INTRODUCTION

What we need today is no less than a revolution. We need to do violence to the cliche, create havoc with the tried, the tired, and tested.

Larry Gelbart

Producers who murder screenwriters. Screenwriters who spend their lives “pitching” rather than writing. Studios that endlessly recycle films that unimaginatively copy previous movies.

Such is the stuff of Michael Tolkin’s devilishly accurate satire of The Industry, The Player, which delighted and horrified audiences in 1992. Tolkin’s script provided director Robert Altman with a new opportunity to do what he had done years ago for a whole generation in his earlier films: he took on American cliches and destroyed them by placing them before us in such exaggerated or perhaps not exaggerated detail that we could laugh out loud and see beyond the cliches.

The destruction of cliches in character, story, and structure is at the center of this study. More specifically we are interested here in creating stronger, more vivid, and challenging characters in screenplays that go beyond what Larry Gelbart calls the “tried, tired, and tested.”

I am speaking of films such as Casablanca, It Happened One Night, The Quiet Man, High Noon, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, Mildred Pierce, On the Waterfront, The Return of the Secaucus Seven, Thelma & Louise, Down by Law, The Silence of the Lambs, sex, lies and videotape, Boyz N the Hood, Unforgiven or, from abroad, The Crying Game, Wild Strawberries, The Bicycle Thief, Closely Watched Trains, Tokyo Story, Rules of the Game, Breathless, 400 Blows, The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, Cinema Paradiso, Europa Europa, The Gods Must Be Crazy, The Time of the Gypsies, Little Vera, or My Life as a Dog. Then, too, there are those rare television series such as “Northern Exposure,” “M*A*S*H,” “Hill Street Blues,” and “Rosanne,” together with such quality miniseries as Lonesome Dove. All of these films and television projects please audiences, win awards, and linger in our memories long after most other films have been forgotten.
These films and programs cross many genres and numerous national borders. But they share a sense that, as Flannery O'Connor says, "it is the character's personality that creates the action of the story" and not the other way around. If much of Hollywood's fare has become plot centered at the expense of character, I wish in this study to suggest strategies and concepts that will help any writer develop more fully realized characters. This does not mean that we should fail to pay attention to story and structure and other elements. Far from it. In fact, our focus on character should help you see narrative from perspectives that go beyond many of the cliches that are often served us on the screen. But we should be able to listen to “other” voices, too. For example, surrealist director Luis Buñuel described his concept of screenwriting in this remark about his famous debut film, *Un Chien andalou* (Andalusian Dog, 1929), which he wrote with his friend Salvador Dali:

> Our only rule was very simple: No idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted. We had to open all doors to the irrational and keep only those images that surprised us, without trying to explain why. (Buñuel 1983, 104)

Admirable advice for writers. But, of course, threatening advice to studio heads and producers. At least they think such advice is dangerous. That's why cliches and stereotypes are so comforting, after all!

Writer-director George Roy Hill whose career has included some of the best-loved Hollywood films of the past twenty-five years—*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *The Sting*, *The World According to Garp*, and *Slaughterhouse Five*—said that he had only seen one film in 1991 that interested him: *Cinema Paradiso* (Hill 1991). It struck me as ironic but not surprising that none of the recent Hollywood fare made it onto his list. For although we can admire the razzle-dazzle special effects of a *Batman* or *Ghostbusters* or *Terminator 2*, or the set design in a *Dick Tracy* or *Edward Scissorhands*, it is more than a bit troubling that these films don't really stick with us for very long as strong stories about real human beings we care about who are experiencing difficult (comic or dramatic) and moral straits. And yet, by and large, the pop genre films that Hollywood has churned out in recent years are the products of the “Hollywood formula,” which is preached in numerous “how to” books lining bookstore shelves everywhere.¹

*Cinema Paradiso* (written and directed by Giuseppi Tornatore, 1989), in contrast, is an Oscar-winning story about a boy whose father has not

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returned from the war; the boy grows up in the movie theater (thus the title) of a small Italian town, befriended by an aging projectionist. It’s an extremely simple tale. Yet you cannot forget it once you’ve seen it. Why? Various answers come to mind, but at the center of them all is the BOY himself. We remember him, his face, his actions, his moods, his character. And we remember him so because we know—whether we can articulate it or not—that his character touches what Flannery O’Connor (46) identified as “those underground springs that give life.” *Cinema Paradiso* is only partially about cinemas and paradises. It is much more importantly, on a core experience level, about a young boy who must grow up without a father. It is this core experience that is an important key to his character and thus to the film itself. Without it, we would have a light story full of nostalgia for old movies.

It is this sense of struggle at the heart of character and narrative that Bruno Bettelheim had in mind in speaking of the very real need children have for fairy tales in his study *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1989). We could easily substitute “the typical contemporary Hollywood film” for what Bettelheim attacks: modern children’s literature, which, he points out, robs children of “the deep inner conflicts originating in our primitive drives” (10). We can substitute “character-centered script” for “fairy tale” when Bettelheim writes that “the fairy tale, by contrast, takes these existential anxieties and dilemmas very seriously and addresses itself directly to them” (10). Such inner anxieties and dilemmas are clearly not the stuff of action/adventure/plot-driven films.

But they are the territory of the character-oriented project. One critic recently observed that Hollywood executives appeared to be learning that “big bucks don’t necessarily mean big bucks, that production costs have gotten out of hand and that smaller, more human movies are a better bet in tough times” (Hinson 1990).

Character is the vital material with which an author must work.

Lajos Egri, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*

If you want to write a screenplay, then write a screenplay! In fact, if you want to make a film, simply make one. You don’t NEED a screenplay; you just need film, a camera, and money to develop and print the film.

Jean-Luc Godard used to say some of his best films had no script at all: just notes scribbled on paper napkins at whatever café he stopped at for coffee on the way to shoot. The truth is, however, that most filmmakers don’t work this way: for artistic and commercial reasons both, they prefer to have a written script of what the movie will be before the
cameras roll. Certainly producers feel this way. And thus the need for writers.

Nobody needs to read a book about how to write in order to write. Yet once you’ve plunged into writing the feature screenplay for the first time, you are more than likely bound to discover parts of the process that are hard, that you feel insecure about, that others feel you need work on. That’s when seasoned advice and guidance can help. This book is offered in such a spirit for the new and the experienced screenwriter alike. Use as you see fit: some may wish to follow the step-by-step schedules offered in part 3 whereas others may find it more profitable to dip and browse. You choose. If several thoughts or suggestions prove useful, I will be pleased. If a handful of pages help you with your scripts, it’s time to open a good bottle of wine.

Writing what has become the three-act, plot-driven Hollywood script in its most crass form leads to what I call the microwave script. That is, the attempt to make a meal instantly by simply throwing elements together according to a set recipe, setting the timer, and zapping it all for a brief time. Some dishes may taste OK concocted this way. But given the choice, I’ll take a stove-cooked, half-improvised, half-planned meal any day.

I live and write in New Orleans, not Los Angeles. That means that cooking, eating, and jazz matter. Sure, people may reheat coffee in the microwave, but no self-respecting New Orleanian would make a gumbo or a jambalaya or a crawfish bisque in THAT machine! For many of the best Creole dishes, what you need to start with is the ROUX, which is the flour and butter (or oil) sauce that is simmered slowly until it turns just the right shade of rich brown (hazelnut) before anything else is added.

The roux is the spine, the core characteristic, of your characters and script. As one New Orleans cookbook says, “It’s surprising to realize that gumbo is a dish that has a sauce—the roux. Properly prepared, the roux is completely absorbed, but its taste and texture are an essential part of the gumbo” (Collin and Collin 1989, 111; italics my own).

There you have it.

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Let us outline our character-centered project more specifically as we set forth to do battle with cliches and stereotypes.

Character Note #1

The character-centered script portrays character not as a static state of being but as a dynamic process of becoming which
We will call the carnivalesque: in brief, the carnivalesque describes an ongoing, ever-changing state in which character is recognized as being made up of many “voices” within us, each with its own history, needs, flavor, limitations, joys, and rhythms.

We will discuss the carnivalesque in more detail in part 1. The study of character almost necessarily brings to mind theories of psychology and even psychoanalysis as developed by Freud, the post-Freudians, and others. Although these theories have their uses, they are not, however, the center of our study. Rather we will draw particularly on the contributions made by the Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin whose discussions of language, literature, identity, culture, and carnival versus noncarnival-oriented societies bear directly on our discussion of screenwriting.

Again it is helpful to refer to the carnivalesque environment of New Orleans in which I live, for, unlike Los Angeles, New York, and the rest of the United States, the whole culture of the “Crescent City” is organized according to what happens before Mardi Gras or after Mardi Gras, the carnival day that occurs each year on “Fat Tuesday,” the day before Ash Wednesday.

Chris, the laid-back 1960s-styled articulate D.J. in television’s “Northern Exposure,” has a firm grasp on everyone’s need for the carnivalesque. In the “Spring Break” episode (1991) he remarks:

Spring is about to spring—Persephone’s coming back. And here in Cicely, the ice is groaning—about to break with that exquisite, deafening roar. It’s a time for madness. A time for our fangs to come down and our eyes to glaze over—so the beast in us can sing with unmitigated joy. (beat) Yes, ecstasy, I welcome thee.

Chris then emits a wolf howl. A sense of the carnivalesque is, in fact, what is most attractive about “Northern Exposure.” One of the four main writers on the show, Diane Frolov, identifies the ideology of their concept as “a nonjudgmental universe” (1992, 266) where different personalities, races, ages, types can coexist, learn, and support each other as a community.

Furthermore, in tune with the carnivalesque:

- Character note #2
  The character-centered script takes chances.

In reviewing the “disaster” of the Hollywood movie business in early 1992, Jeffrey Goodell in Premiere concluded that “to win you have to
gamble" (1992, 32). And John Taylor in *New York* magazine noted in the fall of 1991 that with so many big studios in trouble, studios would “love to give a Woody Allen movie their special spin” (23), referring to the low-budget, character-driven films that Woody has always made.

What was one of the most debated points of *Thelma & Louise*? Simple: “Why did they have to drive off into the Grand Canyon?”

*Because it was their character given the circumstances:*

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LOISE
We’re not giving up, Thelma.

THELMA
Then let’s not get caught.

LOISE
What are you talkin’ about?

THELMA
(indicating the Grand Canyon)
Go.

LOISE
Go?

Thelma is smiling at her.

THELMA
Go.

They look at each other, look back at the wall of police cars, and then look back at each other. They smile.²
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Thelma and Louise took chances. And so did Callie Khouri in this, her first screenplay, for she consciously set out to write something that was off the chart from what had been seen before. Said Khouri simply: “*I had nothing to lose*” (1991; emphasis my own). “Nothing to lose” became, of course, “everything to gain” as she walked off with the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay in 1992.

Khouri took the plunge that many critics, including Wolf Schneider, the editor of *American Film*, have said more writers today should take:

². Callie Khouri, *Thelma & Louise*, Final Shooting Script, 5 June 1990. All quotes from this version of the script.
“Playing it safe often means replaying the same thing . . . Maybe, if all of us who told stories took more risks, if we looked inward into our psyches instead of outward to the structure set by others’ success, we would find more to say.”

Too few Hollywood films in the late 1980s and early 1990s have taken chances. Even at the beginning of the 1980s, critic and novelist David Thomson observed that “movies are nearly at an end” (1981, 23). His reasoning? “The climactic crisis of American film is that the movies were unworthy of a culture dependent on imagination,” he explains. And he concludes by speaking of films that are much closer to those we are discussing: “I suspect that they (American films) have never been worthy, but that they have come close enough, often enough, to tempt anyone interested in a communication that might touch everyone.” The character-centered script is definitely interested in that kind of emotional power that connects with a widely varied audience, if not literally “everyone.”

**Character note #3:**

In the character-centered script, we and the characters are confronted with difficult and often contradictory moral choices.

Late in *sex, lies and videotape*, the “stranger,” Graham, who has been videotaping Ann, the repressed wife of his once-best friend, speaks (as he tapes himself!):

**GRAHAM**

All right, you want to talk about lies, let’s talk about lies, Ann. Let’s talk about lying to yourself. You haven’t been able to sleep with your husband because you’re no longer in love with him, and maybe you never were. You haven’t been honest with yourself in longer than you can remember.

To which Ann, who has been overly reserved the whole time till now, replies:

**ANN**

(heated)

Yeah, you’re right. But I never claimed to know everything like you, and have all these little theories. I’m still learning, I know that. But I don’t feel like I’ve wasted time. If I had to go through my marriage to get to where I am right now, fine.

Ann moves in closer, burrowing, her eyes on fire.
ANN
But you. You have wasted nine years. I mean, that has to be some sort of weird record or something, nine years. How does that feel?

Graham says nothing. Ann picks up the camera and points it at him.

GRAHAM
Don't do that. (Soderbergh 1990, 159)

Ironically, for a film with such a provocative title, Steven Soderbergh’s popular “off-Hollywood” film, made in his native Baton Rouge, has two main characters—Graham and Ann—who are both frigid and concerned with the seeming lack of morality of those (Ann’s sister and husband) who are having an affair with each other. Consequently the whole film becomes a witty, insightful meditation on the 1980s American “yuppie” and self-gratification morality.

Likewise Boyz N the Hood (written and directed by John Singleton, 1991) places its young, black, male, South Central Los Angeles teenager in the midst of a life-and-death moral dilemma. That this character-centered drama of our times speaks strongly to its audiences was tragically clear in the subsequent outbreaks and even deaths during the opening months of its release in 1991. As producer Steve Nicolaides (1991) stated, however, the violence was not caused by an irresponsible use of violence in John Singleton’s film. As he noted, any Schwarzenegger film has much more “violence” in it. What affected viewers was rather the direct honesty and truth of the violence presented in all its contemporary moral complexity. Clearly the film comes down on the side of breaking the chain of violence for young black males as represented in the father’s strong, if somewhat “preachy,” closing speech. How painfully accurate Singleton’s sense of character and place became clear in the spring of 1992 as we all kept many of his prophetic images in mind as Los Angeles burned.

Aristotle helps on this point. He wrote that “virtually all the distinctions in human character are derived from the primary distinction between goodness and badness which divides the human race” (1947, 6).

Character Note #4

The character-centered script often breaks some or many of the so-called “rules” of Hollywood scriptwriting.

It is in the spirit of the carnivalesque to adhere to no set rules. Good screenwriters, like jazz musicians, are aware of the codes, modes, traditions of genres, trends, but go beyond them. Thus it has been a “rule” of
Hollywood for years that “westerns don’t sell” and another often-stated dictum that “historical dramas are a no-no,” and yet Dances With Wolves (Michael Blake 1990) and Unforgiven (David Webb Peoples 1992) proved everybody wrong. The Civil War has been taboo (on the premise of “who cares anymore?”), but Gone With The Wind (Sidney Howard et al. 1939) is still the film that along with Casablanca (Julius and Philip Epstein and Howard Kotch 1942) and a few others many feel represent “Hollywood” at its best.

Back to carnival in New Orleans once more. Yes, you can buy a guide to parade routes for the organized carnival clubs (called “krewes”). But the more exciting carnival-within-a-carnival has to do with New Orleans African-American clubs organized as “Indian tribes” which have no parade route at all but which wander as they wish throughout the day! There are no schedules, rules, routes, obligations on Mardi Gras day for these tribes that cultural historian George Lipsitz (1990) has studied carefully. Noting that these tribes consist of working-class blacks who collectively “author an important narrative about their own past, present, and future” (296), he underlines the multivoiced character of such events as drawing on “music, costumes, speech, and dance.”

In other words, the Mardi Gras Indians create their own rules as they fashion their collective tribal identity.

Character Note #5

The character-centered script is aware that the characters’ lives are strongly affected by core characteristics and experiences that the audience as well as the characters themselves may or may not come to identify and understand.

The Crying Game (1992), written and directed by Neil Jordan, surprised many in The Industry: this small character-centered British “foreign” film proved it had “legs” with a mass audience and won an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay in 1993. Beyond the many controversial topics that the film embraces—from politics and religion to race and homosexuality—there is the strong pull of the characters as developed and presented to us. By film’s end, the various “surprises” in Neil Jordan’s script seem, upon reflection, inevitable given Fergus’s character. We may ask: Why is such a person in the IRA in the first place? Why doesn’t he follow orders as he should? Why does he decide to fulfill a dying enemy’s wish to visit his girlfriend? And why, once an identity secret is revealed, does he decide to stay?

Many lesser scripts would have explained all: perhaps Fergus was beaten as a child or he lived through his own tragic love affair or we see in a series of flashbacks that he has always been kind to animals but was
forced into becoming an IRA hit man against his will. Whatever. But it is a measure of Neil Jordan's success that he has created a Fergus vivid and convincing enough, that we sense the core experiences and characteristics without fully knowing or understanding them. We have no such simple flashbacks or easily identified Freudian complexes drawn for us. But the narrative of the film traces a character who comes finally to appear in our minds as someone with a strong core from which his behavior and actions are drawn.

One further example. At the end of a recent term teaching an Introduction to Film class, I asked students to vote for their top three favorite films seen that semester. The field of contenders included *The Godfather, Rear Window, King Kong, Citizen Kane, All the President's Men, Desperately Seeking Susan*, an early Fellini film, an early Renoir movie, and a recent Hollywood-Yugoslav production, Emir Kusturica's *Time of the Gypsies* (Columbia Pictures, 1989). There was no contest. *Time of the Gypsies* won hands down.

How could this be? What did this seemingly unknown film made for $2 million with an unknown Yugoslav cast speaking in Romany have that *The Godfather* and even *Citizen Kane* didn't? Students answered: a deeply affecting sense of mystery about the human condition that nevertheless rang true to them. The film haunted them: they could not forget it. This tale of contemporary Yugoslav gypsies who sell their own children into slavery in Italy grabbed them and took them through comedy and pathos to places they'd never been before. The film took chances and those risks paid off (seen from today's perspective, of course, the film also seems prophetic in suggesting the kind of struggle that has led to the violent and bloody collapse of Yugoslavia).

Think how this is true in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Ted Tally 1991) as well. Although we come to realize that a core experience for Clarice, the main character, has to do with her need to reconcile the death of her father, a law enforcement officer, there are many questions left unresolved, untouched. What of her mother, generally considered the most important influence on a child's development, especially that of a young woman? That significant fact is never touched upon, and although Clarice's exterior goal is reached—to become an FBI agent—we sense that she still has miles to go before her odyssey is completed.

This point is made even more clearly in relation to the character of Hannibal Lecter. Not only is he on the loose by the end of the film ("having a friend for dinner"), but we never come close to understanding his core character or experiences: we sense the gap between his intense understanding of human nature and thus his ability on the one hand to help others heal themselves and, on the other hand, his own personal need to kill and violate.
This realm between what we know and don’t know of a character brings us to a final note:

**Character Note #6**

The character-centered script suggests that beyond core characteristics and experiences, there is mystery and a realm of the unresolved—that area that we cannot fully or totally know, understand, embrace.

William Goldman coined a phrase often repeated in Hollywood in *Adventures in the Screen Trade*: “NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING.” He was referring to the entire American movie industry. Our character note #6 suggests a variation on Goldman’s Law: None of us ever completely knows anybody, including ourselves. “Truly the beauty of life is its uncertainty,” says the ancient Japanese poet Yoshida Kenko. Approach character as a question rather than a statement. This book is about understanding and learning to write scripts that might have the same lasting and deeply satisfying appeal that *The Silence of the Lambs, Cinema Paradiso, Thelma & Louise, Time of the Gypsies*, and, on television, “Northern Exposure” have had for millions. But I want this to be more than a “how to” book. I am also interested in the WHY in a broad context that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional Hollywood cinema.

The character-centered script is not a registered trademark or a recognized division with a label in all Blockbuster video shops. Furthermore, it’s important to remember that classical Hollywood films traditionally built their appeal around strong characters and appealing stars. Thus no simple line can be drawn between Hollywood versus European or non-Hollywood independents. And certainly all the points made in this book could be applied to building characters within plot-oriented action/adventure films as well. But I have used the term “character-centered” because it best describes the kind of films I like to see—and so do many others—both from Hollywood and from elsewhere. Plus, this is the type of film I enjoy writing.

Note also that an emphasis on character in this book does not exclude the need for a carefully worked-out narrative structure or for any of the other elements that make up the rich gumbo of filmmaking. There can be no fully drawn character without a narrative point of view, a story structure, a sense of place and pace. Even (and maybe more accu-
rately, “especially”) in a film such as Louis Malle’s My Dinner With Andre (1982), in which two actors, Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn, talk with each other for 110 minutes over dinner, a finely etched narrative—both verbal and visual—is at play. As part 2 of this work makes clear, structure does count, and it counts significantly for the total shape and effect of a script. Within this context, however, I wish to focus on the need to develop stronger and more imaginative characters.

Movies have largely lost interest in character. It is not without significance that two of the most publicized characters in the cinema of the last few years have been a shark and a mechanical ape.

Larry McMurtry, “Character, The Tube, and the Death of the Movies,” in Film Flam

Let’s be even more specific. The basic premise of this book is simple: there is a large gap between the typical plot-driven films, especially those produced by Hollywood, and those movies that actually win Academy Awards and other prizes around the world. Yes, I’m talking about a clear double standard. Hollywood is an industry, and most of the films produced there are aimed at the Box Office and not the Academy Awards or the Cannes Film Festival or even the San Francisco International Festival. Yet the pictures we remember and which the Academy most often turns to when it takes a closer look at the end of each year tend to be narratives about strongly etched characters. And because these stories concern people we care deeply about, they have emotional and moral resonance: we replay them again and again in the cinemas of our mind.

This cannot be said of many films in the theaters today, a fact that has begun to be reflected in declining box office and video rental returns. After all, I enjoyed taking my five-year-old son to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II: The Secret of the Ooze (Todd W. Langen 1991) when it was released. But would anyone dare distinguish between the character traits of Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the rest? Remember, in contrast, that Disney managed to make each of the dwarfs in Snow White (1937)—Doc, Happy, Sleepy, Sneezy, Grumpy, Bashful, and most especially Dopey—stand out in our memories because of a few sharply etched character strokes. (Note that writers of animation are still not represented by the Writers Guild of America. Story-script credit for Snow White lists Ted Sears, Otto Englander, Earl Hurd, Dorothy Ann Black, Richard Creedon, Dick Richard, Merrill de Maris, and Webb Smith as adapters of the Brothers Grimm story.)

In this context, consider the MOUNTAIN the aspiring screenwriter must climb today to create a film with such resonance and with characters who remain with us long after the credits have faded on the screen.
OBSTACLES TO WRITING THE CHARACTER-CENTERED SCRIPT

General

1. THE INFLUENCE OF TELEVISION

Television, at least in the United States, works against character-centered scripts because it prefers SITUATION-centered shows and nonthreatening characters who do not rock the boat for either viewers or sponsors. Thus, there is a certain national homogenized sameness and narrowness of range in character depiction. Exceptions such as “Northern Exposure” test the boundaries of television writing, but in general, the middle of the road, middle-brow approach to narrative and character robs writers of the chance to create a true polyphony: a chorus of many voices free to speak as they wish.

There is one very bright exception to the above, as Larry McMurtry has pointed out and proved with the filming of Lonesome Dove, the script for which was based on his own novel: the television miniseries. The miniseries has allowed good writers an excellent chance to develop character to a greater extent than most films, simply because in a miniseries, writers have more time at their hands. Stalin (1992) starring Robert Duvall would be an example of an expansiveness that television can incorporate in the hands of talented writers and filmmakers.

2. EVER-DECREASING ATTENTION SPANS

Television is largely responsible for this, especially MTV with its zip-zap montage editing that manipulates the viewer so that he or she has little chance to observe, consider, enjoy a character working or not working things out. But the mind-numbing editing is itself a product in part of the need to try and hit the audience with enough stimulation so that viewers won’t press the remote control switch at random taking in ten seconds of this show and five seconds of that one. Alan Parker said that while he was shooting Angel Heart (1987) the opening encounter between Mickey Rourke and Robert De Niro was shot as a “wonderful ten-minute scene with no cuts” (Parker 1987). As it plays in the final cut of the film now, it is long, but Parker felt he could not use the full ten minutes simply because “producers don’t feel audiences will sit still that long.”

3. NINTENDO NIRVANA

Marsha Kinder has perceptively observed the impact of kids’ shows such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, but especially of Nintendo and video games on our nation’s youth in Playing with Power in Movies, Tele-
vision, and Video Games. Such sound and light stimulation and digital interaction may be great fun. And they certainly do a lot for hand-eye coordination—and thus to that degree they are active rather than passive media, which, as Kinder explores, evolve their own “interactive narratives” (1991, 4). They do not, however, prepare or invite individuals to delve further into the mysteries and mazes of the human character, for they are, ultimately, dialogues between the machine and the player rather than between individuals.

4. THE GENERAL SPEED AND FRAGMENTATION OF LIFE TODAY
Fragmentation appears to be the pattern of our lives today. Precious little time for talk, for a walk, for undirected play, or for daydreaming. In short, no real time to take in, reflect, respond, to BE. Thus the plot-heavy scripts in some way mirror the schedule-heavy lives of the viewers! I think this in part explains why so many of the recent character-centered scripts such as Driving Miss Daisy (1989), Rambling Rose, Fried Green Tomatoes, and Man in the Moon (all from 1991) are set in the past and, in the case of the last three, the rural past (and what are we to make of the fact that they are all about the South?): these films build on a sense of nostalgia, of course, for a more leisurely time. But the past makes it seem natural that people would talk more, interact more, take their time about things in a way that doesn’t often occur in contemporary stories; stories set in the present often have difficulty pulling off more dialogue, more interaction because of the pace, fragmentation, and overstimulation of our lives today. French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard caught such a feeling for life today in his 1966 film Masculine-Feminine when the young male protagonist proposes to his girlfriend in a noisy café complete with street noise outside and pinball machine noise inside. Instead of answering him, she states that she is late for an appointment and will talk to him later and rushes out. With wry irony Godard suggests that even the most emotional moments of our lives get “crowded out” these days.

Industry Specific

5. SCREENWRITERS AND PRODUCERS WHO ADMIRE HEAVILY PLOT-ORIENTED FORMULAS AND SCRIPTWRITING
Many structure-oriented books (and seminars) such as the ever-popular Screenplay by Syd Field, or more recently, Christopher Vogler’s The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters, have had a profoundly negative effect on the quality of American screenwriting in the past decade. The point is simply that an emphasis on structure and plot without a clear understanding of the nature and work-
ing of character often leads to a lifeless script. Character and action are inextricably intertwined. Aristotle said it, and we still need to remember: “Men are better or worse, according to their moral bent; but they become happy or miserable in their actual deeds” (1947, 24). And it’s ironic to note how Aristotle anticipated Hollywood’s plot-heavy/character-light scripts when he went on to comment that it is possible to have dramas without strong characters, but not possible to have dramas without action, ending with the observation: “In fact, the works of most of the modern tragic poets, from the time of Euripides on, are lacking in the element of character” (24, emphasis my own).

Seymour Chatman (1978) goes beyond Aristotle’s comment to point out how little has really been written on a theory of character. Furthermore, in the centuries-old debate over action versus character, Chatman remarks, “There seems no self-evident reason to argue the primacy of action as a source of traits, nor for that matter, the other way around” (110). Given Chatman’s perspective, the danger of plot- and structure-oriented script books is that, as Chatman says about formalist and structuralist critics, they see character as a PRODUCT of plot and thus as “participants rather than as PERSONAGES” (111).

Finally, few if any of these books truly suggest to the would-be screenwriter the possible European and independent options above/beyond/in addition to “Hollywood.”

Veteran Hollywood and television scriptwriter Michael Elias (whose credits list hundreds of television shows including “Head of the Class,” “All in the Family,” and “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” as well as films such as The Frisco Kid and The Jerk) recently complained that the kind of “formula” writing championed by the host of scriptwriting books around and the equal number of screenwriting seminars and weekend workshops is “nightmarish” (1991). He complained that too many studio heads are MBAs under twenty-five who have taken these “quickie” courses or only read one or two of these “how to” books; even the writers themselves tend also to be under twenty-five and raised on MTV and the same books and courses. “No wonder so much garbage gets made, recycled, remade!” Elias complained.

Producer/director Gilbert Cates, presently Dean of the School of Drama, Film, and Television at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), made much the same observation, adding an often-heard complaint among those who care: “Too many of our students have only studied other films and television. They know NOTHING about life and real characters, therefore what they write winds up sounding like the TV shows and films they’ve seen” (1991). He concluded that at UCLA, “What we need really are fewer students and especially students who have lived more fully and read more widely.”