The Way of The Screenwriter, Amnon Buchbinder
p. 39-43.

Plot, Part One: Working with Conflict

Conflict

THE ESSENCE OF plot is desire and its encounter with the world.

How marvellous and, if we can imagine coming to story for the first time, how unexpected: the notion that to be human is to desire, to exist in a state of becoming, pulled forward by our longing.

The fabric of plot, and the medium through which the screenwriter expresses desire's encounter with the world, is dramatic conflict.

Conflict is such a vast and complex subject that, without a grasp of it in the simplest terms, the writer is certain to be overwhelmed.

Here's how we boil it down:

Conflict = Objective + Obstacle

An objective is simply something a character wants, whether it's to get through the door, to conquer the world, to take the girl

SHERIDAN TRAFALGAR LIBRARY

to the prom or to make amends for what he has done. Sooner or later, most protagonists state this objective: "We're going to put television on trial" (*Quiz Show*); "We're going to go see your father" (*Central Station*); "I want my piano back" (*The Piano*); "I've wanted to make love to you from the moment I saw you" (*American Beauty*).

What are the measures of an objective?

Intensity. How strongly does a character want it — will they expend effort to realize it?

Depth. How far into the character's being is it rooted?

Accessibility. Can you bring the audience to an emotional understanding of it?

Concreteness. Is it something that can be attained, and how will we know and feel its attainment?

Antagonism. Is it possible to generate obstacles to it?

Relevance: Is the action that will flow from this objective the story you want to tell?

Behind every objective, there is a motive. Goodwin's motive in *Quiz Show* is to use his legal training for a worthwhile purpose. Dora's motive in *Central Station* is to take responsibility for Josue. Ada's motive in *The Piano* is to be able to express her inner self. Lester's motive in *American Beauty* is to feel alive.

There are universal forces behind these individual motives, which we will examine later. For now, these motives can be seen to express the depth of the characters' awareness — and for the most part, our own — of why they want what they want.

The motive provides depth and meaning to the objective. An objective with no motive is hollow and leaves the audience indifferent.

Some motives require less explanation than others. If a character has a gun pointed at him, the objective which results (to escape) has a motivation that can be instantly assumed (survival).

Where an objective with no motive is hollow, a motive with no objective is not engaging. Writers often understand their characters' motives before they have found an objective, because motives are more directly connected to the heart of the story. *The Piano*, for example, isn't really a story about a musical instrument, or even about a woman's attachment to one — rather, it is a story about tensions between possession and love. This emotional and spiritual terrain gives the story its depth. But without the magnificent story element of the piano, with all its meaning to Ada (and eventually the other characters), that depth would have no way to express itself and the story would have no impact.

A writer may just as likely understand a character's objective and then work her way backwards to understand the motive. For example, we might hypothesize that the writers of *Central Station* wanted to tell a story about a woman trying to return a boy to his family, before they had figured out why she was doing it.

Whether she starts with it or not, a well-defined and strongly motivated objective is the storyteller's vein of gold. It constitutes a *telos* (absolute end) towards which the story proceeds, and which it must either fulfill or fail irrevocably in the attempt.

Goodwin must reveal the corruption of television, or it will never be stopped. Dora must find Josue his home, or else face the ruin of her own life. Ada must get her piano back — or it must be destroyed. Lester must have sex with Angela, or else confront the folly of the impulse.

For a story to reach its end, the conflicts must be pursued to their fullest possible extent. The audience must feel as though the future has been achieved.

An obstacle is anything that makes the character's pursuit of his objective difficult. While a character may well have more than one objective in the course of a story, each single objective can, and should, face many obstacles:

In *Quiz Show*, obstacles include the presence of a conspiracy to cover up the truth; Goodwin's desire, in a sense, to *be* Charles Van Doren; Herbie Stempel not knowing when to shut up; and so on. In *Central Station*, Josue rejects Dora's help repeatedly; Dora loses her money; Josue's father has moved many times; and caring for others doesn't come easily to Dora. In *The Piano*, Ada's piano is left on the beach and she can't move it herself; her husband, Stuart, is completely indifferent to the piano and its importance to her; she is mute, and therefore limited in her ability to communicate. In *American Beauty*, the object of Lester's lust, Angela, is his daughter's friend; he's out of shape; and so on.

These are major conflicts. If we look at the micro level of the story, within individual scenes, we find conflicts there, too. Goodwin's wife accuses him of being soft on Van Doren; Dora makes a poignant attempt to seduce the Christian truck driver; Ada tears off an ancient wedding dress; Caroline tries to sell a dump of a house. Concealed within each of these events is motive, objective and obstacle. Each reveals something about character; each is both cause and effect; each constitutes an expression of tension between human desire and the world, tension that drives characters to action and creates the circumstances for change. Yet the conflicts themselves are local and specific.

Most story problems can be traced back to poorly defined or weakly dramatized conflict. And all such problems can be clarified by applying this simple test: what is the objective? What is the obstacle?

Conflict is the photosynthesis that converts the sunlight of desire into the growth of action. Not only the story as a whole, but every unit within the story — every scene, sequence and act — moves forward only through conflict.

Conflict is the very language the screenwriter speaks in forming her story, and, exactly as in learning a new language, the screenwriter must acquire an analytical understanding of its construction, an instinctive feel for it, and finally the ability to apply it without conscious attention.

Roughly 2,600 years ago, Laozi declared that "the movement of the Way, by contraries proceeds." For "contraries" we may substitute "conflict." The Way itself may transcend contraries, but it relies upon them for its expression and progression. So it is with stories.