youth audience). Strong opening, satisfying ending – all in 60 seconds. It's a morality tale with a positive outcome, but if we wanted to develop the story we could re-work it as a Lucy-style dilemma tale. For example:

The Story of Yvette

Yvette is a young girl who goes to the school by the park. She is in love with Pascal, who is in a class under her. She doesn't know what to do until she meets Robert, who is in the class above her.

'Come with me, says Robert. I've got something that'll make you forget all about Pascal.'

Yvette follows Robert to the toilet where he begins to cut up some white powder.

'What is it?' asks Yvette.

'A little present from my pal', says Robert. 'We call him Dealer Pierre.'

Pascal has seen Yvette disappear into the toilet and suspects something is up. But he is afraid to do anything about himself. He goes to the headmaster, M du Pont, and expresses his concern.

'It's their free time,' says M Du Pont, the headmaster. 'Nothing I can do about it.'

Pascal goes to the toilet block. He is too late. Robert has disappeared and Yvette is on the floor, dead from a drug overdose.

*

There are five characters to this story. Rank each character, one to five, in order of responsibility for the death of Yvette. For example, if you think Pierre is most responsible, place him in first place, then the other characters accordingly:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

Most stories, especially stories produced for the cinema and television, are made to fulfill the expectations of the audience. We want the 'good side' to win and the 'bad side' to lose. It provides us with a sense of moral order that may be lacking in reality. Thus, the essence of a story is the conflict – how does a character develop, act in a crisis, change. A change from say, bad to good, unloved to loved, weak to strong, poor to rich, losing to winning. The more difficult the change, the more satisfying the story. And the essence of change is the conflict.

2. *What's the Conflict?*

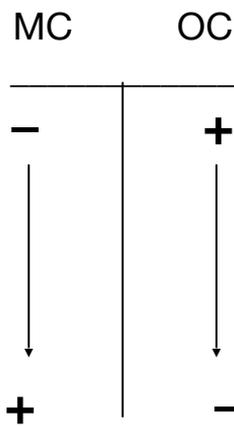
Sporting events provide a conflict sufficient to keep entire populations transfixed to television screens or sports field arenas on a given Saturday afternoon. News bulletins divide the world into individuals or teams of 'good' and 'bad' and everyday issues are presented as contests between two opposing sides. By dividing everything into neat sections of 'good' and 'bad' helps us feel that we are part of the 'good' group. Also we are freed of the normal demands of acting decently and avoiding difficult decisions to moral questions which are not always clearly black or white. Storytelling is like arranging a contest – a conflict between two sides: good vs evil, right vs wrong, rich vs poor, love vs hate, revenge vs compassion; the question the story poses is the same – who wins?

The drama of the contest can be intensified – the higher the reward for the winner, the greater the shame for the loser. Most dramatic of all is the 'matter of life or death' contest. The more identifiable the contestants' situation the greater the viewer's engagement.

In *Easy Street* (1917) Charlie Chaplin plays a police recruit assigned to a tough street in a tough neighbourhood. His formidable opponent is the local street bully, Eric Campbell, who has already hospitalised several police officers. Charlie tries calling for help on the police telephone but Campbell stops him. He indicates to the newcomer that he won't tolerate any interference from the law and to demonstrate his invulnerability he invites Charlie to slug him over the head with a police baton. No effect. Do it again, he smirks. He puts him on the ground and grabs hold of a lamp pole, and to demonstrate his strength, bends it over effortlessly. He bends it again just to show Charlie what's in store for him. As he bends it almost to the level of his head, Charlie leaps onto his back, pushes the gas lamp over the bully's face, and turns on the gas tap. Eric Campbell swoons away unconscious, and harmony has returned to Easy Street.

The scene illustrates an elementary form of dramatic conflict, the contest. Two opponents or two opposing sides engage in conflict in order to determine one winner and one loser. The street thug wants to win, to show that no-one can rule over him, not even the law. Charlie Chaplin - the police rookie - wants to win to uphold the law, to keep his job, and to avoid a beating.

Screen Writing



Dramatic conflict: the Main Character is in the worst possible situation; the Opposition Character is in the strongest possible situation. With the 'reversal' our MC wins; the OC loses.

The scene begins with Chaplin; small, weak, harmless, pitted against the street bully; big, mean and ruthless. The odds favour the bully. Chaplin as the Main Character is set up to be the Loser. Campbell, the Opposition Character, is all set to tear Chaplin apart. At the end of the scene the situation is reversed; Chaplin triumphs, the bully is beaten, unconscious beneath the gas lamp.

Conflict is the essence of any story. The basic conflict is between protagonist – antagonist; main character – opposition character; good guy – bad guy. There are other conflicts:

- Against another person
- Against a community
- Against a machine
- Against a monster
- Against nature
- Against oneself

Yet these different approaches to conflict have one thing in common. They are, in essence, inner conflicts. Dr Jekyll must confront his own inner turmoil in Mr Hyde. Muriel, in *Muriel's Wedding*, is up against the nasty Tania and her friends; they're married and goad Muriel because she isn't. But the story is still Muriel's inner conflict. George Clooney is up against the 'perfect storm', but he is also confronting his own inner doubts and inadequacies. Mr Hyde, Tania and the perfect storm, are all externalisations of the inner

conflict. More than any other kind of storytelling, the audiovisual narrative needs a 'face' to the main character's inner conflict. Then the other requirements of what makes 'a good story' fall into place just that much easier.

A strong opening

Any story begins and ends – the question is how effectively. The strong opening is a hook that grabs the viewer's interest. What makes a strong opening?

- The Question Mark – the dead body, the crime, the mystery, the package, the letter (Romancing the Stone)
- The Spectacle – the panorama, the new world (Blade Runner, Gladiator)
- The Paradox – the oddity, the bizarre (Blue Velvet)
- The Arrival Holly Martins arrives in Vienna (The Third Man), Brian arrives in Berlin (Cabaret)
- The Signifier – a human hand in a dog's mouth (Yojimbo, Last Man Standing, A Fistful of Dollars, Red Sun)
- The Mission – defining the adventure or assignment (Thelma and Louise, Mission Impossible)
- The Event – burning the winter witch (Fellini Amacordo), a hanging (Kind Hearts and Coronets)

A satisfying ending

The satisfying ending is not necessarily the happy ending, even if this seems to be the Hollywood cliché. A satisfying ending is the ending the viewer wants, but not in the way they expect it. Rick doesn't get Ilse; McMurphy doesn't get out of the asylum. Yet the endings of *Casablanca* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are satisfying for other reasons, as we shall consider later.

Also the satisfying ending depends on the set-ups (plot points) throughout the story, and our level of investment with the character and the character's situation. In other words, there are no recipes for the satisfying ending. But there are approaches that work better than others based on the principle that the audience get what they want in an unexpected way:

- The Fountain – Chief Bromden picks up the drinking fountain and hurls it through the window.
- Morality Restored – Rick loses Ilse and finds a cause. The ending we want; not how we expected it.
- The Shift – Black Adder IV. A quality sitcom (see Part Four) can shift from comedy to drama and make it work. The reason is simple. Quality television comedy, in keeping with good storytelling, is 'about something'. MASH, Absolutely Fabulous, Black Adder achieve this. The twist in the last episode of the final series of Black Adder. There's no canned laughter as the characters go 'over the top' – only drama.
- The Twist - Keven Costner in No Way Out. No Russian spies? The twist in the original of this film (The Big Clock, 1948) is just as good. The last line in Some Like it Hot. Jack Lemmon is not a woman afterall. 'No-one's perfect.'

3. Plot – Structure – Theme

Plot

The Cinemania CD-ROM summarises 30,000 film plots. In *Plots Unlimited*, authors Sawyer and Weingarten sketch 1,462 plots; in the 1920s Georges Polti listed 36 plots, while Ronald Tobias (1993) claims there are 20 'master plots.' The Dramatica Screenplay System (computer software, 1996) can generate 32,768 plots, French theorist Etienne Soureau claimed there were 200,000 dramatic situations (1950), and in 1919 pioneer Hollywood scenarist, Wycliffe Hill, published his book *Ten Million Photoplay Plots*. Aristotle claimed there were two types of story; comedy and tragedy. If we look at the ways a character can change in a story, there are three; through insight, love or fate. (See Part Two: Character). How many story plots are there?

In essence, dramatic storytelling has one plot: someone wants something, and somebody is stopping them from getting it. We can give two versions to this basic plot; (a) they get what they want, or (b) they don't get what they want. It is too easy to describe these outcomes as success or failure plots. Rather they define affirmation plots and limitation plots. The main character succeeds = anything's possible; an affirmation of life. The main character fails = life has its limitations; not everything is possible.

For the writer looking up plot dictionaries and plot software in search of inspiration, life has indeed its limitations. Plot may be triggered off by a situation, a character, an event, a place, a memory – it begins as an internal process; an inspiration that is intensely personal.

What is useful for the writer, however, is some insight into the affect of plot on the viewer – how plot development and outcome creates mood and emotion. For example, we can consider three 'affirmation' plot outcomes:

- *main character succeeds – joy*
- *villain fails – satisfaction*
- *main character blunders, yet result is success – unexpected satisfaction*

Corresponding emotions to 'limitation' plots include:

- main character fails – despair
- main character blunders, result is failure – pity
- villain succeeds – disgust

Let's consider a range of possible emotional responses and the types of plot development that can lead to such responses:

- satisfaction – what is desirable happens)
- anxiety – what is desirable doesn't happen
- tension – what is not desirable happens
- relief – what is not desirable doesn't happen

How the viewer actually reads a plot, is of course up to the viewer. It is part and parcel of the free-play that makes up the contract between the story and the viewer. Some stories employ the open-ending for just this purpose. *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998); do the young guys get the loot? *The Italian Job* (1963); do the bank robbers get off the cliff? *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949); does Louis marry Edith? or Sibella? or go back to prison?

It is the kind of plot strategy employed by dilemma tales; folk-tales that leave the ending up to the listener. An example is *The Lady or the Tiger*. A princess falls in love with a commoner. Her father, the king, finds out and is furious. He gives her lover a choice. He is placed before two identical doors. Behind one door is a hungry tiger. Behind the other door is a beautiful young woman, also a commoner, in a wedding gown. The prisoner must choose one door and accept his fate. The princess, however, has managed to find out which door conceals the secret bride and which door conceals the tiger. She sends a signal to her would-be lover. And there ends the story.

Did the princess send her suitor to the arms of a rival woman? or to the claws of a hungry tiger?

Structure

Dramatic structure begins with Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca 330BC); 'an action that is complete and whole... has a beginning, a middle and an end... a well constructed plot must conform to this pattern.'

The beginning (presentation) introduces the characters; the main character and opposition character (protagonist and antagonist), the conflict, problem or crisis, and the time and place. In other words; a situation, a character, a problem.

The middle (conflict) is the main part of the story; the conflict develops and intensifies, sub-plots and minor characters introduced, and the plot leads to a confrontation, compelling the main character to action in order to resolve the crisis.

The ending (resolution) is the return to order. The main character's action resolves the conflict, overcomes the crisis and solves the problem.

Each act ends with a turning point or a climax, an event which changes the course of the story, and changes the main character's course of action.

The three-act structure is not only basic to fictional narratives we create from our imaginations, but is inherent to the narratives that make up our daily lives. The way we converse, play a game, enjoy a meal, make love. Chess players refer to opening, middle game and end game, the medical profession create strategies based on pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis; as do management teams, lawyers and scientific investigators.

Let's look at the scene from *Easy Street* which gives us a straightforward example of dramatic structure:

Presentation

...gives us our Main Character, Chaplin, our Opposition Character, the local bully, and a place – Easy Street, the toughest neighbourhood in town. The bully has already sent a dozen policemen to hospital – bits and pieces of their uniforms lie on the street. It is an arena for the contest. Little Chaplin vs Big Bully. What happens next? Chaplin sizes up the situation as he sizes up the bully. He hasn't got a chance. He calls for help.

Conflict

... or tries to anyway. Campbell grabs the phone and examines it for himself. Chaplin tries a new strategy. He takes out his police baton and belts the bully across the head. The bully turns around, not bothered a bit. Hit me again, he gestures. Chaplin does so – no affect. Chaplin tries a last desperate strategy. He runs away. But the bully has got him with a firm grip, and a final confrontation is inevitable. We have reached the point of no return. Chaplin is about to get a sound thrashing, or worse.

Resolution

... the bully's final demonstration of power. He bends over the gas lamp, Chaplin tries to break free, fails; Campbell bends down the lamp even further. 'See how strong I am!' he gestures. Chaplin has nothing to lose. He leaps on the ruffian's back, pushes his head into the lamp-casing, turns on the gas tap. The bully struggles, is overcome by the gas, and swoons away. Chaplin is victorious.

Traditionally film structure has been defined in 'three acts'. Hollywood manuals are consistent, with some variations on how to best define 'beginning – middle – end.'

Examples include:

exposition - development/conflict - resolution (Rilla)

problem - conflict/crisis - climax (Brady and Lee)

the setup - confrontation - resolution (Field)

crisis - climax - resolution (Egri)

disturbance - struggle - adjustment (Vale)

crisis - complications - resolution (Root)

problem - conflict - action (Armes)

At the end of the 1800s, some twenty years before the era of the Hollywood film, the German dramatist, Gustav Freytag described a 'dramatic triangle' of exposition, complication and resolution.

Classical three-act structure is not however the only approach to dramatic structure. When it comes to structuring a script for a feature film, 'three acts' are not enough. We'll take a closer look at film structure in Part

Three. Meanwhile, let's take a look at some alternative approaches to narrative structure.

The Minimal Narrative

Narratology is the study of narrative texts – a term coined by literary theorist, Tzvetan Todorov. According to Todorov a minimal narrative is a move from equilibrium to disequilibrium and a return to equilibrium. In other words, you have a situation; something happens, which changes the situation. The two elements of a narrative are; 1. a state (equilibrium), and 2. an event – a passage from one state to another.

Equilibrium → *The Disruptive Event* → *Return to Equilibrium*

For example, Jeffrey Beaumont returns to his small town home from college to visit his father – hospitalised after a stroke. The situation described in the opening of *Blue Velvet* (1986). On his walk back home he discovers a severed human ear in a field – a disruptive event which triggers off Jeffrey's journey into the dark side of small town values and a descent into the shadowy world of his own psyche. The return to 'equilibrium' – the solving of the mystery, the demise of the villains – is a return to the small town idyll, but something has changed. It's a false world of make-believe happiness and mechanical singing birds.

A disruption upsets the state of balance to set the narrative in motion. Define the situation, define the problem, introduce the main character who must deal with it. End with the problem resolved. A satisfying approach to structure is the circle; situation – disruption – situation with modifications. The disruption may be an event, like the killing of Swede Anderson in *The Killers* (1946), or an action; the main character does something – like Joe Buck leaves Texas for New York (*Midnight Cowboy* 1969), to set himself up as a gigolo.

The Monomyth

This circular approach to structure can also be found in the monomyth. In his study of world mythology, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell describes the monomyth as a narrative form found in the myths and sacred writings throughout the world. The monomyth describes three phases of what Campbell calls the hero's quest: Separation – Initiation – Return. The 'call to adventure' (separation) is followed by the trials of initiation, followed by the return and reintegration into society. Without this final stage the hero has failed to integrate wisdom or pass his teachings on to others.

In the last 25 years Campbell's approach to myth has influenced Hollywood writers and producers; George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977) perhaps the most popular example; a still from the film appears on the cover of a recent edition of Campbell's influential book. Recent Hollywood screenplay manuals draw heavily on Campbell's work; James Bonnet's *Stealing Fire from the Gods* (1998), Stuart Voytilla's *Myth and the Movies* (1999), and Chris Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*, where he attributes Campbell's approach to myth and storytelling to his work on Disney projects like *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

Morphology of the Folktale

A folklorist named Vladimir Propp made a study of over 100 Russian folktales. He found common structures and characterisations, which enabled him to compile a structural overview which has since been applied to all kinds of narratives.

The essential narrative unit, maintained Propp, was the 'function', an action made by a character. Propp defined 32 functions, some of which included up to 20 or more sub-functions. Film theorists and narratologists have used Propp's system on film and television stories, including *The Killers*, 1946 (Doezel), to television commercials (Sarah Kozloff), *The Prisoner* television series (Arthur Asa Berger), *The A Team* and *Bionic Woman* (Fiske), *North by Northwest* (Wollen); other examples include *Sunset Boulevard*, *Kiss Me Deadly* and *The Third Man*.

Amazingly, it works. Propp's functions fit into film stories, television, even advertisements, as well as the folktales which made up his original study in the 1920s. Propp has his critics – a hundred folktales is not that many – however Propp's approach can also be seen as a search for the universal qualities of what makes stories work. Theorists are even applying Propp's functions to digital narratives and finding the correspondences still apply. Maybe there is a structural unity inherent to the nature of storytelling.

According to Propp:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.

In addition, there are seven role figures in Propp's scheme:

1. *Villain - in conflict with hero*
2. *Donor - provides the hero with a magical agent*
3. *Helper - helps hero in solving difficult tasks*
4. *Princess - object of quest & King - assigns quest/difficult tasks*
5. *Dispatcher - sends hero on mission*
6. *Hero - on 'quest'/fighting villain*
7. *False hero - treasonous figure, to be unmasked*

The basic structure of the folktale, says Propp, consists of:

Preparation
Compilation
Transference
Struggle
Return
Recognition

These terms may need some clarification, and later we shall find some more up-to-date expressions in outlining the phases of a dramatic story. What's of

interest here is how these phases correlate to other narrative systems, not least when we look at another, much older approach to structure. An approach that developed in the Renaissance when writers were trying to understand what makes comedy work!

Neo Classical Structure

Remember *The Name of the Rose*? In the film version of Umberto Eco's novel it was Sean Connery as Brother William who tried desperately to save the missing volume of Aristotle's *Poetics*. It was the volume which was supposed to unveil the mystery of comedy and humour. It was lost to the flames however, and all that survive are the speculations of the Renaissance scholars.

These speculations are not without interest. In addition to Aristotle's 'presentation - crisis - resolution', the neo-classical model of dramatic structure considered two components within the 'crisis' phase of the dramatic arc: 'complications' and 'confusion'. In other words, comedy required a four act structure along the lines of:

Act One – Presentation – Exposition – protasis

Act Two – Complications – Conflict – epitasis

Act Three – Confusion – Crisis – catastasis

Act Four – Resolution – Closure – catastrophe

Catastrophe means literally to 'cast down.' In comedy the story is resolved when everything 'falls into place.'

So we can also consider plot structure in four acts, as follows:

1. defining the problem
2. dealing with the problem (complications)
3. events leading up to confrontation (confusion)
4. resolving the problem and realising consequences

In *The Technique of Screen and Television Writing*, Eugene Vale describes it another way: 1. The undisturbed stage. 2. The disturbance. 3. The struggle. 4. The adjustment.

Let's return to Propp and the six phases of dramatic development. Here are the terms I prefer when it comes to defining the structure within each of these four acts:

a Situation: define main character, time, place

b Problem: define main character's problem

c Motive: define main character's motivation or risk

(ie, what happens if main character does not resolve or deal with problem?)

d Decision: define the decision taken by the main character

e Opposition: define the opposition the main character confronts in taking that decision

f Action: define the action taken by the main character

* which leads to the 'turning point'; the action taken by the main character which results in the narrative's change of direction.

Each phase relates to the problem (the dramatic conflict), and takes the conflict to a higher octave of engagement, as we shall be examining later. Each phase can be compared to a 'move', just like a player moves a piece in playing a game.

OK. So structure is not as straightforward as many scriptwriting manuals would have you believe. The aim of this section has been to provide some options; some alternative approaches on how to best structure a story. Later we shall take up some examples in both film and television. As a writer you can test out the scenarios and find which approach is most suitable for your own style of storytelling. The important aspect, I think, is to have an open and cynical disposition to the Hollywood 'recipe' approach to screenwriting. It's not always necessary to have a plot point on page 10, or mid-act climax on page 55. Scriptwriting is a process that is as individual as the scriptwriters producing scripts. Just as experiencing a story is as unique for each viewer. There may be one story on screen, but there are as many stories going on as there are viewers watching them.

Theme

Our 'good storytelling' list wrapped up with 'theme' or 'premise' – a story should be 'about something.' Let's take an example:

Pluto's Blue Note (1947) is a Disney cartoon – despite its age, often found on Disney video compilations and screened on Disney television programmes. It's Spring. The birds are singing and Pluto wants to join in. He sounds terrible and the birds blow him a raspberry. The bumble bee hums – Pluto tries again. The bee hides in disgust. The grasshopper chirps – Pluto tries that too, but the grasshopper disappears. Pluto can't sing. He is deeply depressed.

He hears music from a local music shop – a radio; hides away in the shop and by accident discovers how to play a gramophone record. Pluto discovers music!

He returns to his backyard – birds are singing, and this time Pluto sings too. He is miming a Frank Sinatra record ('You Belong to My Heart') and finds appreciation not only from the birds, bees and grasshoppers, but also from an admiring fan club of appreciative female dogs. Oops! the record gets stuck, but Pluto saves the situation, and female dogs, birds, bees and grasshoppers are won over. Pluto is a happy dog.

Here are all the prerequisites of good storytelling; a solid structure, an engaging character, consistent plot, strong opening and ending; but what's the premise? What's the story about? What's the theme?

As a scriptwriter there are five basic questions we should be asking before writing each scene:

Who? What? Why? Where? When?

Who is our Main Character? Who is the opposition?

What does the MC want? What's the conflict? What's the problem?

Why? Motivation! Why does the MC act in this way?

Where? Place

When? Time

Pluto is the Main Character, and the strategies employed to gain audience sympathy are outlined in the next chapter. And maybe this is an inner conflict (Pluto wants to sing, but he can't. In Jungian terms Pluto confronts his shadow). But as we suggested earlier, in audiovisual narrative we need to give a 'face' to the opposition. Not only are the birds the first characters presented in the story, they are inexcusably rude to Pluto. What does Pluto want? He wants to sing and he can't.

Why does he want to sing? Motivation? As a script-editor/dramaturgist my most frequent task is creating character motivation. Why do people do the things they do? In real life motivations may be obscure, inconsequent, unfathomable; but in writing for the screen, motivation has to be on-screen.

Ask a group of kids who have seen Pluto's Blue Note. Why does Pluto want to sing? You'll get all kinds of answers: because he wants to; because he wants to be friends with everyone else; because it's Spring and he wants to sing for the simple joy of singing; because he wants to impress the girls! Well, there's a lot of answers, and the answers don't just tell us something about the on-screen character; they tell us something about the kids watching.

Motivation is the fuel to the narrative engine. The stronger the motive, the stronger the story. Motives like 'revenge' 'greed' 'self-sacrifice' 'jealousy' make for dramatic stories. Maybe Pluto wants to be part of the group because he wants to be loved? Maybe he is determined to get even with the birds who mocked him? He wants revenge. Once it was the writer's story. Now it belongs to you, the viewer. You choose.

Where and when? Time and place. Good storytelling does not leave things to chance; time and place should relate to our dramatic conflict. Time of day; late morning – the birds are out, and Pluto has to get into the music store. Time of year; Spring. This is a story about the rituals of seduction, of the celebration of life, of creativity. In Spring a young man's fancy turns to love and other things; a young dog's fancy too. Historical time; 1947. Frank Sinatra has left the Tommy Dorsey band to begin a solo career. Remember The Godfather? Young girls paid to scream as the crooner appears on stage. 1947. No CD players or cassette decks. Pluto's tail which serves so well as a needle on a 78 rpm gramophone disc, serves less well on contemporary playing machines.

Place; a small town backyard. A big city setting won't work – no nature; a rural setting won't work – no music store; no technology. A structural analysis of this story would reveal a series of binary oppositions between culture and nature; art and technology; performance and ritual; all coming together in a small town backyard.

So – what's the premise? The theme? What's the story about? What sort of moral does the viewer read into it?

Here are some suggestions from some American viewers: 'You can achieve anything if you try hard enough.' 'Don't let your physical limitations stand in the way of success.' 'Even a dog can sing!' Interpretations which I suspect are much in keeping with the Disney writers more than 50 years ago.

Some Swedish viewers have provided a different slant; 'If you can't make it, fake it.' 'Cheaters prosper.' 'If you're no good use technology to help you out.' 'Dishonesty pays.' As one Swedish viewer pointed out, we never actually saw Pluto pay for the record player.

The point being, there is not just one premise, or a single theme to any story. Remember *The Story of Lucy*? We read stories from our cultural background, or gender, or generation, or just because we have our own individual slant on life. This is what screen play is about. As a viewer we can play with the on-screen story any way we like. As a writer we need to understand the craft of good storytelling. Only then can we create narrative games worth playing; only then can we maintain the unwritten contract between viewer and story.

Summary

What is story?

*character
plot
structure
theme*

What makes a good story?

*a conflict
an engaging character
a strong opening
a satisfying ending
a consistent plot (it makes sense!)
a premise (it's about something!)*

A dramatic narrative

*a main character in the worst possible situation
an opposition character in the strongest position
reversal*

Six basic conflicts:

*against another person
against a community
against a machine
against a monster
against nature
against oneself*

II

CHARACTER

1. *What Makes an Engaging Character?*

Identification! We need a character we can identify with. Or do we? Hollywood manuals and scriptwriting text books go to lengths to tell us how important it is to create a character we can identify with. When in fact... We can make a character of anyone, or anything. We can make a cartoon figure, a robot, a desk lamp, a dinosaur. What we need to create is a situation we can identify with.

For example. A small green dot moves about on a white screen in a leisurely kind of way. A big black blot suddenly blocks its way. The green dot tries to move around the black blot, but the black blot continues to block its way. The green dot backs off and goes back the way it came, when another black blot appears and blocks that way as well. The green dot tries moving sideways, but a third black blot moves in. Now the green dot is hemmed in from all sides. Which ever way it tries to move, the black blots move in and block its way.

How do you feel about this? What do you think about the black blots? Or the small green dot?

When this kind of test is tried out by psychologists, most people feel sympathy for the green dot. The black blots come across as threatening and spiteful; the green dot as victimised and picked on. It's a green dot on a white board! Which shows how easily it is for us to identify with a situation. The bullies and the victim. Imagine how much more we could dramatise this scenario with music, sound affects, some simple scenography. No characters, just dots on a screen.

Poor Sod

What we are creating here is a poor sod scenario. A poor sod is someone we feel sorry for. A young man who loses his job, the woman with a brutal husband, the kid who suffers at the hands of a sadistic teacher. Charlie Chaplin, up against the bully, is the poor sod. Pluto, who wants to sing, but is mocked for his efforts, is a poor sod. Rick, dumped by Ilse, is a poor sod. The

poor sod scenario serves two functions: 1. arouses the feelings of the viewer – feelings for a character stimulates interest in the story; 2. allows the viewer to identify with the character because we identify with their situation.

What else helps create an engaging character?

- clear goals
- a problem
- unhappiness
- helplessness
- another character (contrast)
- determination and resolve
- smart
- 'a secret past'

At the opening of *The Third Man* (1949) Holly Martins 'broke, without a care, and looking for a job' arrives in Vienna only to find that his best friend who paid for him to come over, was killed in an accident the day before. On the way to his friend's apartment he walks under a ladder. Poor sod.

Joe Buck (*Midnight Cowboy*, 1969) gets into his best clothes, best boots and a cowboy hat – stares into the mirror and tells himself how good he looks, and sets off from Texas for New York. He's leaving a job as a dishwasher and thinks he's going to earn a fortune seducing sex-hungry women in the big city. Dressed as a cowboy. Poor sod. Within the film's first 20 minutes he's been humiliated, cheated, conned and robbed.

Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*, 1976) can't sleep nights. He gets a job driving taxis. He tries to joke with the company foreman, who tells him if he's a wise-guy he can clear off. Everyone dumps on Travis Bickle. He goes to a sex cinema (he hasn't got a girl), tries to be friendly with the girl at the desk, and she threatens to have him thrown out. And then he has to drive nights through the garbage and sleaze of New York's poorer quarters. Poor sod. All we want is that the poor bastard gets a break. By the time we realise that Travis Bickle is unhinged - a disturbed psychotic on the brink of violent and bloody deeds - it is too late. We feel sorry for Travis Bickle, we like the guy, and we get 'taken for a ride'. We end up as unwitting passengers on Bickle's descent into hell, siding with him as he prepares to kill a congressman and

again as he wages carnage in a lower East side tenement house. Just because we felt sorry for him at the start of the picture.

Richard Blaine in *Casablanca* has been 'wronged by a woman', Antonius Blok in *The Seventh Seal* confronts death, and Charlie Chaplin in *Easy Street* is the 'little man' forced to contend with the biggest and toughest bully in the neighbourhood.

John Cleese, co-writer of *Fawlty Towers*, was once asked to explain how it was possible television viewers could actually feel sympathy, or even like, Basil Fawlty. 'Helplessness makes us feel good about people,' he said, 'and if they can look after themselves we don't like them very much.'

In *Thelma and Louise* (1991), Thelma is the poor sod. She's up against Darryl, and Darryl is in control. What does Thelma want? She wants to go away for the weekend with Louise. What does Thelma need? Freedom? Her own life, her own identity? Wants and needs are not always the same. Joe Buck wants to be a gigolo; he needs to get in touch with his humanity. Rick wants Ilsa; he needs to find some kind of moral centre, a cause. Antonius Blok wants to beat Death, but he needs to find humility, an act of selflessness.

In *Muriel's Wedding* (1990) Muriel wants to get married. She catches the bride's bouquet; 'looks like I'm next,' she says. 'No-one's ever going to marry you!' say her chiding friends. 'You haven't even got a boyfriend.' Overweight, friendless, misunderstood, and taken to the police station for shop-lifting. Poor Muriel!

Muriel may be the 'poor sod' but she is not a victim. There is an important distinction. She has a clear goal (getting married), even if what she needs is something else (confronting her dad, communicating with her mum, bringing the family together). The risk of creating a character without goals, or who is just a victim, is that the viewer runs out of sympathy. We just don't care. When *Philadelphia* was released in 1993 it was hailed as the first mainstream Hollywood film with an AIDS victim as the main character. Big controversy, lots of publicity. But it wasn't true. For the purpose of the story Tom Hanks was the victim of unfair dismissal. He had a clear goal. To win the court case against the company he had worked for. He was the poor sod (unfairly dismissed) but never a victim.

The Story of Muriel

Muriel is a young woman who lives in a house by a beach somewhere in Australia. She wants to get married but she doesn't even have a boyfriend. She doesn't know what to do so she goes to her best friend Rhonda and asks for advice. 'Look after your family and friends,' says Rhonda. 'Getting married can wait.'

'Sod that!' says Muriel, and asks her mum instead.

'If you want to get married, then get married', says her mother.

'Yes,' says Muriel, and goes to the swimming pool training centre where she meets Peter, a South African swimming champion. She goes to her Dad. 'Let me marry the South African swimming champion, please Dad,' asks Muriel.

'Sure', says her Dad, 'I don't give two hoots what you do! When's the big day?'

'I'm not sure,' says Muriel. 'Why do you need to know?'

'I'm moving out to go and live with my mistress. And I don't want any of my stupid family coming to bother me!'

Muriel and her new husband move to a luxury beach front apartment in Sydney harbour. Muriel dresses in sexy underwear. 'Peter, I love you', says Muriel. Peter resists the temptation and does not make love with Muriel.

When she recovers from the occasion Muriel is upset at the thought that Peter has taken advantage of her. She runs from the house and to the house where Rhonda lives.

Rhonda is angry with Muriel. But she opens the door and welcomes her in anyway. Muriel tells her the whole story, whereupon Rhonda is filled with bitterness and asks Muriel to leave.

Muriel realises there's trouble at home. She phones her Dad. Muriel calls out: 'Dad, please take mum back.'

Dad looks at his wallet and calls back: 'Sorry Muriel - I did warn you.' And he hangs up. Muriel decides to return home. It is too late. Her mother has taken an overdose and died.

There are five characters to this story. Rank each character, one to five, in order of who is most responsible for the death of Muriel's mum. For example, if Rhonda is most responsible, he is placed first, then the other characters accordingly:

Patty Hearst is the granddaughter of W R Hearst, who was fictionalised in *Citizen Kane* (1941). Patty Hearst's biography was published in the 1980s and writer/ director Paul Schrader made the film. It's a gripping story. The heiress to the once richest man in the world, tries to find a normal life as a university student. In the mid-1970s she is kidnapped by a terrorist group calling themselves the Symbionese Liberation Army. She was held captive and converted to the cause of her abductors. Surveillance cameras filmed her part in a California bank robbery. She was rescued from captivity in a dramatic FBI raid, and after months of de-briefing and de-brainwashing, found herself on trial for acts of terrorism. She was convicted, gaoled, re-tried and finally released to return to a so-called normal life.

When the film was screened for the first time at the Cannes film festival in 1988, the publicity was enormous. Patty Hearst appeared together with Paul Schrader for press interviews and television coverage. But whatever happened to the film, Patty Hearst? In most countries the film never had a theatrical release, nor even video release. The reviews were poor and the film sank without a trace. What went wrong?

The problem, according to Paul Schrader, was that the film 'deals with a passive protagonist. Movies are about people who do things. The number one fantasy of the cinema is that we can do something - we are relatively impotent in our own lives so we go to the movies to watch people who are in control of their lives. Patty Hearst violates the cardinal rule of cinema.'

Patty Hearst didn't want anything. No goals. No objectives. The engaging character wants something, and desperately.

2. *In Depth Character*

Cabaret (1969) begins with Brian (Michael York) arriving in Berlin in the early 1930s. He knocks on the door of a boarding house, and Sally Bowles (Liza Minelli) lets him in. He's looking for a room, and large enough to accommodate students – he intends giving English lessons. The available room is small, but Sally suggests he borrow hers – she's 'out all day, and working at the club at night.' He is English, reserved and proper; she is American, impulsive and 'divinely decadent.' She persuades him to take the room and their precarious relationship begins, against a background of nightclub decadence and rising National Socialism.

If we divide a piece of paper into two columns; Column A 'Brian' and Column B 'Sally', we could observe the following traits describing the two characters.

Brian : Sally
English : American
polite : impulsive
reserved : spontaneous
intellectual : theatrical
introvert : extrovert

How do we know these things about Brian and Sally? Well, we don't – we speculate. Our knowledge is based only on what we've seen and what we've heard; on sounds and pictures.

Film stories are told in nouns and verbs. Our observations concerning Brian and Sally derive from the images and dialogue in the script, from the performance of the two actors, and the sounds and pictures that are pieced together in the process of post-production. A filmscript describes people and situations in concrete terms without recourse to the literary convention of descriptive prose. There are no adjectives in the filmscript. A 'beautiful chair' means little in a filmscript. 'Beautiful' may be Edwardian to one betractor, Reitveld to another. 'Beautiful' in film terms is described by a person, an object, or another person, and the first person's reaction. Nouns and verbs. Things, people and what people do.

In addition we understand the character's of Brian and Sally because they are so different; Brian is everything that Sally isn't and vice versa. They contrast each other, which not only creates a dramatic dynamic, but makes their characteristics that much more apparent.

Profile

Next exercise. Let's sketch out a character – in depth – outlining four key aspects to a character profile:

- physiology – what a character looks like
- sociology – a character's background / social status
- psychology – what makes the character tick
- drives – wants, needs, problem, what's at risk

CHARACTER CHECKLIST

Name:.....

Problem:.....

What this character wants:.....

.....

What this character needs:.....

.....

What stops them getting it:

.....

Who are they up against:.....

Physiology	Sociology	Psychology
Sex	Place of birth	Introvert/Extrovert
Age	Current residence	open/secretive
Height	Mother	passionate/detached
Weight	Father	fearless/afraid
Hair	Family	intense/relaxed
Eyes	Marital status	aggressive/passive
Physical characteristics	Work	kind/mean
Physical deformities/ peculiarities	Recreation	stereotype:
Clothes	Interests	enthusiast - pragmatic
	Ambitions	thinking - feeling

Three lives

'Every man has three lives - public, private and secret.' Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

A stereotype has one voice, a character has many voices. Or layers. The public life, the private life, the secret life. Understanding a character is like peeling layers of an onion. In a public situation (the wedding reception) Muriel is the girl who wants to get married, but she 'hasn't even got a boyfriend.' As the opening sequence unfolds, we get to know something of her private life. She's got a famous dad. According to 'Leo Higgins... the best councillor this town ever had.' But something strange is going on this opening scene. Why does everyone mention her dress? Who is that woman who keeps looking at Muriel? Muriel's secret life is exposed; she stole the dress – she steals things. What do we think about Muriel now? Hm. More complicated than we first thought.

If in-depth character is multi-layered, what do those layers represent? Public life scenes include those at work, with strangers, in social situations, formal situations, unfamiliar situations.

In public situations Joe Buck is awkward, stammering, inarticulate and socially handicapped; in front of the mirror he is confident, smooth, stylish and self-assured.

Private life scenes include those at home, with family, close friends, partner, and familiar situations. Imagine the head of a big company, or a headmaster at a school; how they behave in front of their subordinates; how they exercise authority. Imagine the same character at home; with their spouse, favourite pet, a baby. It's easy to understand this kind of role-play because it's the same kind of role-play we confront and act everyday in real life.

The third layer: Secret life scenes when the character is alone, with a confidante, writing diary confessions, dreaming, daydreaming, expressing their secret ambitions. Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks*, Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*; characters estranged by the dark secrets they bear.

Here's a new exercise. Divide a blank sheet of paper into three columns: Column A 'work', Column B 'home' and Column C 'alone'. In a given situation how does this character respond at work, at home or by alone? Divide the 24 hour day into three 8 hour segments. Eight hours work, eight hours recreation, and eight hours in a bed. The bedroom being the arena for the drama of sex, dreams and nightmares – and the hours of darkness. For some, insomnia and psychosis.

Now that we have a character and some understanding of the character's background, we can begin the scriptwriting process in earnest. Try this: write a presentation scene for the main character, i.e. the scene in which the audience first meets this character. Try to include as much of the material as outlined in the Character Profile. In screenplay format a page is about a minute. Three pages is three minutes. This is the start of your story as the presentation of the character. Make it interesting.

Transformation

As the script develops we'll find that a story is about how a character changes. There are three ways in which a character can change:

Inner realisation: a character changes through his or her own efforts or own self-awareness. These are Ugly Duckling stories as in the tale by H C Andersen. *Muriel's Wedding* is an Ugly Duckling story.

Another Person: a character changes through the influence of another person. As in H C Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. She chooses mortality for the sake of her love for the young prince. Most love stories are about change through the influence of another; *Casablanca* for example.

Fate: a character has no control over their own destiny; the change occurs through events over which they have no influence. H C Andersen's *The Little Tin Soldier* is a fate story. So are disaster stories, war stories, catastrophe stories. Which category does *Titanic* fall into? Could be 'love', could be 'fate'. There's nothing wrong in combining transformation themes.

There is one more transformation theme, and that is when the character doesn't change at all. Did you see the film *Dark Eyes* (1986)? Marcello Mastroianni plays a philandering cad who finally who has the opportunity to redeem himself to his wife, and for once, be truthful. But he can't. He lies. He cannot change. Which is both the comedy and the tragedy of the story.

3. Roles, Types and Archetypes

Let's not confuse character role and character type. A role serves as a dramatic function. Good, bad, helping, watching. A type provides us with a perspective; feeling, thinking, creating problems, solving problems. That's a simple overview of what we have already revealed as the complex subject of 'character'.

Character roles

Whether the story has two principles, or a cast of thousands, any character will fit into one of four basic roles. These are:

- main character (protagonist)
- opposition character (antagonist)
- catalyst (hero / helper / antihero)
- observer

Remember the French information film set in a school playground? There are three principles; the young boy, the young girl, and the older boy who peddles drugs. The film lasts one minute. Who is the Main Character, who is the Opposition Character, who is the catalyst? Girls often identify with the girl, boys usually with the younger boy. Is the young boy the catalyst, helping the girl away from the drug dealer? Is the older boy the catalyst helping the younger boy get the girl? I'm not sure it matters that much; what's important is that the roles are there, rather than who plays them. It's like *The Story of Lucy*. Viewers 'write' scripts too.

Thelma and Louise begins with Louise serving coffee in a roadside diner. She calls Thelma and asks if she's ready for their weekend trip. Sure, says Thelma, only first she has to ask Darryl.

Who's the poor sod in this story? Well, Louise is pretty much in control of her life; so is Darryl. Thelma is downtrodden – she doesn't realise it at the beginning of the story, but she needs help. And she gets it from Louise. Thelma changes. It's an *Ugly Duckling* story.

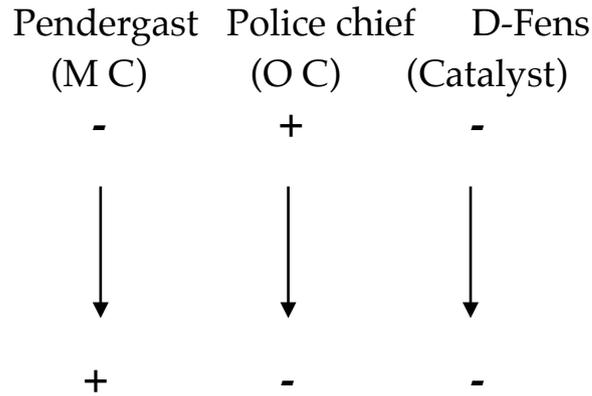
Later Harvey Keitel comes in as the police chief, to provide a moral perspective over the unfolding events. Their roles correspond to:

Thelma (M C)	Darryl (O C)	Louise (Catalyst)	Police chief (Observer)
-	+	+	?
↓	↓	↓	↓
+	-	+	!

Four roles: protagonist, antagonist, catalyst, observer

In the dramatic narrative the Main Character and Opposition Character (protagonist and antagonist) undergo some kind of change (a reversal, or in classical terms, anagnorisis, which means both reversal and insight). The catalyst is the agent of change, but doesn't change themselves. It's not their story. Same applies to 'observer' characters, whose alliances to the principle characters can change during the story. Observer characters are like the chorus to Greek drama, voicing the concerns, doubts and support for the character they think deserve it. Just like the audience. And audiences are fickle.

Falling Down (1993) is about a character in crisis. D-Fens (Michael Douglas) is stuck in a traffic jam, harassed by a fly, so abandons his car on the freeway and hikes it into the city. En route to visit his estranged wife and child he vandalises a grocery store (he's overcharged for a Cola); embarking on a journey of escalating acts of violence and rage. D-Fens however, is not the poor sod. He is unhinged from the beginning. His dramatic function is that of catalyst to the real protagonist, Pendergast (Robert Duvall). It's Pendergast's last day at work before the retirement he doesn't want to take. He is harassed by a nagging wife, and humiliated by his boss (the antagonist). D-Fens is the anti-hero catalyst who, through his negative actions, helps Duvall regain his confidence and his life. The story ends with him humiliating his boss, defying his wife, and abandoning retirement to be the police department hero.



Anti-hero: a catalyst through negative actions

Character Types

We have a main character (protagonist) and an opposition character (antagonist). A character we feel for, (empathy) and a character we fear (antipathy). Most likely the main character needs help (catalyst), and most likely other characters will voice some kind of moral perspective (observers). There are no rules as to how many characters a script requires, but a guiding line is four principle characters. Watch films, plays and television series. The interaction between four archetypal characters is basic to most of them. They belong to what Carl Jung described as the 'collective unconscious.' His descriptions of 'intuitive, sensation, thinking, and feeling' described a typology with its precedents in the four temperaments of Hippocrates (400BC) and the four elements. According to Empedocles, the elements formed all material – the analogy here can be extended to the psychological components of the human personality.

Element	Type	Temperament	Trait	Orientation
Fire	Intuitive	Choleric	'Enthusiast'	Action-orientated
Earth	Sensation	Melancholic	'Practical'	Process-orientated
Air	Thinking	Sanguinic	'Logical'	Idea-orientated
Water	Feeling	Phlegmatic	'Imaginative'	People-orientated

Let's take a look at the four principles in Mission Impossible 2 (2000). Not because it's a great film or a great script, but because it is an updated reworking of a great script that was a great film more than 50 years ago.

Ethan Hunt is assigned to recruit top thief Nyah Nordoff Hall. He falls in love with her, then must assign her to get involved with her ex-lover, Sean Ambrose. Ambrose has stolen a tube of a deadly virus named Chimera. Ambrose is aided by the sociopathic Hugh Stamp who deeply resents Nyah's re-involvement with Ambrose. Hunt is forced to watch their relationship develop before he can defeat the villain, Ambrose, in the final confrontation.

Their psychological profiles correspond to:

Ethan Hunt – thinking

Nyah – feeling

Ambrose – intuitive

Stamp – sensation

And the basis for these correspondences? Well, not so much the film, MI2 (the display of special effects left little time for character development), but rather the film on which it's based; Notorious (1946).

The four principle characters of Notorious not only represent quintessential Hitchcock 'types', they also represent clearly defined psychological 'types':

Alicia – feeling type. She bears with her a secret past, and her actions of the present are founded on incidents of the past. Her attempt at oblivion through alcohol and reckless living helped conceal her guilt from herself and from others, but finally she must atone for the sins of the father. Atonement leads to self-sacrifice. She seeks a nurturing 'father figure'. Her actions are based on feelings, not logic or reason. 'Spying for the government' has to do with 'atonement' rather than intellectual stimulation, pragmatism or political ideology.

Devlin – thinking type. 'I don't trust women' says Devlin, implying 'I don't trust feelings'. Reserved, difficulty in expressing feeling, analytical, repressed, full of plans and ideas and social charm – but detached and fearful of commitment. We see 'Devlin' in other Hitchcock scenarios; Roger Thornhill in North by Northwest; L B Jeffries in Rear Window.

Sebastian – intuitive type. A villain, a Nazi, but charming, romantic, cultivated. His motivations are ideological; he believes in what he's doing, in

the 'cause'. The intuitive type sees beyond themselves and his romantic involvement with Alicia has the qualities of idealised love. Demonstratively affectionate, gallant, a man of (misguided) vision – an idealist.

Sebastian's mother – sensation type. Practical, realistic, conservative – wary of change – and possessive. Not only toward her son, but to retaining the status quo. She is a woman who solves problems when necessary, and by whatever means necessary. 'Mother, I am married to an American agent,' confesses Sebastian. Mother replies, 'Don't worry son. I'll take care of your wife.' Next morning she serves Alicia with poisoned coffee.

Types do not define actual personalities; each individual consists of all four types, but to a greater or lesser extent. Jung called the dominating quality the superior function, and the 'subjugated' quality, the inferior function. The cinema narrative is a series of representations; cinema time (ellipsis) is a representation of real time; sets, decors and studios represent places; actors represent characters. Likewise characters are represented by types, not actual people. No matter how realistic a film may seem, or how convincing a character may be, the brevity cinema's story conventions means simplicity, in contrast to the complexity of real life and real people. In television the use of types is essential to enable the viewer to immediately identify the stereotype. (See Part Four). So stereotypes in television (this isn't as negative as it may sound); archetypes in film.

Consider Chinatown (Polanski directed, the scriptwriter was Robert Towne, who wrote Mission Impossible 2); four principle characters – four archetypes – juxtaposed against each other so that the narrative can lead only to a series of intricate and insoluble conflicts, so entrenched in their 'archetypal mode' as these characters are.

According to Jake Gittes, Evelyn Mulwray 'is a phony just like the rest.' The rest? According to Jake women are 'no good', but at least he knows one funny story about women's impossible sexual demands. He heard it from a barber. Evelyn Mulwray heard it from Jake, but if Jake had known she was nearby he would no doubt have sent her 'off to the little girl's room', as he did his young secretary. Gittes is a pragmatist and bewildered by Evelyn's subterfuge, 'secret past' and vague meanings. He knows what he can hold

and touch. Jake Gittes can't get a grip on Evelyn Mulwray. They become lovers which only intensifies the enigma.

Evelyn's father, Noah Cross is also an enigma. 'What can more money get you?' Gittes asks Noah Cross. 'The future Mr Gitts (sic), the future - my daughter's future.'

Gittes liaison with Evelyn's husband, Hollis Mulwray was brief. But he recognised a man of principle, a man of ideas and ideals. Later he discovers that although Noah Cross's great vision was 'to bring water to the desert of Los Angeles', it was Hollis Mulwray, civil engineer, who could make it work. And when the risks were too great, when Mulwray was audacious enough to present reality before the vision, he made himself instantly expendable.

The characters can be summarised as:

J J Gittes: sensation – relates to the present and sensory perception.

Evelyn Mulwray: feeling – entrenched in the past; dark secrets and hidden feelings.

Noah Cross: intuitive – visions of the future. No-one may hinder the actualisation of the will.

Hollis Mulwray: thinking – ideas and knowledge; fatal knowledge as it transpires.

Summary

Four basic traits of an engaging character:

- *helplessness*
- *clear goals*
- *a problem*
- *determination*

Four key aspects to character profile

- *physiology (physical appearance)*
- *sociology (social background)*
- *psychology (psychological profile/traits)*
- *drives (want/need/problem/risk)*

Four roles or dramatic functions

- *Main Character (protagonist)*
- *Opposition Character (antagonist)*
- *Catalyst (hero/antihero/helper)*
- *Observer ('chorus'/viewer's perspective)*

Four psychological types

- *Action-orientated (intuitive/enthusiast)*
- *Process-orientated (sensation/practical)*
- *Idea-orientated (thinking/logical)*
- *Relationship (people)-orientated (feeling/emotions)*

Four character-transformation plot lines

- *insight (change through self-realisation)*
- *love (change through another person)*
- *fate (change through uncontrollable events)*
- *stasis (no change – the static conflict)*

III

FILM

1. *What Makes an Engaging Film?*

At the head of the list is 'what makes a good story...' Conflict, character, plot, structure, theme, and the other points we've covered earlier. But what are the qualities specific to film stories we should consider? Here's a list we can start with:

- genre
- set-ups -> pay-offs
- credibility <-> implausibility
- visuals/motif
- concise dialogue

Genre

Genre is useful for a lot of reasons. Sorting videos in video shops, clarifying a story to producers, providing a set of aesthetic criteria and conventions on how to best execute a particular kind of story, and above all, to cue in the viewer. Genre gives us expectations; an indication as to what kind of narrative game we're playing. The murder mystery begins with a corpse, and proceeds with an investigation; the romantic comedy with a confused meeting of two unlikely candidates to become a future couple; the musical – characters can sing and dance on cue. All films pertain to genre; sometimes we need to define a new one. For the writer making 'the pitch', genre is a prerequisite for introducing the story. Sometimes genre is as loose or vague as 'European art-house', or a 'Fellini film', or 'Bergmanesque' or 'noir', a genre defined by critics and academics.

Genre means conventions for the writer; expectations for the viewer.

Set-ups and pay-offs

What was it Chekhov wrote? If you have a hunting rifle hanging on the wall in Act One, make sure some-one's going to shoot somebody by Act Three. The set-up is the information planted early on, that 'pays-off' later. Michael Douglas races motor cycles in the opening of *Black Rain* (1989), and the final chase sequence is on motor cycles. How set-ups and pay-offs work in drama

and comedy is covered in the sections on classical Hollywood narrative and television situation comedy.

Credibility <-> implausibility

In the classic swashbuckler, *Scaramouche* (1952), the world's greatest swordsman is trying to teach the young novice the finer points of fencing. 'The sword is like a bird,' he says. 'If you grasp it too tightly, it will suffocate and die; if you hold it too lightly, it will fly away.' Well, the script is like that bird. Too much credibility means too much information – the story becomes too obvious and the audience is suffocated. Too much implausibility – impossible coincidences, unbelievable characters, whatever – and the audience flies away. The script is a fine balance between what the viewer can believe – the realistic, and what the viewer wants to believe – the fantastic.

Visuals/motif

When David Lynch introduced *Wild at Heart* (1991) at the Cannes film festival, he described it as a 'film film.' What should that mean? Well, a film that employs all the devices and playfulness that the cinema can provide – outrageous visuals and wild motifs. A motif is any element of a film repeated in a significant way; the striking match and close-up flame in *Wild at Heart*; Sailor's Elvis references ('Love Me Tender', the snake-skin jacket, the posturing), and Lulu's *Wizard of Oz* inserts (the wicked witch and the good witch, the yellow brick road); lipstick is the motif that describes Lulu's mother's descent into madness; from her painted red mouth, to her painted wrist, to the lipstick daubed mirror, and to her entire face painted red.

Concise dialogue

As we've considered elsewhere, the cinema is a visual medium first – dialogue, in the words of Alfred Hitchcock, is just another sound effect. Television is a verbal medium; the soap opera, the sitcom, television drama, need dialogue for exposition and plot development. The cinema demands pictures. 'We didn't need dialogue,' says Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), reflecting on the golden age of the silent cinema, 'we had faces.'

Today's cinema requires dialogue, but dialogue is not the same as conversation. Dialogue means that text has a subtext, and understatement allows the viewer to fill in the gaps. 'Make him an offer he can't refuse,' says Brando in *The Godfather* (1972). A good film scene creates a dramatic situation without words; as Voltaire once wrote, 'if you want to bore people, tell them everything.'

To our list of basic 'engrossing film' qualities we could add music, humour, the specifics of the genre (every genre has its own list of aesthetics and conventions, of which the well-versed writer need be aware), and more besides. But the most important aspect of the well-crafted script is along the lines of the advice director John Huston received before directing his first film, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). 'Just remember. Treat every scene as the most important scene of the film.'

And sure enough the script fails or succeeds on the strengths and weaknesses of each scene. Each scene is its own integral storyworld. In addition, there are a number of 'must have' scenes:

- a 'define the character' scene
- a 'define the situation' scene
- a 'define the problem' scene
- a 'define the villain' scene

Let's return to the opening of *Thelma and Louise*. Louise serves coffee in a roadside diner. She calls Thelma, who answers the phone in her morning robe. 'Are you packed and ready little housewife? We are out of here tonight.' 'I have to ask Darryl first,' says Thelma, then hangs up as she helps Darryl on his way to work.

In that opening scene the characters are established and the plot is set-up. What does Thelma want? To go away for the weekend with Louise. What does Thelma need? She needs to get her own life. To liberate herself from a dominating and oppressive patriarchy. Of which Darryl is the primary representative. Does she need help? Absolutely. Enter Louise...

The Story of Thelma

Thelma is a young woman who lives in a house in the suburbs. She lives with her husband Darryl but she is no longer sure if she is love with him. She doesn't know what to do so she goes to her friend Louise and asks for advice.

'If you don't love him, come away with me for the weekend', says Louise.

'Yes' says Thelma, and leaves for the weekend without telling Darryl.

Thelma and Louise drive across the country and Thelma goes to a motel room with Brad Pitt. 'Brad, I want you', says Thelma. Brad cannot resist the temptation and makes love with Thelma.

When she recovers from the occasion Thelma is upset at the fact that Brad has taken advantage of her, and stolen all their money.

Now Thelma and Louise have to rob banks and stores and blow up trucks. The police chief, Harvey Keitel, asks them to stop. Thelma telephones to Darryl. 'Darryl, please don't take me back, 'cos I'm not coming back!'

Thelma and Louise are chased across the state by the police chief, Harvey Keitel. Harvey looks at his fellow police officers and calls out: 'Sorry Thelma - I did warn you.' And he chases them all the way to the Grand Canyon.

Thelma looks at Louise and tells her to put her foot to the floor. In midair, she ...

*

There are five characters to this story. Rank each character, one to five, in order of who is most responsible for the death of Thelma. For example, if Brad Pitt is most responsible, he is placed first, then the other characters accordingly:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

2. Classical Hollywood Narrative

We can look up a history book and find that 'moving pictures' began in a Paris Cafe in december 1895. Short films showing a train pulling into a station, workers leaving a factory, and more. But film narrative? When did film narrative begin? It was about 30 years later that the film medium developed into a narrative form that's come to be known as a classical Hollywood style.

During the years between independent production companies employed 'wildmen' to come up with crazy ideas; film makers experimented with car chases, train trips, spectacles, short films, long films. The film distributors didn't care much for the feature film – showing films made money because viewers could come and go as they pleased. It was more profitable to have a programme of short films than one feature film which meant people having to wait for the starting time.

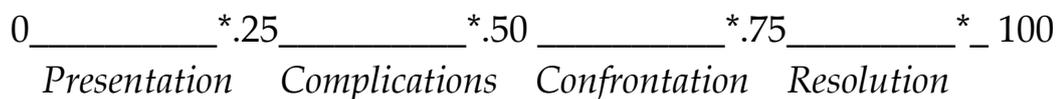
D W Griffith, an actor turned filmmaker, liked the idea of the feature film (the photoplay) that were imported from Europe, and in 1915 made *A Birth of a Nation*; *Intolerance* a year later. But the feature film photoplay did not become the norm until around 1924 when MGM opened up their studios in Culver City and began the conveyor belt industrialisation of the motion picture industry. One feature length photoplay per week; a stable of actors, writers, producers and technicians. Now motion pictures were manufactured like Henry Ford manufactured automobiles.

And with mass-market production came a narrative style. The industry talks about the three act 'beginning – middle – end' story structure (which is true – everything has a beginning, a middle and an end); whereas a closer look at the feature film's narrative form shows four stages of plot development. I am referring to the neo-classical structure outlined in Part One. Act One establishes the character and defines the problem; Act Two develops the character and their experience of the problem; Act Three pushes the character to confront the problem to the 'point of no return'; Act Four – the main character resolves the problem and sees some kind of return to order. Perhaps a moral point is made in the rounding off at the end of the story.

It is the narrative structure of the conventional, predominantly Hollywood feature film; opens with a 'hook' (what's the problem? who's the character? why should we care?), and culminates with the 'satisfying ending'; a narrative convention which aims to fulfil the expectations of the broadest potential audience.

Of course there other kinds of film stories. In classical literature we have the epic and lyric – episode 'quest' narratives and poetic narratives – and there are such comparisons to be made even in the cinema. Yet the dramatic narrative remains the norm; dramatic storytelling has sustained the motion picture industry since the studio system evolved in the 1920s.

A film lasting around 100 minutes, can be broken down into four acts, each about 25 minutes. (The 100 minute length of a film – which is the average – is not so arbitrary as may first appear. It is the same length of a sleep cycle, which also consists of four parts; light sleep, heavy sleep, REM sleep – the dream state – then light sleep). Each act begins with a situation, defines the problem, forcing the main character into a decision, finally leading into a course of action.



Remember our analysis of character types in MI2, and archetypes in Notorious? Let's take a look at the structure of Notorious to illustrate the four act structure. Act 1, set in Miami, intelligence agent Devlin meets Alicia, the wayward daughter of a man convicted of treason. At the outset Alicia is the victim manipulated by government officials playing on her guilt over her father's treachery. Devlin is the persecutor exploiting her bad conscience, that in order to atone for the sins of the father she must spy for the government. Act 2. Alicia falls in love with Devlin. At first he doesn't respond. He has trouble expressing feelings. But as the assignment intensifies, so does his passion. Although he cannot admit it, Devlin falls in love with Alicia.

Act 3, in Brazil, Devlin loses Alicia. On government orders she marries Sebastian, head of a nazi ring. Sebastian, in spite of his mother's misgivings, is obsessed with Alicia, and doesn't realise until late in the game whose side

she's on. 'I am married to an American agent', says Sebastian to his mother. 'Don't worry,' she says. 'I'll take care of it.' Act 4, Alicia is being slowly poisoned to death in Sebastian's home. Devlin, embittered, fails to see what's happening. But, in the tradition of the last minute rescue, Devlin saves her.

And the 'satisfying ending'? At the end, the situation is reversed – Devlin is driven by guilt to rescue Alicia. He has jeopardised her life and manipulated her feelings. Finally he confesses his love for her. At the beginning he has saved her from her own recklessness and self-destructiveness, now he has saved her once more, this time from Sebastian, Sebastian's mother, and a gang of ruthless Nazis.

In Greek mythology a hero is half mortal and half divine, and favoured by the gods. In drama, unlike the main character, the hero doesn't change. The hero is the same at the end of a story as at the beginning – still a hero, whereas the main character changes.

Hollywood loves a hero. So much so that sometimes the hero figures more prominently than the protagonist/ main character. That's OK. As a scriptwriter, you play God. You can choose which character you want to emphasise, providing you understand the dramatic role the character plays.

Let's take an example.

In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1976) Randal McMurphy arrives at the asylum. His handcuffs are removed and he whoops like a monkey. McMurphy is no poor sod. Chief Bromden stands in line to get medication. The other inmates shuffle along in a makeshift cue, but Bromden is so lifeless, the orderlies push him into line. Bromden is so lacking the will to live, he is almost comatose. Poor sod. He needs help.

Nurse Ratched rattles her keys and opens the metal door to the asylum corridor. Orderlies stand to one side as she enters. She is dressed in pristine white with a black cape. She is in control.

McMurphy enters the ward and introduces himself to Bromden: 'Goddam, you're as big as a mountain...' he says. No reply. Bromden stares vacantly.

Their roles correspond to:

Bromden (M C)	Ratched (O C)	McMurphy (Catalyst)	Inmates (Observers)
-	+	+	?
↓	↓	↓	↓
+	-	+	!

Four roles: setting up the contest , or as the Greek dramatists expressed it - the 'psychomachia' - the conflict of minds.

The opening shots of the film show:

- 1: *Sunrise. A car driving along an isolated road through a forest. A shamanic drum plays.*
- 2: *Inmates sleeping.*
- 3: *Nurse Ratched arrives, jangling keys and unlocking doors. Inmates chains removed. Medication time. Nurse Ratched and assistant dispensing pills.*
- 4: *Chief Bromden with broom. No response.*
- 5: *McMurphy enters entrance hall, handcuffs are removed and he starts to laugh.*
- 6: *McMurphy walks down corridor - Nurse Ratched checks clothes. 'You're as big as a mountain,' says McMurphy to Bromden.*

McMurphy's arrival dispels the institution's stagnant calm. McMurphy's line, 'You're as big as a damned mountain!' is our first set-up to the powerful 'fountain scene' ending we discussed in Part One.

'No good speaking to him', says one of the inmates. 'He's deaf and dumb.' The Chief is at rock-bottom; apathetic, imprisoned, withdrawn from the outside world. McMurphy makes contact. Slowly he draws the chief from his isolated state. He tries to prepare him for the world beyond the walls. Half-way through the story McMurphy arranges an escape. 'I'm not ready yet,' says the Chief. (Set-up #2).

McMurphy wants to watch a ball game downtown. 'I'm going to pick up that fountain and throw it through the window. Then I'm getting out of here,' he tells the inmates. (Set-up #3). It can't be done, say the others, and sure enough, it can't. The Chief watches as McMurphy fails. 'But I tried, didn't I, goddammit', says McMurphy. 'At least I did that.'

By the end of the story the Chief has regained his self-respect. 'I'm ready,' (Pay-off #1) he tells McMurphy. 'I feel as big as a damned mountain.' (Pay-off #2). But McMurphy's lobotomy has turned him into a vegetable. The Chief has to go alone. 'You're coming with me', he says, and suffocates McMurphy with a pillow. Then he picks up the drinking fountain and hurls it through the barred window. (Pay-off #3). The final shot shows the Chief running toward the hills at daybreak. He has found his self-esteem and gained his freedom.

The last six scenes are like the opening scenes, only in reverse. We have come full circle.

1. Bromden walks to McMurphy's bed. 'I feel as big as a damned mountain,' says Bromden to McMurphy.
- 2: Bromden realises McMurphy is lobotomised. 'I can't leave you like this.'
- 3: Chief Bromden - action; 'I'm taking you with me.'
- 4: Bromden walks down the corridor. He strains with the drinking fountain, lifts it from the floor and hurls it through the barred window.
- 5: Inmates awake and cheering.
- 6: Sunrise. Bromden runs off into the forest. A shamanic drum plays.

McMurphy's death? How can his role be described as unchanged? Because as hero he has created a myth, and the myth lives on, unchanged. Only the Chief has seen McMurphy after the lobotomy. According to the other inmates he's either 'knocked out a few guards and escaped', or he's upstairs as 'meek as a lamb.' Either way, McMurphy's exploits live on, and the seeds of freedom planted in Chief Bromden, may have also taken root in some of the other inmates. McMurphy's is the role of the 'outsider', who arrives, achieves his task, and leaves.

Joseph Campbell says the monomyth (see Part Two) tells us that the sacrifice of the hero is necessary to regenerate a stagnating society. Like Mr Keating,

the teacher in *Dead Poets Society* (1989), or the Western hero, *Shane* (1953), or the heroes of so many other Westerns that save the threatened community. The Japanese film *The Seven Samurai* (1957; remade in Hollywood as *The Magnificent Seven*) provides an archetypal model of the cinema hero story. The sacrifice of the hero is for the common good, and the legend lives on.

3. *The Film Game*

In *Groundhog Day* (1993) fate plays a game with Phil (Bill Murray) a self-centred TV weather forecaster. He wakes up to the same day every morning. It's a morality tale – Phil has to repeat the same day until he learns how to be a decent person. Otherwise he will go unrewarded. In the story the reward is Andi McDowell.

It's a game in four parts:

Part 1: Phil is not nice – he is rejected

Part 2: Phil learns to be nice but is false – he is rejected

Part 3: Phil is suicidal – he even rejects himself

Part 4: Phil learns to be nice, and true. Phil gets the reward (Andi McDowell).

For Phil it takes a while before he understands that he is in the middle of a game. For the viewer it's apparent from the start. Watching a film is playing a game. We pretend actors are people, and that studio sets are real places. The suspense of disbelief that makes fiction work is the mental state that makes playing games work. 'What happens next?' we ask, once involved in a story game (this provides us with mental stimulation); and then, 'What would I do in that situation?' (which involves us emotionally).

It's a Wonderful Life (1946) is a Monopoly game between Bailey Brothers Building and Loan and Potter Finance, with the chance cards stacked against George Bailey, and George, the reluctant player. The narrative begins with the game's penultimate move, when defeat for George seems inevitable. We get a recapitulation of the game up to the point that drives George to taking his own life. As George prepares to jump off the bridge Clarence the angel enters the dramatic arena as George's coach.

As a viewer we both participate (we take on George's role, asking ourselves 'what would I do in that situation'), and observe, speculating as we go along; 'what happens next?' Like playing a game of Monopoly we watch the film and take a walk around the game board of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

We play a game because there is a goal, the possibility of reward, and the element of risk. The plot development of the film game consists of a number of moves which lead us toward the goal of the 'satisfying ending.' The situation (a), problem (b), motivation (c), decision (d), opposition (e), action (f), turning point (*).

The game of *It's a Wonderful Life* begins with George Bailey on the brink of defeat. He prepares to kill himself; Clarence the angel is to be sent to save him. (a1) The first three sides of the board summarise 30 years of game playing between Bailey Brothers and Potter Finance in flashback form. The conflict is the contest between George Bailey and Bailey Brothers Building and Loan and Potter Finance; fair play and foul play. The current state of play suggests cheating pays off. (b1)

The flashback gives us insight into George Bailey's background. It explains his motivations; (c1) his principles of self sacrifice and fair play: he saves brother, saves a culpable druggist from ignominy, defends his father against Potter.

George finds the monopoly game dull however compared to the possibilities of the world beyond Bedford Falls and decides (d1) to set off on a world trip. On the eve of his departure the forces of opposition strike (e1); his father dies of stroke and three months later Potter tries to force closure of Baileys. George is forced to act (f1); either he can fulfil his ambitions of world travel, or stay and save Bailey Brothers. He stays.

The second half of the game is played out on the afternoon and evening of Christmas Eve. George is resigned to the role of dutiful if reluctant player; Bailey Brothers is solvent but only just as the visiting bank inspector discovers (a3). The problem, coincidental to the inspector's visit, is that George's Uncle Billy has mislaid \$8000 and if it is not recovered by the end of the day's trading Bailey Brothers faces bankruptcy. (b3) Potter has come by the missing money but reveals nothing, even when George in state of desperation pleads with Potter for help, in other words, George cedes defeat. Potter, however, responds by calling the police, charging George with embezzlement, forcing George to stay in the game till the bitter end. (c3)

For George it is the bitter end and he decides to kill himself (d3), yet meets opposition in the form of Clarence (e3) who prevents George from ending it all in the foamy brine of Bedford's falls. The action George is forced to take, at Clarence's insistence, is to take a tour of Bedford Falls as it would have turned out had George never been born. 'What might be' and 'what might have been' provide the course through which the plot moves.

At the fourth and final side of the board the situation describes Bedford Falls without Bailey Brothers; that is, what happens if George doesn't play and Potter wins the Monopoly game uncontested. (a4) George soon realises the problem to such a state of affairs – he discovers that Bedford Falls is Pottersville, a film noir town dark with corruption, vice, immorality, greed; a town of shadows and neon light. The foreshadowings (or set-ups) from the first half of the game are paid off to emphasise the problem of George's non-existence. (b4)

As was Clarence's intention it is a state of affairs that motivates George back into the game, with the will to live, even if it appears, he is forced to lose the game. (c4) Once more at the bridge over the falls, George declares, 'I want to live again.' (d4) George returns home, Bedford Falls is back to normal, but George has found contentment beyond the parameters of the game board. Nonetheless, the severe opposition in the form of Potter's over-whelming victory appears in the form of police officers. The final action, and final pay-off, shows the rallying-round of the townsfolk, who have made a collection far exceeding the missing \$8000; George is declared 'the richest man in Bedford Falls' and wins hands down.

A board game, Monopoly included, like film, has a predetermined structure which establishes what type of game (or genre), as well as the limitations and the possibilities within that game. How the viewer reads or interprets the game's performers is a subjective matter; as role player our piece might be called George Bailey, we might choose Potter. As George we are moral, and once coerced into the game, play by the rules, play fair, playing for collective gain rather than Potter's personal gain motivation (the Capra film ethos); ie., making the most of the game is more important than winning.

Similarly how we as a player/viewer 'reads' the game is subjective. The object of Monopoly is to accumulate wealth and property and to bankrupt

opponents. Yet Elizabeth Magie, who patented the Landlord Game, in 1902, Monopoly's precursor, consisting of 40 squares, four stations, a prison and capital which increases with each completion of 40 squares, had devised an anti-capitalist game in which players could not create monopolies. Parker's released the game commercially in the 1930s with an ideological about-face – the game's popularity was ensured once the ideological tag was removed allowing players to engage in ruthless speculation and give vent to an amorality of business practice otherwise denied most players in the routine of daily life. Just like watching a film. Just like writing a script.

Screen Play

A screenplay is a filmscript – screen play, on the other hand, is how we as a viewer, 'play' with whatever's up there on the screen. As a writer this means allowing room for the viewer to play on the screen; by saying the most through describing the least, by leaving enough gaps for the viewer to be able to play the film game.

Let's take the script of *The Graduate* (1967). Ben has a problem. The future. What to do with it. His adversary is Mrs Robinson. She helps him avoid the problem. She helps Ben into a life of complacency and self indulgence. Elaine saves him. She is the catalyst. A happy ending? That depends on who's watching, and how you play the story.

The filmscript begins by presenting Ben and his dilemma. The film begins differently. Let's compare:

**The Graduate – Final Draft
Screenplay by Buck Henry (1967)**

1 EXT. AMPHITHEATRE – DAY

SHOT – HELICOPTER'S POV

Moving through clouds. The clouds separate and, far below, we can see a giant outdoor amphitheatre. There is no SOUND but the WIND. As we move closer to the amphitheatre, we can hear SNATCHES OF WORDS and PHRASES as though from a public address system.

CONT'D/...

CONT'D

2 EXT. AMPHITHEATRE — PODIUM — DAY

SHOT OF BEN

in cap and gown, standing in front of a microphone. The WIND is BLOWING. He has to hold on to the papers from which he is reading.

3 EXT. AMPHITHEATRE — SHOT OF AUDIENCE — DAY

Thousands of expressionless STUDENTS are sitting there.

4 EXT. AMPHITHEATRE — SHOT OF PODIUM — DAY

BEN

- and today it is right that we should ask ourselves the one most important question: What is the purpose of these years, the purpose for all this demanding work, the purpose for the sacrifices made those who love us? Were there NOT a purpose, then all of these past years of struggle, of fierce competition and of uncompromising ambition would be meaningless. But, of course, there is a purpose and I must tell it to you. I ask you to remember this purpose always and I pledge that I shall endeavor to carry it with me forever.

5 SHOT — AMPHITHEATRE AUDIENCE — DAY

staring at him impassively.

6 INTERCUT BETWEEN SHOTS

of impassive students, seated, watching; of Ben standing alone on the huge amphitheatre stage; of CLOSEUPS of Ben speaking; of loud speakers; of windblown papers on the podium.

7 EXT. PODIUM OF AMPHITHEATRE — DAY

BEN
(continuing)

The purpose, my fellow graduates —
the purpose is —

CONT'D/...

CONT'D

He stops, trying to think of the word.

8 CLOSEUP - BEN

He begins to sweat.

9 SHOT - AMPHITHEATRE AUDIENCE

watching.10 SHOT - PODIUM of AMPHITHEATRE

Ben's hands searching through the pages of his speech. The pages begin to blow away in the wind.

11 SHOT - AMPHITHEATRE AUDIENCE - DAY

staring.

12 SHOT - PODIUM OF AMPHITHEATRE - DAY

BEN

- there is a reason, my friends, and the reason is -

13 CLOSEUP - BEN

He is in a panic. He looks up from his papers at the audience.

14 SHOT - AMPHITHEATRE - DAY

The audience is gone.

15 SHOT - PODIUM OF AMPHITHEATRE - DAY

BEN

- the reason is - the purpose is -

SOUND of the WIND becoming the ROAR of an AIRCRAFT coming at us through the air.

CONT'D/...

CONT'D

16 SHOT — AMPHITHEATRE — DAY

Huge and empty. SOUND of AIRCRAFT.

CAPTAIN'S VOICE

Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to
begin our descent into Los Angeles -

SOUND of a SONIC BOOM.

CUT

TO:

17 INT. PLANE — CLOSEUP — BEN — NIGHT

His eyes open suddenly.

CAPTAIN'S VOICE

The sound you have just heard is the
landing gear locking into place. The Los
Angeles weather is clear and the temper-
ature is a pleasant 72. We do not expect
any traffic delay and will make our four
hour and eighteen minute flight plan smack
on the nose. We enjoyed having you on board
and look forward to seeing you again in
the near future.

In the film these scenes disappear. The film begins:

INT. PLANE — CLOSEUP — BEN — NIGHT

His eyes open suddenly.

PULL BACK from the CLOSEUP of Ben to reveal a row of passengers
staring straight ahead, their headsets on. Ben turns and looks
out the window.

START OF MAIN TITLES

INT. AIRPORT — MOVING SIDEWALK — NIGHT

Ben and the other passengers on the automatic sidewalk.

INT. BEN'S ROOM — NIGHT — CLOSEUP — BEN

His eyes are open and he is trying to remember something. There are the SOUNDS of many people TALKING and LAUGHING in other rooms. A RADIO nearby PLAYS MUSIC. After a while, there is the SOUND of a DOOR OPENING. The SOUNDS of the people TALKING are lower.

After a few moments, there is the SOUND of a LIGHT SWITCH being SNAPPED and light, as though from an overhead fixture, falls across BEN's face. He does not move.

There is the SOUND of the RADIO being SNAPPED OFF.

MR. BRADDOCK'S VOICE

What's the matter?

Ben's mouth opens a little bit and closes again.

MR. BRADDOCK'S VOICE

The guests are all downstairs, Ben.
They're all waiting to see you.

BEN

Look, Dad — could you explain to them
that I have to be alone for a while?

CONT'D/...

Those first pages certainly explain Ben's problem; his uncertainty for the future, his fear of failure, his fear of not meeting expectations. But do we need it explained in such detail?

Instead the film begins three pages later. Close-up on Ben's face in the aeroplane. Medium close-up on Ben at the airport. Close-up on Ben in his room. In the film there is no radio in Ben's room, but there is a fish tank. (Which ties in later with Ben's underwater trek across the bottom of a swimming pool).

In the filmscript we have a clear idea about what's bothering Ben. In the film version do we know what Ben's problem is? Well, no. Do we understand he's

bothered by something? Yes, sure. Apart from his line: '... I have to be alone for a while,' we have the auidial association of Simon and Garfunkle's 'Sounds of Silence' over the title credits, and we have the visual associations of (a) Dustin Hoffman's face, and (b) a fish tank. Ben's problem is not spelled out, only suggested.

Is that enough? Maybe. Remember the script-as-bird metaphor? Hold on to your audience, but not too tight, not too loose. What is too tight and what is too loose? Well, knowing the answer to that is what the storytelling craft is about. How much can the writer trust the audience to read the open-text? You don't want to say too much; then there's no game for the audience to play. You don't want to say too little; then the audience doesn't know how to play. You don't want to let the bird fly away.

A famous Hollywood story concerns director Rouben Mamoulian directing Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina* (1933). It is the final scene. Queen Christina has abdicated the Swedish throne. She and her lover are about to embark on a long sea journey. But just as they are to leave her lover is slain in a duel. Christina is forced to flee the country anyway. The ship leaves port and Christina stands on the prow and stares into the distance. 'How do I play this scene?' Garbo asks Mamoulian. 'Have you heard of tabula rasa?' says Mamoulian. 'I want your face to be a blank sheet of paper. I want the writing to be done by every member of the audience... you are nothing but a beautiful mask.' Many years later Mamoulian commented that anyone who has seen the film will tell you what she is feeling and thinking. And it's always something different.

Remember the ending of *The Graduate*? Ben and Elaine on the back seat of a bus? What are they thinking? What are they feeling?

Summary

What makes an engrossing film?

genre
set-ups -> pay-offs
credibility <-> implausibility
visuals/motif
concise dialogue

'Must have' scenes include:

a 'define the character' scene
a 'define the situation' scene
a 'define the problem' scene
a 'define the villain' scene

Hollywood narrative's neo-classical structure:

presentation
conflict leading to complications
confusion leading to confrontation
resolution

Each act consists of a number of moves which lead us toward the goal of the satisfying ending:

situation
problem
motivation
decision
opposition
action
turning point

IV

TELEVISION

1. *Zap-free Television?*

There's a 30 year period between the birth of the moving pictures, and the development of a narrative form specific for the cinema. What about television? The first public demonstration of the so-called televisor was at Selfridges department store in London's Oxford Street in 1928. Around the time that inventor John Logi Baird demonstrated his 33-line image apparatus, film director Alfred Hitchcock was re-shooting *Blackmail*, to make it the first British talking picture.

These are interesting precedents that tell us something about different approaches to storytelling from the two different media. The cinema began as moving pictures – then came sound; the televisor was like a radio apparatus with a tiny screen – first sound, then pictures.

The cinema was a place people went to; the television's place was in the home. Writers and performers in the motion picture industry, came mainly from the theatre; writers, performers and presenters for television came from radio. Today the cinema remains a primarily visual medium; whereas television – well, there's a lot of talking heads on television; talk shows, debate programmes, news, soap opera, sitcom.

The BBC began broadcasting television as early as 1936 – but to a select minority audience; broadcasting stopped in 1939 to be resumed after World War Two. Television's breakthrough, as we have noted, came in the 1950s; first in the USA, then elsewhere. And the programmes? well, they were mainly versions of radio programmes; the soap opera, the serial, the literary adaptations, the situation comedy. Before we consider what a television narrative might be, let's take a look at the aesthetics of the small screen – what is our criteria for zap-free television?

When viewers have a selection of 50 or more TV channels, most of them featuring commercial breaks, a zap-free television programme is no easy task. Let's start with these:

strong personalities
it's recent
it's close to home
celebrities <-> 'folk'
keep it simple
continuity – keep it going
it's verbal
it's close-up

Strong personalities

What French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu refers to as 'fast thinkers.' In news and debate programmes the television personality needs to formulate complex ideas in simple terms; in black and white, in good and bad. The same applies to television drama. In a zap-filled environment a viewer needs to understand a character quickly and easily. Film has characters and archetypes, television it's stereotypes.

Recent

Television ages quickly – it is a trend medium more than any other. This years television is not like last years television. New trends and genres come and go. 'Reality games' one season; 'game shows' the next. The glamour soaps of the 1980s are history; sitcom conventions remain constant, but style and content change continually.

Close to home

Hollywood is not the home of American cinema; it is an international community and has been it began. Television, on the other hand, is local. In Sweden viewers watch the Swedish survivor; in the UK, the British version; in the US, the American version. Television – whether drama, news or talk shows – is deeply immersed within a cultural context. Understanding the local culture, the values and priorities of that culture, is a prerequisite for television screen success.

Celebrities <-> 'folk'

Movie magazines talk about film stars, and the Hollywood system created a mythology around the film actors; their life-styles, personalities, romances, far removed from the lives of ordinary folk. Not so television. The TV is in our living room. The faces on the screen are part of the family. Ask any avid viewer of Friends, or Seinfeld, or their favourite soap. Likewise, the TV screen is a forum for 'ordinary folk' to become a celebrity. An appearance on a game show, or reality show, on local TV, whatever – is a guarantee for the participant's five minutes of fame. (Andy Warhol quipped 'fame for 15 minutes', but time has moved on since then).

Simple

Television and media critics, Noam Chomsky, Neil Postman, Pierre Bourdieu, to name three, are critical to the concision of television. If a view or perspective is too complicated to be reduced to a two minute 'item' it is ignored. Hence the oversimplifications of news and current affairs, and a television world divided into neat sections of good and bad. However, this need not be a limitation, rather a criteria of the television medium.

Continuity

The soap-opera is not the only serial form on TV. Everything on TV is in serial form; news, current affairs, situation comedy, game shows. The serial form is designed to create viewer fidelity, and the continuity of viewer engagement.

Verbal

As we considered earlier, the historical development of television has emphasised the spoken word; dialogue in drama, conversation in talk shows, rhetoric in debate programmes. The two column format of the TV script accentuates the spoken word; the standard screenplay format (filmscript) emphasises the description of scenes.

Close-up

Because of television's verblality, the image is most often – the talking head. The close-up also emphasises non-verbal communication; facial expressions, body language.

Cinema screen; television screen

Let's consider some other contrasts between the demands for television and the cinema:

The film story is big investment (it requires effort, money, a night out, preparation, choice)

The TV story is a small investment (it's in the home, we can watch or not watch, there are interruptions, the TV's probably switched on anyway)

Film is big screen collective experience (it's dark and we share the collective responses of the audience; laughter, surprise, shock)

TV is small screen domestic experience (alone or together, on a sofa, and with a remote control unit)

Film is pictures with sound. TV is sound with pictures.

Films have characters; television has stereotypes.

Film is global; TV is local.

The film story is one-off; it begins and ends. (Maybe a sequel)

The TV story is on-going; we watch an episode, and tune in again next week. (Maybe a season cancellation)

2. *Drama*

The mainstay of television drama is the weekly series, about 50 minutes long, with stories built around a character, or characters, and like mainstream commercial cinema, if not imported directly from Hollywood, so influenced by Hollywood style narrative as to make little difference. Like Hollywood cinema, the series is bound by conventions of genre; the western series, the police series, the private detective series, the agent series, the law series, the science fiction series, the medical series, and others.

The television series can be compared to the tradition of melodrama of the Victorian novelists: TV drama are stories with simple morals and structures of reassurance. The principle actor is the 'strong personality' and on the television screen the close-up is well suited to small gestures, reading faces, voice tone. If the 'larger-than-life' movie close-up exaggerates the subtle facial gesture, on TV the close-up is 'on par' with life. Movies stars are 'out there'; TV stars are in our living room, familiar, as in one of the family.

Like melodrama TV drama provides stories around the testing of virtue, where evil is finally defeated by the forces of good. Maybe that's why melodrama, just like TV drama, gets a low cultural prestige rating. Quality drama, the theory goes, should be tragic, providing insight into the ultimately tragic nature of the human condition. Not a theory I adhere to, I should point out; our analysis of television comedy will, I hope, suggest even comedy's potential for insight and understanding.

Melodramatic characters have little basis on reality; they confront each other with their deepest and most intimate feelings, beliefs, fears and anxieties. Melodrama, like the drama of psychoanalysis brings to the surface repressed feelings and desires, and, like dreams and nightmares, anxieties not usually expressed in the wakened state. In melodrama every conversation is a confrontation, like the soap opera, the trial, the police interrogation, the medical drama, which is a part of the appeal and the fascination of television drama.

The term melodrama combines the Greek words, drama (action) and melo (music) and has emerged as a kind of meta-genre combining romance,

adventure, horror, tragedy and comedy. Where realism demands that characters be well-rounded and psychologically plausible, melodrama explores the way characters go through all sorts of transformations of 'identity', likening it more to folk tales with their themes of metamorphosis, crisis and rebirth.

Twin Peaks (1990) is a good example. Twin Peaks exploits almost the entire repertoire of television formula; it is shamelessly kitsch. Just as Casablanca (1942) endures because of its wholesale use of Hollywood's repertoire of stock formulas, Twin Peaks elevates the cliché formulas of television to a higher octave.

It is the murder mystery, with Holmes and Watson (Cooper and Truman) in pursuit of an archfiend, Moriarty (Windom Earle). There are elements of black comedy; Bobby and Shelly's clandestine love-affair before the salivating and incapacitated Leo Johnson. Andy Brennan's charge of a six year old boy, whom he is convinced is a murderer. Nadine's preoccupation with the silent curtain runner. The doughnut fixation of Lucy Moran.

It is the romantic drama; doomed love between James Hurley and Donna Hayward, between Ed Hurley and Norma Jennings, between Audrey Horne and her millionaire boyfriend, John Wheeler, between Harry Truman and Jocelyn Packard, between Dale Cooper and Annie Blackburn.

Twin Peaks is also film noir, screwball comedy, melodrama and gothic romanticism. It is *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Peyton Place*, *Frankenstein*, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Blue Velvet*. Measured against US television's interminable output of television drama, Twin Peaks, now more than ten years into television history, endures. It is decidedly odd, yet the 'oddness' is consistently juxtaposed against the conventional and the identifiable.

But the unifying character is FBI Special Agent, Dale Cooper. Cooper is paradoxically the most straight-forward character, and the most complex. He is without blemish either physically or morally. As an outsider he has no dark secrets; indeed his function is to cast light on other characters dark secrets.

The hunt for a killer becomes an excuse to visit small town America with its idiosyncratic characters, and sub-surface perversities. The heightened

absurdity of specific plot and character contrivances imbues the series with the dynamic of the unexpected, where absurdity contrasts the conventional.

Ultimately Twin Peaks reads like the kind of Victorian dilemma tale introduced in Part One. Instead of 'who is responsible for the death of Lucy?', we ask, like agent Cooper, 'who is responsible for the death of Laura Palmer?'

EXT. RIVER BANK. EARLY MORNING

A SHERIFF and his younger ASSISTANT drag a body up onto the river bank. The body is wrapped in plastic. The Sheriff looks at his colleague and sighs. He unwraps the plastic material revealing the face of a YOUNG GIRL. The assistant looks up, an expression of horror on his face.

ASSISTANT

My God. It's Lucy.

SHERIFF

Who could have done such a thing?

The assistant begins to weep, struggles to regain his composure. Looks at the sheriff with a determined gaze.

ASSISTANT

Michael. Michael is responsible for the death of Lucy.

DISSOLVE TO:

Soap Opera

There are soap opera elements to *Twin Peaks*, but it is not soap opera. What then makes a good soap opera?

- *close-ups*
- *dysfunctional relationships*
- *intense feelings*
- *obsessive behaviour*
- *contrasting characters*
- *strong dialogue*
- *cliffhangers*
- *problem issues - not solutions*
- *'a bitch'*
- *the sensitive guy*

The British television serial prides itself on a kitchen sink realism, from the 35 years of working class gloom in Salford's Coronation Street, split families in Liverpool's Brookside, the comings and goings of the Midlands Crossroads motel, or the grit and earthiness of the London East Enders estate dwellers. The integrity of failure has been the mainstay of the British soap opera, in contrast to the glamour serials of the US (the triumph of success and bad taste), the family sagas of Latin America, and the triumph of the middle class in the Australian serials.

Neighbours is a low budget serial set in Melbourne's middle class eastern suburbs, where Kylie and Jason's traumas rarely escalate beyond which shampoo to chose at the local Seven-Eleven. If British soaps favour losers, and the American soap 'winners', the Australian serial sits midway in a limbo world of safe middle class suburbia.

According to the BBC, 'true soap, whether it be weekly, twice or thrice weekly – may be profuse in plot, but it must be simple in presentation, capable of casual viewing by the family while it's completing it's meal. The stories must progress slowly, ensuring that anyone who misses a couple of episodes can pick up the threads without difficulty...' (Sean Sutton: *The Largest Theatre in the World – Thirty Years of Television Drama*).

Soap operas are constructed around multiple plot lines and variety of characters. As a dramatic form it contrasts to classical structure which is causal, goal-orientated, based on the psychological development of a single protagonist and a single problem. We move from problem to crisis to confrontation to resolution. The serial is open-ended, slow paced, with a multi-climaxed structure. No surprise that in gender studies comparisons have been made to the patterns of classical and serial structure to the patterns of male and female sexuality.

Soap opera offers the viewer a far more open structure through a complex organisation of time, temporary resolutions and a proliferation of moral dilemmas. *The Bold and the Beautiful*, with over 2000 episodes broadcast, is a typical example; protracted time and fragmented stories, disruptions, and the duplicity/ ambiguity of the main characters (Sheila, like Dallas' JR, can evoke either contempt and sympathy depending on the plot line). Complexity of conflicts involves three different families, with the main focus on the Forrester dynasty. Parallel development disrupts lineal flow, extending an undefined ellipsis – a single episode usually follows three plot lines, issues around male–female relationships which are problem raising, or problem identifying, but never problem solving. A few studio sets, close-ups, interior monologues and exposition through dialogue is the norm.

Soap opera dates back to the 1930s when the soap manufacturing company Procter and Gamble, sponsored a weekly radio drama to ensure the fidelity of the listener, (and consequently the consumer). The serial structure, however, is nothing new, with precedents in Victorian literary magazines (the serialisation of Charles Dickens' novels, for example), the silent cinema serials of *Fantomas* (1913) *Perils of Pauline* (1914), and their successors, and back to the tales of 1001 nights and story telling skills of Scherezade.

The popularity of the television soap opera has influenced serialised drama throughout television; the advertisement (the ongoing Nescafe relationship drama), the fly-on-the-wall documentaries, news coverage, game shows – in particular the 'reality games' where strangers are put together in an extreme situation. (*Real World*, *Survivor*, *Temptation Island*, etc). The trend can be traced to the popularity of the O J Simpson trial which provided prime time drama, without the incumberances of writers, performers and studio sets.

One of the most popular on-going serialised dramas has focused on the British royal family. UK television's breakthrough came with the coronation in 1953, and the cameras have remained in the royal arena ever since. Like other soap operas, issues relate to the dysfunctional family, complicated love affairs and family tragedies. And like other soap operas the viewer's involvement is paramount – we take sides with characters and the moral values they represent, just as *The Story of Lucy* makes us examine our own morals and values.

The Story of Diana

Diana is a young woman who lives in a house by the park. She is in love with Charles who lives on the other side of the park. She doesn't know what to do so she goes to her friend Fergie and asks for advice.

'If you love him, go and tell him,' says Fergie.

'Yes,' says Diana, and drives across the park to Charles' house, where she meets Elizabeth. 'May I see Charles please, Elizabeth?'

'Yes,' says Elizabeth, 'But what time will you leave?'

'I'm not sure,' says Diana. 'Why do you need to know?'

'Charles has an official engagement at six. If you want to avoid the papparazzi you must leave before then.'

Diana enters and Charles opens the door to his apartments. 'Charles, I love you,' says Diana. Charles cannot resist the temptation and makes love with Diana. When she recovers from the occasion Diana is upset at the thought that Charles has taken advantage of her. She runs from the house and to the house where James lives.

James is in love with Diana. He opens the door and welcomes her in. Diana tells him the whole story, whereupon James is filled with bitterness and asks Diana to leave.

She returns to Charles' house and it is almost six. A horde of papparazzi stand at the door, Elizabeth looks out the window. Diana calls out: 'Elizabeth, please let me in.'

Elizabeth looks at her watch and calls back: 'Sorry Diana - I did warn you.' And she closes the window and pulls down the blind.

Diana decides to drive home with the papparazzi in pursuit. She crashes into a tree, and dies.

There are five characters to this story. Rank each character, one to five, in order of responsibility for the death of Diana. For example, if you think James is most responsible, place him in first place, then the other characters accordingly.

And what values do these characters represent? Well, that's up to the viewer. Some viewers might associate Fergie with Folly rather than wisdom, Elizabeth for Excessive subservience to duty, maybe James for jilting, or even jealousy, Diana for divine or diva, Charles for cad or for caution. Take your pick. But once the faces are on the screen they are part of the television story world; dilemma tales and morality tales, alongside news, dramatisations and situation comedies.

At a scriptwriting workshop for TV soap writers I asked participants to write a scene based on the Lucy story. The idea was to select characters and create a dialogue scene; the writers were free to interpret the characters any way they liked.

For example:

Lucy, 16 years, and her younger brother William (aged 8) sit at the breakfast table and drink chocolate milk.

Lucy: Tell me Willie, have you got yourself a girlfriend yet?

Willie: Yuck! And get girl germs? You gotta be kidding!

Lucy (laughs): Sure. Maybe it's not so great.

Lucy broods a bit and Willie catches her eye.

Willie: Of course there's that idiot Pete. He's hanging around with Linda.

Lucy: O yeh?

Willie: Yep. Since Tuesday. (Willie makes a face).

Lucy: That's brave of him.

Pause.

Lucy: I wish I was that brave.

Willie stirs his chocolate milk.

Willie: How come you're not dating anyone?

Lucy (teasing): Maybe I don't want to get boy germs!

Willie: Come on. You're a grown up. You don't get germs. (looks at Lucy).

Willie: Why don't you take a chance? Ask some guy? You could get anyone...

Lucy: Well... I want to. I... I just can't, that's all.

Willie: Come on. It's a cinch. That's what Pete says anyway. You just go up and say: 'You and me – how about it?' Piece of cake.

Lucy looks at Willie.

Lucy: What did Pete do next? When Linda said yes?

Willie: He kissed her! On the mouth! And then she said that he tasted Juicy Fruit.

Lucy laughs.

Willie: Linda's pretty keen on Juicy Fruit. It's her favourite.

So William advises Lucy to see Peter, and William is only eight years old! So how does William feel when he finds out Lucy drowned after visiting Peter. And finds out how Peter behaved. An eight year old kid. Her younger brother. The dialogue is casual, but the situation is not. Willie is childhood innocence and Lucy is teenage curious. The consequences, tragic. Gripping television melodrama.

What if Michael and Peter are brothers. What do they say to each other when they find out Lucy drowned? Peter is a reckless hedonist. Michael, a serious-minded student of theology, devoted to his studies. Michael, beside himself with grief, curses his brother and his promiscuous ways. Reminds Peter of his former girlfriends, and how badly he has treated them. Peter tells his brother he's uptight – just because he's never been with a woman, there's no point in taking it out on him! Lucy was the only woman Michael ever loved, and his brother just abused her. 'Don't put your guilt on me,' says Peter, and decides to leave for Paris...

Or if Peter hears the news of Lucy's death. And he really cared for Lucy. And hears how Michael shunned her. So he confronts Michael with a hunting rifle from the family home. Or what would the dialogue be between Michael and Lucy when Lucy came for help and support? What about the dialogue in a scene from *The Story of Diana*?

ELIZABETH'S HOUSE. LIVING ROOM

ELIZABETH, DIANA

Elizabeth is seated in an arm-chair and drinking tea. Diana stands in front of the fireplace, an elegant clock on the mantelpiece. It is just after five.

DIANA

Please Elizabeth. I must see Charles. I must.

ELIZABETH

I don't know. I'm not sure that's such a good idea.

DIANA

You don't understand. It's vital that I see him.

ELIZABETH

Can't you come back tomorrow? Right now... well it's difficult.

DIANA

Tomorrow? No. Tomorrow is too late. You see... well, I don't think I need remind you. You know, Charles... problem.

ELIZABETH

No. No you don't. That was uncalled for. I'd expected something better from you.

DIANA

Let me see him. I promise I'll say nothing.

Elizabeth looks at the mantelpiece clock. It shows ten past five.

ELIZABETH

What time will you leave?

3. Comedy

Not all television comedy is situation comedy, but let's begin with the sitcom, 'the defining genre of television.' What makes a good sitcom? Let's begin with:

- *a trap*
- *humour*
- *identifiable characters*
- *set-ups, pay-offs and running gags*
- *continuity*
- *familiarity*
- *an obvious plot*

A trap

The situation comedy is no less than a metaphor for the 'trap' of the human condition. Whether the trap is work, a place, a social class or the family, any audience can identify with being trapped in circumstances which they cannot command. 'Entrapment' is the situation of the sitcom, whether the situation is the home, a place of work, or a sea-side hotel.

Humour

For the sitcom writer there are two basic approaches to humour: verbal humour, which uses language and wit to create jokes and comic situations. Sitcom after all began on radio. And visual humour, where the television medium can be exploited; close-ups, surprise entrances, and the secret of all comedy - the unexpected - work best on television. Sitcom also has an ancestry in the B films of 30s and 40s, as well as in the music halls and vaudeville. After four seasons of *Black Adder* Rowan Atkinson was keen to break away from the 'verbal humour' niche, and in the *Mr Bean* series found a way of best exploiting his unique visual humour, through mime and facial expressions.

Identifiable Characters

Which in sitcom means 'stereotypes' The multi-faceted character – in depth character – works fine in the novel, the film, the play; but the half hour sitcom requires readily identifiable stereotypes. 'The trouble making enthusiast', 'the world weary problem solver' 'the smart guy' 'the incurable romantic' 'the worrier'... Usually there are four principles (see Part Two), but some series carry up to seven regulars.

Set-ups, pay-offs and running gags

In the 'Communication Problems' episode of *Fawlty Towers* (1979), a deaf woman, Mrs Richards, insists that Basil has her money which she had misplaced. The money, in fact, Basil had won on a horse race, an activity frowned upon by wife, Sybil. 'Don't say anything to anyone about the horse,' says Basil to Manuel; a plot point occurring ten minutes into the episode. Twenty minutes later, facing the accusations of Mrs Richards and her missing money, Basil needs Manuel to say that Basil has in fact won the money on a bet:

Basil: Tell Mrs Richards. Tell her I had the money yesterday.

Manuel: (with pride) Ahem. I know nothing.

Basil: What?

Manuel: I know nothing.

Basil: No, no.

Manuel: Nothing.

Basil: No, no, forget that.

Manuel: I forget everything. I know nothing.

Basil: No, you can tell her. You can tell her.

Manuel: No I cannot.

Basil: Yes, tell her, tell her, please, please, tell her... I'll kill you if you don't.

Basil warns Manuel; this is the set-up; 20 minutes later Manuel denies everything; the pay-off.

The difference between the set-up and pay-off and the running gag, is that once set-up, the running gag has more than one pay-off. The best running

gags are the ones the viewer doesn't notice. They get laughs but at the same time they are part of the plot.

- *Continuity*

The situation comedy, like soap opera, can also carry a story line that can be told over a number of episodes, week by week, season by season. In some instances the distinction rests with an indispensable personality around which the 'situation' is structured. Amos and Andy began like this, as did the early episodes of The Phil Silvers Show. I Love Lucy incorporated Lucille Ball's pregnancy into the story line; The Fall and Rise of Reggie Perrin consisted of three seasons, each with its serialised plot structure. Friends is sitcom with a serialised form. Like the soap opera it's a format that encourages viewer fidelity which makes it good for business.

- *Familiarity*

Sitcom conventions are much the same as they were 50 years ago. Even if the setting or the situation, or the trap, or characters, are something different, adhering to the conventions of the genre is necessary to ensure to the kind of familiarity the viewer needs to orientate themselves within the sitcom story world. On the Air (David Lynch's series from 1992) is an example of how digressing from the familiarity of genre conventions succeeds only in ostracising the viewer.

- *An Obvious Plot*

A sitcom plot can be described in three sentences; the formula plot structure ensures the episode's problem is solved but the main characters remain in the 'trap.'

In addition a sitcom should be funny. Some would argue that this is the most important feature of situation comedy. If it doesn't make you laugh why watch? Is sitcom humour or drama? I would suggest that the sitcom writer is first and foremost a dramatist. Why? Because the sitcom must engage. Humour is a question of perspective; engagement is a question of drama. We engage the viewer with story and character. The humour-ist is content with

sketches, gags and one-liners. The writer of the sitcom is a dramatist who creates humour out of situations and characters. Why is it that situation comedy is one of television's most popular formats? It is this combination of drama and humour - a 25 minute drama concerned with making people feel good about themselves.

The Sitcom Model

The sitcom is a short play made for TV – a short play with familiar characters that have a problem which needs solving. When the main character of the sitcom solves the problem he or she is back in 'the trap' where they started.

The sitcom's six basic dramatic units consist of:

Situation
Introduce Problem
Trouble
Confrontation
Outcome
Moral

Situation

Opening credits and a signature tune can define the ongoing situation; Al Bundy, the exploited dad; Richie Bottom, the dependent half of a sado-masochistic relationship at the bottom end of the British social scale; Fawlty Towers; the hotel with the misspelt place name; Seinfeld's stand-up routine; Fletcher's incarceration in Porridge, and so on. The Situation defines the trap, and gives the background before Inserting the Problem.

Problem

The disruptive event, the unexpected visit, the forgotten anniversary; the problem provides the impetus to the story that makes things happen.

Trouble

What happens next? Things get complicated. Trouble. Complications. Usually manifested in three scenes of escalating predicaments.

Confrontation

Whatever problem has been introduced in the opening scenes, the writer must consider the 'worst possible scenario'. What is the ultimate confrontation that this problem can lead to?

Outcome

Denouement literally means 'untying the knots.' The Problem is the big knot; complications and confusion lead to a lot more smaller knots. The return to order, an outcome, is the process of untying them, leaving the untangled piece of rope as represented by the Situation. For the main character the resolution is the 'moment of truth' - when he or she has to own up to their own shortcomings and inadequacies.

Moral

The Moral is whatever you want to make of it. Like the punchline to an anecdote, the rounding off of a drama, the premise. The result, as always, is a return to the Situation – family, work, class – whichever trap the characters are ensnared.

Most situation comedy is restricted to a few studio sets; there is a kammerspiel economy to the sitcom. An example is the 'Psycho Dad' episode of *Married With Children*; which features two principles; Dad, (Al) and daughter Kelly, with only brief appearances by Peg, Bud, a pizza delivery boy, playmates, the pet dog and a Wagneresque nurse. The action is contained to the living room / kitchen set with brief interludes in Al's bedroom.

Married With Children

Credit sequence: 'the trap' - everyone picks on Al. Frank Sinatra sings Love and Marriage as wife, kids and dog fleece Al for his last buck, while all he wants to do is sit and watch TV. The romance of the song's text is ironised by the splurge of green slime hitting the typography and dribbling down the letters.

1. SITUATION. Living Room.

Al and Kelly 'sick'. Peg and Bud go to grandma's. Al and Kelly alone together for a week.

2. INTRODUCE PROBLEM. Living Room.

Al and Kelly alone together for a week? How will they cope? They are strangers to each other, and agree to avoid to each other for the entire week. The father - daughter relationship is the problem! Kelly goes out and Al watches 'Psycho Dad' on the TV. (5 min)

3. TROUBLE. Bedroom.

Al alone on bed embarks upon an outrageous sex fantasy with a busty red-lipped blonde, not entirely dissimilar to Kelly in both appearance and IQ. He is interrupted by Kelly who announces she really is sick. Al has to look after her.

Living Room, next evening.

Al returns from work, goes out to get bread for Kelly, only to return to find she and the pizza delivery boy eating the last of the pizza. Kelly produces a bell to summon Al when necessary and watches TV. Al goes to bed.

Bedroom.

Al returns to his fantasy - now two women. Interrupted once more by Kelly. (5 min)

4. CONFRONTATION. Living room.

Father and daughter - they can't escape each other. Al tells Kelly the bedtime story version of his life and just before he returns to bed, Kelly sneezes over him.

Bedroom.

Al's fantasy takes wild and elaborate Playboy like dimensions, and is about to culminate when he is interrupted by the ringing bell. (5 min)

5. OUTCOME. Living room. (Dissolve to: TEXT - "Four Days Later")

Al on the couch with the flu. Kelly, healthy and well-dressed offers to help but has to go out. She leaves. Al returns to his fantasy world.

6. MORAL. Living room.

Al's dream. Instead of two Playboy bunnies, a large middle aged matron in a nurse uniform and a large syringe, smiles wickedly. 'Enema time!' she says. Al screams: 'I can't wake up!' (5 min)

Morals are what you want to make of them. For example: Don't let Dad get too close to the sexually overdeveloped teenage daughter - he'll get sick. Al Bundy is back in the trap.

Characters and Stereotypes

Stereotypes can both lead and mislead. They 'lead' the situation comedy with their inflexibility and contrast to other stereotypes. They mislead when we imbue the stereotype with prejudice.

But stereotypes also provide us with a platform, a starting point from which we can build up a character. Many sitcom stereotypes develop into characters - like the regulars of *Fawlty Towers*, *M*A*S*H*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Cheers*, etc.

Every stereotype has both positive and negative features. This is an important consideration if we are to avoid prejudice. The 'jerk/ nerd/ patsy/ buffoon' stereotype may make us laugh with his foolish antics (he is invariably a 'he'), but there is a side to this foolishness that is also endearing - the playfulness, the innocence, the naivety of the child. Mr Bean, Gomer Pyle, Maxwell Smart, Woody in Cheers, Neil in The Young Ones, Gilligan in Gilligan's Island, Maynard in The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis.

As mentioned earlier sitcom stereotypes, broadly speaking, number between one and seven, with a mean average of four. Four works well because we can easily identify four contrasting types, as we found when examining contrasting characters in the cinema.

The idea of four types has been around a long time (the psychology of Carl Jung, the temperaments of Greek physician, Galen) and maybe this is why it works so well in situation comedy. Practical people infuriate enthusiastic types - and vice versa; thinking logical types drive romantic feeling people around the bend, and so on. Contrasting stereotypes is frustrating, but funny.

T*Y* P*E - Four Stereotypes

Thinking Type

intellectual, rational, logical, idealistic, systematic, strategic, 'by-the-book', 'adult'

Logical, talkative types who enjoy socialising, theorising and devising abstract plans on how to make a better world. The problem with being so reasonable is how to cope with the rest of the world that's so unreasonable. Thinkers ask 'what' questions because they appreciate knowledge for its own sake.

Yearning Type

sentimental, emotional, romantic, moody, artistic, sensitive, 'introvert child'
Express themselves better with tears and smiles than with words and reason - vague, sympathetic and imaginative souls who lose themselves in art, poetry, music and l'amour fou. The yearning type asks 'why?' Why did he/she leave me for another? Why did I take this job? Why can't people be decent and not mow their lawns on Sunday mornings? They yearn for a better life, a better

partner, a better love life, a better job, a better personality. But they have trouble doing anything practical about getting them.

Practical Type

realistic, problem solving, like money and food, nurturing, 'parent'- like.

These are pragmatists, sensible but maybe cynical people; they ask 'how' questions. They may lack imagination, they may lack romance, but they are down to earth individuals who once set on a task, get on with it. They are the problem solving antidote to the problem making Enthusiast - they are the Sybils undoing the damage of Basils.

Enthusiastic Type

impulsive, eager, problem making, visionary, idiosyncratic, 'extrovert child'

They are a bit crazy, inspiring, good at leading others, ask 'If' questions constantly so they can drive other people crazy too. 'If we go into business - we'll make a fortune and retire to Bora Bora.' Always new ideas, new plans to change the world - completely impractical. They make the mess for other people to clean up.

For example:

In Seinfeld, Jerry Seinfeld is the practical reasonable man, at a loss to understand why the rest of the world is less reasonable; Kramer his next door neighbour is the wildly enthusiastic eccentric impresario conning Seinfeld with some new enterprise - 'free' cable TV, DIY Pizza shops, interior decorating; Elaine is Seinfeld's ex-girlfriend, but still close confidant - a sociable, idealist, non-smoking thinking type, whereas George, Seinfeld's long suffering pal, is the yearner bemoaning his less than successful romantic life, an emotional wreck. Elaine's 'What did your parents ever do to you?', sums up George's inept character.

In Fawlty Towers Sybil 'runs the show' - she is the pragmatist continually having to contend with Basil's impracticalities - his impulsive forays into areas over which he lacks expertise; Polly is the oppressed intellectual, and Manuel, just oppressed, with a propensity to sentiment over a pet Siberian hamster amongst other things.

In brief:

<i>Seinfeld:</i>	<i>Elaine(T) George (Y) Jerry(P) Kramer (E)</i>
<i>Fawlty Towers:</i>	<i>Polly (T) Manuel (Y) Sybil (P) Basil (E)</i>
<i>Red Dwarf:</i>	<i>Rimmer (T) Kryten (Y) Lister (P) Cat (E)</i>
<i>Young Ones:</i>	<i>Rik (T) Neil (Y) Mike (P) Vyv (E)</i>
<i>Absolutely Fabulous:</i>	<i>Gran (T) Patsy(Y) Saffron(P) Edina(E)</i>
<i>Simpsons:</i>	<i>Lisa (T) Homer (Y) Marge (P) Bart (E)</i>
<i>Roseanne:</i>	<i>Daughter (T) Jackie (Y) Roseanne (P) Dan (E)</i>
<i>Brittas Empire:</i>	<i>Mrs B (T) Carole (Y) Laura (P) Brittas (E)</i>
<i>Hermans Head:</i>	<i>Genius (T) Wimp (Y) Angel (P) Animal (E)</i>
<i>Mother and Son:</i>	<i>Liz (T) Arthur (Y) Robbie (P) Maggie (E)</i>
<i>Black Adder IV:</i>	<i>Darling (T) Baldrick (Y) BA (P) Melchitt (E)</i>
<i>Married w Children:</i>	<i>Bud (T) Al (Y) Peg (P) Kelly (E)</i>
<i>Third Rock...</i>	<i>Tommy (T) Harry (Y) Sally (P) Dick (E)</i>
<i>Men Behaving Badly:</i>	<i>Deborah (T) Gary (Y) Dorothy (P) Tony (E)</i>

Stereotypes make situation comedy work. In the framework of 25 - 30 minutes you have to make an immediate impact; to achieve immediacy you need readily identifiable situations and readily identifiable characters. In order to find the funny side of character quickly the stereotype embodies a set of ideas, clichés, to be easily identified by the viewer.

What makes characters funny?

- tenacity: they never give up
- irresponsibility: they don't care
- incompetence: they can't deal with objects
- offensive: they have no social skills or regard for people around them

In other words, basic human characteristics, but for the comic character, they are heavily exaggerated. In addition the character must:

- want something - have clear goals and objectives
- have obstacles - hindrances why they can't get what they want
- be stuck in a trap
- have an attitude (dim, superior, aggressive, etc)
- be beset with a tragic/ comic flaw (tenacity, anxiety, irresponsibility, etc)

Sitcom structure is similar to film narrative. The story begins with a problem, and ends with the problem solved. However, whereas in film, solving the problem reveals a change in the psychology of the main character, in the sitcom solving the problem brings us back to square one.

Nonetheless the sitcom character is up against some-thing or someone; the conflict is not necessarily resolved but there is conflict. One way of emphasising character conflict, for example, is through contrast. In *Fawlty Towers* even the names provide a character contrast:

<i>Basil</i>	:	<i>Sybil</i>
<i>Problem making</i>	:	<i>Problem solving</i>
<i>Snob</i>	:	<i>Sociable</i>
<i>Social aspirations</i>	:	<i>Social resignation</i>
<i>Tall and lanky</i>	:	<i>Short and rounded</i>
<i>Manic</i>	:	<i>Stable</i>

Why We Laugh

Aristotle's treatise on comedy went up in smoke. Sean Connery as Brother William could only watch helplessly before the flames if we accept the film version of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Many philosophers since Aristotle, however, have attempted to solve the human mystery of why we laugh. Two famous attempts were made at the beginning of the twentieth century. Bergson's treatise *Laughter* was first published in 1900, in which he claimed laughter was a sanction against social restraints. In 1905 came Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, a psycho-analytical attempt to explain laughter. Other philosophers have had their theories; Hobbes, Schopenhauer and others. There emerge three basic theories on why we laugh:

1. Superiority / malice - watching someone fall over and hurt themselves is funny because it makes us feel superior - what Hobbes refers to as a sense of triumph.

2. Incongruity (proposed by Schopenhauer) - something happening at the wrong time, at the wrong place makes us laugh - we are bewildered, hence amused. Kids and animals can be funny because they have no sense of propriety.

3. Psychic release - arousal through fear, then laughter when the fear response is realised to be unnecessary. Laughter is an expression of relief.

The more common kinds of humour include:

- *slapstick*
- *farce*
- *satire*
- *parody*
- *irony*
- *absurdity*
- *carnival/grotesque*
- *black humour*
- *the confession*

Slapstick

is probably the most rudimentary form of humour. It is physical humour, aggressive particularly against vanity, snobbery, pride or anything represents extreme forms of 'adult' authority and control. Slapstick is a licence for aggression and a licence for idiocy - characters can do all the things not allowed by the social restraints of every-day routines. Within the confines of the circus arena, the slapstick humour of clowns allows dressing up in outrageous clothes, throwing food, squirting soda syphons in people's faces, breaking windows, breaking wind, and hitting well dressed gentle-men in top-hats on the behind with 'slapsticks', the split wooden instrument which amplifies the noise of the blow rather than the pain.

Farce

is the humour of chaos, of horse play. Farce's 'fear of comedy' is that 'maybe they won't get the joke... so lets fool around instead...' Farce is the humour of

recognition, of the predictable, yet no less funny for that - the chase, the mistaken identity, the drunkard stumbling over a kerb. Farce has kept theatres solvent for centuries, and works well in sitcom to break long passages of dialogue, and the relentless television image of talking heads.

Satire

is attack humour; sometimes we laugh, some-times we just get the point. Some episodes of M*A*S*H were purposefully unfunny in order to strengthen the satiric point of US involvement in Asian warfare - the programme was set in Korea in the early 1950s and televised from 1973, the height of US involvement in Vietnam. The subversive element of satirical humour makes it popular in late adolescence when our awareness of the outside world makes us angry against the folly of authority and our impotence against it. As satire attacks those in authority, or those who think they are in authority, it is a humour form least popular amongst dictators.

Parody

if satire is making fun of things we don't like, then parody is making fun of things we like. The Mel Brooks parody films are homages; Blazing Saddles to the western, Deströy Rides Again, to Universal Studios horror with Young Frankenstein, to Hitchcock with High Anxiety. In recent years Casablanca has been a favourite subject of parody in sitcoms from Parker Lewis Can't Lose (Miss Musso walks off with Parker Lewis in 'the beginning of some kind of friendship' with Weird Al Jankowich playing 'As Time Goes By' in the background); in Red Dwarf, Kryten's love affair with a green blob ends with his Bogart like sacrifice in face of the untimely arrival of the green blob's husband. Casablanca is a popular subject for parody because it fulfills the two basic prerequisites to make parody work: (i) Nearly everyone has seen the picture (ii) Nearly everyone likes the picture.

Parody requires a reasonably mature, or at least well-versed audience, as it can only function by the recognition of certain styles, genres and characters, or specific films and programmes. TV is the great parody form - the sitcom is constantly sending up other television, characters, genres. Programmes like Drop the Dead Donkey and Murphy Brown use social and political satire, but the form itself parodies rather than satirises television news.

Irony

Black Adder: That's very clever Baldrick!

Baldrick: Thank you my lord.

Black Adder: Baldrick you idiot. Don't you know what irony is?

Baldrick: Of course my lord. And I know what silvery is, and goldery is...

Irony means using a word in a context opposite to its intended meaning. Young kids don't get irony because they are still assimilating actual meanings. Hence Baldrick's literal interpretation - he is the surrogate ten year old. According to some studies, not until early adolescence around 12 - 13, can we appreciate irony.

'Absurd humour'

...like the Marx brothers, like The Burns and Allen Show, breaks the rules of logic, of language, of reason. Absurd humour makes 'incongruity' jokes.

'Carnival humour'

(named after Bakhtins description of the 'carnavalesque') or 'grotesque', goes one step further, breaking social rules; violent disruptive humour, the extreme nature of which, it is claimed, has a cathartic affect; eg., the humour of Monty Python, sketch comedy and The Young Ones.

'Black humour'

... pessimism lies at the heart of 'noir' comedy suggesting a bleak and cynical view of human-kind; taboo subjects like sex and death, are subjects for derision. The Ealing comedy Kind Hearts and Coronets (1949) combines wit with 'noir' - as Louis Mazzini despatches his seven surviving relatives by successively bloody means. The 'noir' humour of the closing episodes of each Black Adder season featured Blackadder's death depicted with the kind of gruesome refinement British comedy writers have exploited since Restoration drama.

The Confession

with its roots in the works of St Augustine and Rousseau, is the favoured comic style of the stand-up comedian; from Lenny Bruce to Woody Allen to Jerry Seinfeld. The confession carries with it the Jewish humour tradition of self-deprecation. Stand-ups like Ray Romano, Jerry Seinfeld and Gary Shandling have incorporated elements of stand-up (apart from a comic style, an enhanced intimacy with the audience) into the formulaic plotting of sitcom.

When we consider the many forms of comedy, the one unifying factor is making people laugh. This is why writers consider comedy so difficult - fear of failing to make people laugh. Comedy, however, is not just laughter. In medieval times comedy was intended to draw an audience away from trouble and strife and toward harmony, reconciliation, fulfillment. This approach to comedy is more in tune with the sitcom idea, which describe characters and situations concerned with the serious matter of survival in dire circumstances.

The other liberating factor the sitcom writer might consider is that comedy is hit and miss and the writer can expect about 50% of the joke stuff to miss. In sketch comedy that might be a problem. In sitcom it's OK providing you have engaging characters and a good story.

Most sitcoms don't travel well because situations and characters emerge from what's happening around us. We laugh about the things that make us anxious. An adaptation works when the original is thrown out the window and situations and characters are recreated for a local audience.

Yet nothing is sacred when it comes to finding sources for humour. *Pallas*, was a popular UK sitcom satirising the royal family; *Spin City* is ruthless in its humour around city hall politics, and the *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* series sending up the ongoing conflicts between politicians and bureaucrats, found appreciative audiences, in the UK and elsewhere.

Let's try moving our Victorian dilemma tale, *The Story of Lucy*, to a more contemporary setting:

The Story of Monica

Monica is a young woman who works in a big white house by the park. She is in love with Bill who lives in the house. She doesn't know what to do so she decides to go and confront Bill.

Monica approaches Bill's office, where she meets the Secret Service man. 'May I see Bill please, Secret Service man?'

'Yes', says the Secret Service man, 'But what time will you leave?'

'I'm not sure,' says Monica. 'Why do you need to know?'

'Bill has an official engagement at six. If you want to avoid a Republican Party conspiracy you must leave before then.'

Monica enters Bill's office. Bill opens the door. 'Bill, I love you', says Monica and reveals a glimpse of her bright green underwear. Bill cannot resist the temptation and makes love with Monica.

When she recovers from the occasion Monica is upset at the thought that Bill has taken advantage of her. She runs from the house and to a café where she meets Linda.

Linda hates Bill. She opens her handbag and turns on a tape recorder. Monica tells her the whole story, whereupon Linda is filled with an exuberant and perverse sense of vengeance and asks Monica to leave.

Monica returns to Bill's office and it is almost six. A horde of Republicans stand at the door and the Secret Service man bars her way. Monica pleads: 'Secret Service man, please let me in.'

The Secret Service man looks at his watch and says: 'Sorry Monica - I did warn you.' And he shows her the door.

Monica decides to return home when she is stopped by Republican conspirators and FBI agents. She is arrested and confesses the whole story to Ken. Ken is the co-ordinator of the Republican Party conspiracy. In his attempt to defeat Bill he publicises the story throughout the world. Monica is depressed until she succeeds in selling her rights to publishers and talk show hosts and becomes a multi-millionaire and goes on to host a world syndicated talk show of her own.

*

There are five characters to this story. Rank each character, one to five, in order of responsibility for the success of Monica. For example, if you think Linda is most responsible, place her in first place, then the other characters accordingly.

Not only can we give the characters moral values (as in the case of Lucy); we can find stereotypical correspondences that match our sitcom types. For example:

Monica - (Love)
Linda - (Wisdom)
Kenneth - (Morality)
Bill - (Passion)
Secret Service man - (Duty)

And the four stereotypes?

Bill as problem maker (enthusiast)
Monica as romantic yearning type
Hillary as the practical problem solver
Ken as the intellectual 'by the book' thinking type

Dramatist or Humorist

Is the sitcom writer a playwright or a comic? A little of both won't hurt, but I suggest that writing sitcom is like writing a play. Sure, gags, one-liners and jokes can refuel a flagging script. But if you've got a dramatic situation, engaging characters, and a comic perspective, you won't need to fall back on comic punch-line salvos.

A dramatist makes drama of the everyday – the sitcom writer makes the drama of the everyday just that much more. Drama is created through contrast – when the contrasts are exaggerated to absurdity, drama is funny.

Page Eight [Extract from MONICA Episode # 19 'The Cuban Cigar']

BILL'S ROOM.

Bill is seated at the desk. He
wipes his brow and reaches
across to the humidor.

BILL

That's was great Monica.
Just great. What about a
cigar?

Monica is now seated in the
chair on the other side of the
desk, a pair of bright green
panties in her hand.

MONICA

Not for me poochie.

BILL

Don't you ever smoke
afterwards?

MONICA

Can't say that I ever
looked poochie.

Bill rolls the cigar and
cuts the end, then draws
Monica toward him.

BILL

(laughing)
Well cuddle button, why not
let me take a look for you.

Monica fondles the cigar
with light fingers.

MONICA

Now that wouldn't be a
Cuban cigar would it
Poochie? Because that could
be real embarrassing.

CONT'D...

There is a KNOCKING at
the door.

HILLARY'S VOICE

Bill?

Bill is startled. He makes a
short yelping sound. He looks at
Monica holding her green
panties, then opens the cigar box.

BILL

Quick. Into the humidor.

MONICA

(holding up the panties)

OK. And where can I hide
these?

Summary

Zap-free television requires:

*strong personalities
it's recent
it's close to home
celebrities <-> 'folk'
keep it simple
continuity – keep it going
it's verbal
it's close-up*

Good soap opera needs:

*close-ups
dysfunctional relationships
intense feelings
obsessive behaviour
contrasting characters
strong dialogue
cliffhangers
problem issues - not solutions
'a bitch'
the sensitive guy*

Sitcom? Think about:

*a trap
humour
identifiable characters
set-ups, pay-offs and running gags
continuity
familiarity
an obvious plot*

V

COMPUTER

1. What is Interactive Narrative?

What kind of stories can we create for the computer screen? If classical structure works for the cinema, and serial structure for television, what sort of structure works for the digital media? What are the time factors involved? If a film lasts about 100 minutes, and a TV show around 25 or 50 minutes, how long should a computer screen story last? How 'immersed' can we get into the storyworld of a computer?

New technologies and new media prompt a lot of questions; not about the technology itself, but what we can actually do with it. Who thought the cinematographe would be the universal storytelling medium it has become in those early turn of the century years? Or that the televisor of the late 1920s would become the central storytelling medium in every home? Or a generation ago, who would have predicted the social influence of the home computer? And today, how many writers understand the potential of the CD-ROM, or the DVD, or the internet as storytelling media?

For the fact is that the fiction writer is peripheral to the digital media revolution which is dominated by programmers, designers, journalists and architects. And with reason. By definition the programmer, designer, journalist and architect must interact with their vocational environment, whereas the writer holds onto the illusion of being in control. The writer does not interact, but creates a storyworld of make-believe places and characters; has the power of life and death over the people that populate such a world, manipulating destinies with plot-points and reversals.

Furthermore, an interactive narrative deprives the writer their complete control, and hands it over to the viewer (or the reader, or listener, or user). In an interactive narrative the viewer has the power to reject a plot-line and choose another; transfer interest from one character to another; decide to end the story sooner than later. What self-respecting writer wants to be party to that kind of interference? In fact, when writers write about the interactive narrative, the result is invariably the worst of worst possible scenarios. For example...

David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999) is about the ultimate interactive computer game – reality and fiction fuse into an indistinguishable blur. The story ends with the two central characters shooting down a group of computer game players. Then they shoot the game designer. One game player survives. They aim their guns and prepare to shoot him as well. 'No, no, no - you don't have to shoot me,' says the player. A pause. The player looks confused. 'Tell me the truth,' he says. 'Are we still in the game?' The two 'eXistentiaLiZt' bandits point their guns at the audience.

How is it for us? Is it still just a game? At the end of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the train robber, called Barnes, points his gun at the audience and fires. According to the scenario 'the resulting excitement is great.'

These narrative ploys play upon audience anxiety/ susceptibility about identity and loss of identity, technology and loss of control. The writers and audiences fears of too much interaction is as prevalent today, as when the motion pictures first entertained audiences a century ago.

At the first film screening in 1895, the sight of a locomotive pulling into a station provoked, so the story goes, the most extreme audience reaction. 'People were astonished and even panic-stricken to see a locomotive charging toward them,' claims Francis Doublier, the motion picture operator. Yet within a few years films such as *The Countryman's First Sight of the Animated Pictures* (1901) – made fun of these myth-spun reactions of viewers' cinema experiences. In this film the bewildered countryman, first terrified, then confused, ends up tearing down the screen onto which the moving pictures are projected.

A century later the scenarios are not that different. Truman of *The Truman Show* (1998) is the poor idiot 'tearing down' the screen – or at least opening up the door in the screen – while a nameless television audience stands by and watches. 'We' of the collective audience both sympathise with and are amused by Truman (poor sod!) because 'we' know what's fiction and what isn't, but he doesn't.

Similarly Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Lee), *eXistenZ*'s computer game designer extraordinaire, is like Barnes the outlaw, pointing the gun to the audience, who are asking; 'is this still part of the game?' Can we, the

audience, tell the difference between the game and reality? Writer / director David Cronenberg claims '...what people are really doing in computer and video games is trying to get closer and closer to fusing themselves with the game... that a game would plug right into your nervous system made perfect sense —if I want to be the game, the game will also want to be me.'

Confusing game and reality, a popular theme of the motion pictures a hundred years ago, is back in vogue. Where does space end and cyberspace begin in *Matrix* (1999)? what is a dream and what is reality in *Until the End of the World* (1992); what is television drama and real drama in the collective soap opera of *Fahrenheit 451* (1967)? In films like *Dark City* (1998), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *Matrix* and *eXistenZ*, the characters get stuck in a game of someone else's devising; their struggle is finding out that it is a game.

The moral to these stories is something like: 'play with the game, or the game will play with you.' If you don't interact, you will be 'immersed' – so absorbed in the story that you will lose your sense of identity.

So what do these morality tales tell us about interactive narrative? If these are the worst possible scenarios, what are the best possible scenarios? It seems that there are three possible 'interactive' audiovisual narrative forms:

- *mental interaction*
- *mental/physical interaction*
- *physical interaction*

Mental Interaction

The *Total Recall* scenario (a film in 1990, a television series ten years later); the body is passive, the mind is active; so active as to experience a digital environment as reality. Like *Matrix*, only the subject volunteers. In the William Gibson novel, *Neuromancer*, 'jacking in to the simstim' is to joyride someone else's consciousness; inducing a drug-like state of ecstatic experience. In *Until the End of the World* subjects watched their own recorded dreams, similarly inducing a state of lethargy. There are those that argue television soap opera is similarly addictive, thus harmful to the individual's mental state.

Mental/Physical Interaction

The myth of the 'interactive cinema' has its origins in 'The Feelies', the ultimate moving picture experience as described in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, (1936). Hold onto a hand grip at the side of the cinema seat, and you can 'feel every hair of the bear rug.' The cinema is directed to two senses; the human being has five. At 'The Feelies' patrons 'feel.' The push-button control of 'steering' narrative has its correspondence in the TV remote control, the computer joy-stick and control pad, and in the fictitious world of *Fahrenheit 451*, a hand unit that links the viewer to the wall-screen soap opera. In Francois Truffaut's film version of the Ray Bradbury novel, the screen-viewer is invited to participate with 'The Family' (the nightly soap opera), by answering trivial questions from a childishly banal script. There are similarities here with our contemporary idea of human-computer interaction. The computer game industry sells 'interaction' as user-control, when in fact, controlling buttons and selecting options has little to do with 'power.' A writer has 'power' over the actions of a character; a user has control over which one of a limited number of options to select.

Physical Interaction

Virtual Reality was the buzz words of the early 1990s; ten years later VR exists in the fiction worlds of Star Trek movies, and television's Star Trek Voyager, *Wild Palms* (1994), *Disclosure* (1994), and others. Star Trek's holodeck is the place of crew recreation – crew members can select a narrative environment, and 'interact.' Captain Janeway favours a gothic Victorian environment, Captain Picard, the noir novels of Raymond Chandler; Data, the Sherlock Holmes London of the late 19th century. Technologically the holodeck is a long way off (according to NASA website on the subject, at least 100 years, if it's feasible at all), but the concept tells us a good deal about the potential of digital fiction. For the writer in the new medium the plot is less significant than the credibility of the environment itself. In some respects this is a development from the fiction worlds of television. The television viewer is attracted more to the narrative environment than the narrative itself. The cosy New York apartments of *Friends*, or *Seinfeld*; the hospital environment of *ER*, the White House environment of *The West Wing*, and the increasingly niche environments of the plethora of television soap opera and sitcom.

It is here – the creation of story worlds in which we want to play (or 'interact' if you prefer), that the writer for the new medium has their biggest challenge and greatest potential.

So if digital media at least provides the potential for creating interactive stories, what are the advantages of the media itself? In other words...

... what's good about digital media?

The film screen is best suited to an audience; the television screen to the family (or intimate or 'closed' group); the computer screen, to the individual. Not just because of size, but because of the computer's primary functions. Namely:

search
navigate
link
play

Via the computer screen we can search for information or entertainment, navigate through an array of material – visual, auidial or text, link from one text to another (hypertext), or entertain ourselves within a personal play space, in contrast, say to the collective screen play of the cinema or television.

But before we get too enthusiastic about this new storytelling playground, let's consider a few practical questions about the computer and the digital attributes (specifically the CD-ROM) that go with it. For example:

Is it profitable?

Between 1990 - 1997 4% of English language CD ROM titles / publications have made a profit. This means that 96% have made a loss. In the late 1990s the majority of the major publishing houses and media corporations have abandoned CD-ROM publishing. Book sales, on the other hand, have increased, and remains the favoured 'user-friendly' 'interactive' medium. By the mid 1990s the investment into computer games by the major Hollywood

film corporations exceeded investment into film production. The main source of income is still film productions and off-spring franchise.

Is it effective?

Whether loading a CD-ROM or a DVD, downloading a web-site, or starting up a programme, the waiting time is not only long, but outside the control of a user. A reader consulting a reference book is actively involved, and experiences the satisfaction of finding the material; the computer user experiences lack of 'power.' In many cases an overlong waiting time leads to the user simply giving up and moving on.

Is it viable?

Can digital media work in the future? Will the investments pay off? Well, the investments are considerable, but so were they for the development of High Definition television in the 1980s.

Is it engaging?

As narrative media, film and television work better. Consider the introductions to some of the more popular computer games, *Myst*, *Riven*, *Return to Zork* and others. Reviewers praise their cinematic qualities; the production values of superb image and sound. Production values, which for the majority of users, are a waste of time. Cinematic production values work in a cinema. On a computer screen the individual user wants to get to the action. The expectations of the user are focused on involvement, on interacting. The movie-like opening and closing credits, panoramic camera movements, and slow-moving introductions thwart the users' expectations of power and control. If this is a new digital medium, why fall back on the norms and conventions of a medium that is a century old?

Is it easier?

The main advantage of the CD-ROM is as a source of storing information. The sales focus of the CD-ROM is that it makes all sorts of things easier; entertainment, access and above all, education. So why make it easier? Educational institutions in the 1980s considered video the new educational

aid. Vast sums were spent on expensive video productions to make learning 'easier.' But maybe the whole point of learning is that it shouldn't be too easy. Easy means less stimulating.

Let's return to the advantages of digital media. 'The medium is the message,' declared Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s, and certainly each medium is best served with a narrative style developed to serve that medium. Broadly speaking, film stories work best with one character, one problem, one plot; stories best suited to television have many characters, many problems, many plots and the narrative devised for the computer screen has the potential for choice of character(s), choice of problem(s) and choice of plot(s).

<i>Film</i>	<i>Television</i>	<i>Computer Games</i>
<i>(uni)linear</i>	<i>multi-linear</i>	<i>opti-linear</i>
<i>one character</i>	<i>many characters</i>	<i>choice of character(s)</i>
<i>one problem</i>	<i>many problems</i>	<i>choice of problem(s)</i>
<i>one plot</i>	<i>many plots</i>	<i>choice of plot(s)</i>
<i>one line</i>	<i>several lines</i>	<i>limitless line(s)</i>
<i>one perspective</i>	<i>many perspectives</i>	<i>any perspective</i>

In other words, what digital media can provide that other media cannot, is the potentiality of options.

2. Options

The cinema gives us the experience of story; television a range and breadth of many stories (characters, plots); and the computer, options. We can choose characters, story types, environments, even how much time we want to spend inside the chosen story-world.

What would happen to our Lucy story if it were to become 'interactive'; if our reading of the story had options, rather than a 'reading'? We could provide any of the characters with options which would enable us to steer the story in certain directions. A character grid of traits on one side, and specifics on the other provides options on how to determine age, social status, appearance,

dress, demeanour and education. A list of specifics helps us define the character. On this basis the first two lines of a character delineation grid for The Story of Lucy generates 36 possible 'Lucies.' A six line 'traits' axis gives Lucy x 46,656. If each of the other four characters are provided with similar options, any given combination provides over two billion character combinations, each with a potentially new slant on the story.

Is Peter a fair, tall and shy 18 year old student, a short stocky 48 year old lawyer, or a 60 year old professor? Is he sexually inexperienced; a notorious womaniser – a bounder, recently widowed, or married, or a labile alcoholic? Is Lucy, 13 years, 15, 25, 35? Is she betrothed, married, a virgin, a prostitute, a career woman? Is she fair, dark, be-spectacled, robust, shy, demure, awkward, alluring, bold, aggressive, a femme fatale? We can list at least 19 traits in compiling a character description: name, age, gender, height, weight, race, hair colour, hairstyle, complexion, eyes, nose, posture, body language, voice, accent, clothes, facial expression, occupation, setting; any one of which may change our reading of The Story of Lucy.

The Story of Lucy – 'filling in the blanks'

	t	r	a	i	t	s	
	AGE	STATUS	APPEARANCE	DRESS	CHARACTER	EDUCATION	
s	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	
p	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
e	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
c	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
i	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
f	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
i	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
c	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
s	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

By adding options for place (country, region, landscape, environment) time (of day, of year, historical period), weather conditions, description of the river (undertow, swirling torrent, calm, deep and dark) and the narrative

possibilities match the complexity of a chess game. To the descriptive elements of the narrative could be added plot point options: Peter and Michael are brothers; William is a six year old child and Lucy is his governess; David goes back, Peter jumps into the river after Lucy; William knows that unbeknownst to Lucy, Peter is her brother, separated at birth; David is the father of Lucy, or Michael was ruined through Peter's avarice.

Instead of five characters to the story, an interactive version could provide a choice between six different Lucys, or Peters, or Davids. Select Peter and you get a list of options:

<i>age</i>	<i>status</i>	<i>appearance</i>	<i>dress</i>
<i>18 yr</i>	<i>student</i>	<i>tall and fair</i>	<i>casual</i>
<i>24 yrs</i>	<i>soldier</i>	<i>tall and swarthy</i>	<i>uniform</i>
<i>36 yrs</i>	<i>doctor</i>	<i>short with glasses</i>	<i>white coat</i>
<i>48 yrs</i>	<i>lawyer</i>	<i>short and rotund</i>	<i>black suit</i>
<i>60 yrs</i>	<i>professor</i>	<i>bald and deformed</i>	<i>cap and gown</i>
<i>72 yrs</i>	<i>judge</i>	<i>wheelchair bound</i>	<i>bathrobe</i>

At a workshop for game and web designers I set the following task. Make The Story of Lucy into an interactive digital narrative. Here are some of the ideas:

Post Mortem

An interactive investigation narrative. Lucy is found dead on a river bank. The user selects their choice of time and place, and attributes of different characters. The user's role, like Agent Cooper in Twin Peaks, is to investigate the scene of death, and interview each character. There are background stories, parallel stories and involvements between the characters which the investigator must decipher. A combination of Twin Peaks and the Voyeur CD-Rom.

Die Lucy Die

A strategy game. Lucy is a thoroughly disagreeable character. Players can choose one of four characters (Michael, William, Peter, or David) and the object of the game is to see which player can provoke Lucy into throwing herself into the river. Each successful action against Lucy is rewarded with 'depression points', and players compete amongst each other as to who can gain the most points and push Lucy over the brink.

Who Killed Lucy?

An interactive investigation narrative in three parts. The setting: Texas, 1936. Lucy is dead under suspicious circumstances. Each character has pre-determined roles. Peter, for example, is poor and black. Michael is an evangelist minister.

Stage One: The Investigation. You are the Sheriff investigating the case, you consider the evidence, and interrogate four male suspects, one of whom is responsible for the death of Lucy. The suspect is charged, pending trial. You must decide which of the four suspects to charge and take to trial.

Stage Two: The Trial. You are The Lawyer defending the accused. You must gather evidence, call in witnesses, and where possible, misdirect suspicion of guilt elsewhere.

Stage Three: The Verdict. You are the foreman of the jury. Is the defendant guilty or not guilty? You must convince other jury members of your conviction. If you've made the right decision, you win.

Components of Law and Order, In the Heat of the Night, Twelve Angry Men, Witness for the Prosecution, The Verdict and all the police and law series we've seen on TV.

Save Lucy! (The Tameguchi Lucy)

Screen play, on a tiny screen. Lucy is a tameguchi figure you carry around with you. Just like the tameguchi, Lucy is cued to make demands, and requires constant attention. Sometimes she needs consolation, ('Of course Peter loves you...'), sometimes she needs sympathy, ('Don't worry Lucy, I'll take care of you...'). Lucy is in a state of constant neurosis, and it is up to the 'owner' to make sure she is kept as psychologically stable as possible, and prevent her from taking any extreme action. (Jumping into a river, for example). By coming up with the right answers or responses to Lucy's demands, the user collects points (wrong answers means deductions). The tameguchi Lucy works as a morality test. How much empathy does the user have? How competent is the user in handling a person in neurosis? A lack of skills in empathy and consolation can result in Lucy's death.

Interactive narrative is based on the options available to the user. Just like these examples of Interactive Lucy. A story with only two menu options at each link, with branches providing a maximum of five options each, would generate 32 possible endings; branches with 10 options would generate 1,024 possible endings. Or imagine an interactive word game. You have ten choices for a word to begin a sentence, ten choices for a second word, and ten choices for a third word – that yields 3000 three word beginnings, so that a number of sentences of 20 words 1020 yields a hundred million trillion sentences. Or a musical game. If a melody can be selected from 8 notes, that gives 64 pairs of notes, 512 motifs of three notes and 4,096 phrases of four notes, which yields many trillion musical pieces.

The point being that sometimes options can be overwhelming. The more options available on an updated word processing programme, doesn't make a better programme if the user has no need of them. Options without need soon become an encumbrance. Remember the example of Garbo's blank face; or the expressionless faces of Ben and Elaine in the back of a bus? (Part Three) Here too, the viewer is confronted with options; what are they thinking? what will happen next? is this the right thing to do? what about the parents? The difference is that each option is based on a psychological evaluation of character and situation – the options have meaning. How do we create

meaningful options in the interactive narrative? The answer is simple; we return to our criteria for 'what makes a good story.' Conflict, the engaging character, a theme... well, you know the list.

3. Hunting the Web

Present day man is still essentially Man-the-Hunter, the problem being that Man today is psychologically fitted to an environment which no longer exists. So we create artificial hunting grounds. The supermarket, the department store, the parking lot, the theme park, the web.

The internet provides a root system of separate and autonomous networks the size of which no-one actually knows. In 1996 the estimate was 4.8 million computer host sites, which in turn serve any number of peripheral computers. That's a very large hunting ground.

Surfing the web is also a form of screen play, like watching a film, or looking at a television programme. Only the 'player' gets to choose how long, and where, and what the goals are. Hunting down web sites on Australia for example (maybe you're planning a trip) can begin with sites on places, cities, tourist attractions – then lead to sites on aboriginal culture and end up with examples of didgeridoo music and tribal rituals. It is a random form of narrative with the user as main character, and the user in control of outcome, duration and reading a meaning into the text.

Rather than experiencing the 'pre-determined story' hunting down texts, sounds and images on web-sites creates an 'indeterminate' narrative, where the hunt itself becomes a simulative game. Surfing is not just an interaction between player and game, reader and text; but a pursuit that relies on the skills and exertions of the player required to create a game.

Internet is everywhere at once, and everything at once, representing a seemingly limitless assortment of textual segments to be assembled into a 'narrative flow.' Any restrictions are set by the player/interactor. The internet

web sites themselves constitute 'assemblage points' – independent production units where texts, sounds and images are thematically collated.

Yet what of the 'state of the art' itself; the aesthetic level of web-sites? It is no quirk or whim that most hunting on the web is the pursuit of sex and pornography. The commercial acceptance of video followed in the wake of the sex industry, and even the early years of the cinema was sustained by 'blue movies.'

If pornography is so prevalent a subject on the web, it is surely an indication of the primitive 'state of the art' of today's web-site. Here are the makings of a narrative form, yet at present, as vague and nebulous as the early days of the cinema. As yet undeveloped, but developing. The visual style of the web site window emphasises fragmentation, indetermination, process or performance, but seldom a finished art object.

Similarly, the means of distribution is in such a phase of development. In the early 1900s filmmakers functioned as heads of independent production units with their own artistic and production standards. The Hollywood studio system and the industrialising of film production in the 1920s was borne primarily of a need for distribution. A hundred years later CD-ROM and internet 'directors' are, likewise, heads of their own production units – each web site is a potential production company. Distribution is free, the market is global, but the market needs guidance. In 1983 the internet hosted 562 sites; 1987 – 28,174; 1991 – 617,000; 1995 – 6,642,000. In 1994 web usage growth was estimated at 2,300%; commercial sites had grown from 27,000 in 1995 to 750,000 in 1998. As distribution paved the way for a film industry – and the shaping of narrative norms as a result; internet – and whatever narrative norms develop as a result – requires an alternative strategy, namely selection.

If the narrative potential of internet is to be realised, the first prerequisite is a standardising of form; hypertext or 'stream'? The merging of screens – television and computer – is a means by which to sustain television 'streaming' – 'real-time' transmission of television without having to 'download' to the home computer harddisk. Internet would thus become a viable alternative broadcasting system, with television/internet providing new forms of participation. Previously broadcast episodes of television series

would be available to the viewer, checking references to earlier episodes or other series would also be feasible options.

Critics of the web's integration with television, however, maintain that web surfing and channel surfing are genuinely different pursuits; to imagine them as equivalents is to ignore the defining characteristics of each medium.

As a narrative medium, internet in its present form, has weaknesses compared to the established forms of audiovisual narrative. These include:

lack of characters and strong personalities

lack of genre

lack of clarity and cohesion of narrative

In effect, internet's storytelling debilities – which may prove to be the strengths of the hypertext narrative – can be attributed to two main areas; an absence of context – the user has no knowledge of who they are dealing with, of authorship, of narrative credibility, reliability or continuity; and, an absence of contest – the impartiality and multilinearity of hypertext does not favour taking sides in the experience of the basic narrative form of the protagonist – antagonist contest of wills. It does favour – as opposed to taking sides – the opportunity to experience both sides; to enter the realm of the participatory narrative. So how can the writer meet such a challenge?

What makes an engaging web site?

Let's first consider how the web-site has evolved. The first web sites were sources of information (phase one); then a new potential was realised. The net need not be limited to a simple exchange of information; it could also be a meeting place (phase two). Whether on the chat sites, or MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons, or Multi-User Domains – whichever is your preference), or playing a game of chess, the net was a place to interact with people, regardless how dubious their identity might be.

Now we have entered a third phase – the web as a stage; an arena for the performing arts. Whether music, 'streamed' motion pictures, even 'live' sex-shows. With the web as a stage, the web site must meet new criteria. And what should such criteria include? Let's consider the following:

a strong opening
navigational logic
visuality
theme
a satisfying ending

a strong opening

Which also means a quick opening. The longer the delay, the more the frustration. A strong visual impact. Simple and communicative. Easy to work out where to go next. Engaging interest and aiding progress, not impeding it.

navigational logic

If a story has 'plot logic' then a web-site should have navigational-logic. Easy to navigate, easy to understand how to navigate. Hyperlink possibilities – easy to move on. Easy to follow. A site that makes the user feel stupid, or that frustrates intentions, is a 'failed' site.

visuality

Show don't tell. Why use text if you can use pictures? The computer screen is a picture screen; smaller than television screens and cinema screens, but anyway a screen.

theme

The user has chosen the site, this site. Is it worth staying here? What's in it for me? Why should I invest the next 5 minutes, 20 minutes, on just this site? What is the level of credibility? Does it meet expectations? Like a good story, a site should be about something. What's the theme? Is it consequent? If it's an artistic site, game site or performance site, does the presentation arouse feelings and engage interest? If it is an information or sales site, is it functional, is it appealing, is it fun?

a satisfying ending

Do I just log off? Or just close down the frame? Can I get a sense of ceremonial departure? A sense of closure? Even my mobile telephone window bids me farewell; why not a web-site?

This is a short list for a long inventory of demands, requests, desires. Can we introduce more dramaturgy into the web site? What about conflict? What about an engaging character?

In Part One we began with the question 'what makes a good story?' We have explored those story telling skills and how they work in different media. Now we have come full circle. The newest of media, and the latest in technology makes the same demands on the most ancient of all skills – how to tell a story. The technology of a medium is a tool. It takes a generation for storytellers to understand the storytelling potentials of a new medium. You are the dramatists of that new medium. You stand on the threshold of making it work.

Summary

Three possible 'interactive' audiovisual narrative forms:

mental interaction
mental/physical interaction
physical interaction

The computer's primary functions:

search
navigate
link
play

Characteristics of digital fiction/computer games:

opti-linear
choice of character(s)
choice of problem(s)
choice of plot(s)
limitless line(s)
any perspective

Weaknesses of digital audiovisual narrative:

lack of characters and strong personalities
lack of genre
lack of clarity and cohesion of narrative
an absence of context
an absence of contest

How to 'dramatise' a web site:

a strong opening
navigational logic
visuality
theme
a satisfying ending