third edition

voice & vision

a creative approach to narrative filmmaking

Mick Hurbis-Cherrier

A **Focal Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE

Voice & Vision

Develop your creative voice while acquiring the practical skills and confidence to use it with this new and fully updated edition of Mick Hurbis-Cherrier's filmmaking bible, *Voice & Vision*. Written for independent filmmakers and film students who want a solid grounding in the tools, techniques, and processes of narrative film, this comprehensive manual covers all of the essentials while keeping artistic vision front and center. Hurbis-Cherrier walks the reader through every step of the process—from the transformation of an idea into a cinematic story, to the intricacies of promotion and distribution—and every detail in between.

Features of this book include:

- Comprehensive technical information on video production and postproduction tools, allowing filmmakers to express themselves with any camera, in any format, and on any budget
- An emphasis on the collaborative filmmaking process, including the responsibilities and creative contributions of every principal member of the crew and cast
- A focus on learning to work successfully with available resources (time, equipment, budget, personnel, etc.) in order to turn limitations into opportunities
- Updated digital filmmaking workflow breakdowns for Rec. 709 HD, Log Format, and D-Cinema productions
- Substantial coverage of the sound tools and techniques used in film production and the creative impact of postproduction sound design
- An extensive discussion of digital cinematography fundamentals, including essential lighting and exposure control tools, common gamma profiles, the use of LUTs, and the role of color grading
- Abundant examples referencing contemporary and classic films from around the world
- Indispensable information on production safety, team etiquette, and set procedures.

This third edition also features a robust companion website that includes eight award-winning example short films; interactive and high-resolution figures; downloadable raw footage; production forms and logs for preproduction, production, and postproduction; video examples that illustrate key concepts found within the book, and more.

Whether you are using it in the classroom or are looking for a comprehensive reference to learn everything you need to know about the filmmaking process, *Voice & Vision* delivers all of the details in an accessible and reader-friendly format.

Mick Hurbis-Cherrier has been teaching all levels of film production at Hunter College in New York City for well over a decade. He works professionally in both film and video and has performed a wide range of duties, including producing, writing, directing, cinematography, and editing. His films have been shown around the country and have garnered prizes at a number of festivals. He is also the co-author of *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics* (2013), now in its fifth edition.

Voice & Vision

A Creative Approach to Narrative Filmmaking

Third Edition

MICK HURBIS-CHERRIER

Illustrated by Gustavo Mercado

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This book is dedicated to Frank Beaver, Michelle Citron, and Dana Hodgdon—exceptional professors, mentors, and friends whose teachings have remained with me and whose voices echo throughout the pages of this book.

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www.routledge.com/cw/hurbis-cherrier


When you see this hand pointer icon in the pages of this book, it indicates that material related to that section is available online at www.routledge.com/cw/hurbis-cherrier

THE COMPANION WEBSITE TABS

All By Chapters

This section contains all of the supplementary web materials in the book, listed by chapter and in the order they occur in each chapter. This includes:

- Short film examples
- High-resolution and color figures
- Video figures
- Interactive figures
- Forms, logs, and tables for preproduction, production, and postproduction.

Short Films

This section contains links to stream the example short films discussed in the book. The films are:

- *The Black Hole*. Directed by The Diamond Dogs Phil & Olly (3 min.)
- *Plastic Bag*. Directed by Ramin Bahrani (18 min.)
- *Waking Dreams*. Directed by John Daschbach (24 min.)
- *When I Was Young*. Directed by Huixia Lu (15 min.)
- *Vive le 14 Juillet*. Directed by Didier Rouget (4 min.)
- *Winner Take Steve*. Directed by Jared Hess (2 min.)
- *This is It*. Directed by Alexander Engel (3 min.)
- *The Wake*. Directed by Gemma Lee (7 min.)
- *Before the Making of Sleep Dealer*. Directed by Alex Rivera (12 min.)
- *Kiarra's Escape* (scene excerpt) (2 min.)
- *You Got It* (multiple scene excerpts).

Video and Interactive Figures

This section contains all of the figures and examples which are noted in the book as videos or interactive flash figures.

Forms, Logs, Tables

This section contains downloadable forms, logs, and tables for preproduction, production, and postproduction. These forms include:

- Storyboard forms
- Location scouting report
- Budget forms
- Production call sheet
- Script breakdown sheet
- Camera and sound reports
- Depth of field tables for the 16mm format
- Film can labels for exposed film
- Sound cue spotting sheet.

The Celluloid System

This section contains all of the chapters and sections dealing with the celluloid filmmaking process from the second edition of this book (i.e., film cameras, film stocks, film-to-tape transfers, and film workflow in general). You may download all celluloid film related chapters as .pdfs if you wish.

Web Resources Links

This section contains links to useful websites related to various aspects of filmmaking.

Raw Footage Downloads

This section includes download links for raw video footage to be used for editing exercises.

Misc. and New

This section includes miscellaneous materials from throughout the book and new material added to the website after publication. This includes:

- Sample location contract and talent release
- The CSATF and Ontario production safety guideline publications
- Screenplay formatting specifications
- Instructions for calibrating monitors to color bars
- New materials added to the website after publication date.

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Introduction: Third Edition, 2018

As I was preparing the third edition of *Voice & Vision*, I carefully read over my two previous introductions. The first edition intro, written in 2007, essentially asserts that filmmaking is more than just having a good story—it argues that one must gain a degree of familiarity, if not mastery, over the tools and technology of the medium in order to become truly expressive and fluent. Too many times beginners launch into a film project without really understanding how a lens, or light, or an edit, or a sound effect can contribute to telling a compelling story on the screen.

The introduction to the second edition, however, seemed a reversal of this concern. Only a few years after publishing the first edition, digital technologies exploded and became more powerful and available, and I noticed a trend with emerging filmmakers; they were becoming so enamored with the technology that the lion's share of their attention went into securing 4K cameras, strategizing workflows, and designing cool green screen CGI effects, while far too little attention was being paid to the foundational storytelling aspects like writing a solid script, rehearsing actors, or creating expressive lighting and compositions. I had seen more than a few novice filmmakers hire a cinematographer for no other reason than they happened to have an Arri Alexa camera.

Are these two exhortations incompatible? Are they contradictory? Not at all, and this represents the steep learning curve for all new filmmakers; you've got to do it all. You have to know your technology and tools, *and* you must maintain your focus on creative storytelling, expressive image making, and convincing performance.

So how does a beginner absorb all of this—and fast? Practice, lots and lots of practice. It's a good thing that exceptional filmmaking tools are neither expensive nor difficult to acquire, and this makes extensive practice doable. If you are just starting out in your career as a filmmaker, don't get bogged down in complex technologies and expensive workflows. Stay lean. Work simply. Produce much. You can make fantastic films with little more than a good camera, an off the shelf editing system, and a small cast and crew of eager creative people—and of course a great script. Producing multiple short films, quickly, will teach you more about the real world of filmmaking than a film production class, or online forums, or YouTube tutorials, or even a book on filmmaking … oh, wait! Of course, if you have all four resources working in coordination, then every short film you make as a beginner will represent a veritable crash course.

So, don't immediately jump into features or 30-minute films. These can take a very long time to simply get off the ground. You should be producing, producing, producing. Some of your movies will be good, others may be not so good—doesn't matter. Making multiple short films with a simple workflow will allow you to develop your core storytelling techniques like writing a solid screenplay, visual storytelling, working with actors, controlling rhythm and tone, and harnessing the storytelling power of editing and sound design. And while none of these things requires a big budget, complex workflows, grip trucks, or a 4K DCP, you will nonetheless be gaining a degree of mastery over the tools of cinematic storytelling. Making many short films quickly will also give you familiarity and confidence with the filmmaking stages, set-protocol and most importantly, working collaboratively. Then, as you begin to add more advanced technologies and workflows, and larger crews and budgets, you'll still remain in control of the filmmaking process, rather than having the process control you. You will be able to tell the difference between a cinematographer who thinks creatively about image making from one who has a lot of awesome gear, but no eye

for image making or story sensitivity (and there are a lot of those). You'll gain a clear-eyed perspective for the relative value between a well written screenplay and a fine actor versus the latest 8K camera and a D-Cinema workflow. In other words, you will discover who you are as a filmmaker and you will be equipped to do good work over the long haul, in whatever production situation you find yourself in, no matter how technologies and workflows change in the future.

This little pep talk does not simply apply to directors; it goes for anyone seeking to work in one of the creative filmmaking roles. A budding cinematographer is better off making five short films in one year with a DSLR and a basic lighting package, rather than spending that year hunting down an Arri Amira, attending training workshops to learn how to use it, researching a technical workflow that includes transcoding proxies and 3D LUTs for it, finding a reliable DIT, and shooting only one project. Shooting many projects will help you understand how to become an expressive shooter with any camera, rather than being just a gearhead, and you will learn about collaboration and how to recognize good directing and good screenwriting. The same goes for editors, and art directors, and sound designers, and special effects designers, and so on. So get out there and make films, lots of them, take risks, experiment, try different approaches—find your voice.

I have included trimmed down versions of the previous introductions here in the third edition because while the technology of filmmaking may have changed dramatically since 2007 (!), the basic principles behind learning and practicing the craft have not. These introductions are still relevant and instructive, and will give you a good sense for the philosophical and pedagogical underpinnings of this book. Please do give them a read.

INTRODUCTION: SECOND EDITION, 2012

Early in the process of writing the second edition, I happened to run into a former student who was preparing to go into production on his first feature film. When he elaborated on the project, the very first thing he told me, quite excitedly, was that he was shooting on a RED ONE camera at 24p and 4K resolution and that the latest version of Final Cut Pro supported the REDCODE RAW codec without transcoding, and so on and so on. It took some time for the conversation to get around to the actual story and ideas in the film.

This is not an unusual conversation these days. I have seen countless students labor so mightily over the mysteries of production formats, transcoding, compression ratios, workflows, container formats, and codecs, that the creative dimension (the hard work of crafting a compelling story with convincing characters and expressive images) often takes a backseat. But they're not entirely to blame for this tendency. The technology of filmmaking and film distribution has accelerated rapidly, oftentimes outpacing the end user's ability to fully absorb the new paradigms. American video standards are now completely digital and analog NTSC is a quaint antique. High Definition video has come down in price and saturated all market levels to the point where HD formats are the new standard. Anything resembling tape stock, whether in sound recording or video recording, is totally archaic; sound and picture production is file based and solid state. Elite film camera manufacturers like Aaton, Arriflex, and Panavision have fully entered the digital cinema arena and left celluloid behind. Additionally, the web, which has become an essential tool for promotion, fund raising, and distribution, requires yet another set of technical skills to successfully harness. And if the past five years has shown us anything, it's that we can expect the same rate of technological transformation in the *next* five years—perhaps even greater. So it's understandable why a young filmmaker would reel off the technical dimensions of his project before the story; getting a handle on all of it does constitute an accomplishment of sorts. But this is exactly why we must be extra vigilant not to let the tail wag the dog. Filmmakers must dig deep into the core of their creativity to find their true artistic voices, even while they are digging deep into product spec sheets, user forums, and software manuals. And this is very possible.

I believe that this avalanche of technology is actually having an impact in two ways. Some things are getting trickier, while other things are getting easier. Yes, the constant changes to workflows, shooting formats, frame rates, scanning options, sensor types, and codecs can be a veritable technological tar pit. At the same time, however, gorgeous, high-resolution images of broadcast or theatrical quality, which allow for precise creative control over lighting and exposures, are now within easy reach for even a novice with very little money. In the past, it was rare for a student to shoot a 35mm film, even a short one; now I have many advanced students shooting on the same camera rigs used by commercial directors like Soderbergh or Fincher, and many more recent graduates are able to embark on feature films knowing that even midlevel camcorders and off-the-shelf editing software will yield professional results. Perhaps all this easy and relatively inexpensive access to very high production values, along with this state of constant technological flux, might just make the technology *less* precious and encourage filmmakers to place their best energies into what will truly distinguish them as visual storytellers—the script, the acting, the images, and the ideas behind all of it.

So, yes, the technical information in this book *is* important—these are our tools, this is how we express ourselves in this technological medium after all—and it is my sincerest desire that this book give you the fundamental technical information you need to work successfully as a filmmaker. I hope that the technical discussion in these pages empowers you to make films, to make them look the way you want them to look, and to avoid costly technical detours and errors. But I also hope that this book inspires you artistically and encourages you to never lose sight of the fact that filmmaking is a creative endeavor. We tell stories to move people, to make them cry, laugh, shriek, sit on the edge of their seat, hold their lover a little harder, think about their actions, understand other people better, feel warmth, joy, fear, or outrage. We do not tell stories to prove to the world that we know how to use a RED camera shooting 24p at 4K resolution.

> *The point is that it really doesn't matter what the equipment is. It really matters who the artist is, and what their attitude is.*
>
> Mike Figgis (From *Digital Filmmaking*, 2007)

INTRODUCTION: FIRST EDITION, 2007

Where does one begin a journey into the world of filmmaking? Film is creative and it is technical. It's a form of personal expression and a universal language. It requires careful logistical planning and inspired spontaneity. It is the product of a single vision and collaborative energy. Film is also the quintessential hybrid art form, finding its expressive power though the unique amalgam of writing, performance, design, photography, music, and editing. And all of it matters. Every choice you make, from the largest creative decisions to the smallest practical solutions, has a profound impact on what appears on the screen and how it moves an audience emotionally.

The central principle behind *Voice & Vision* is the notion that all of the conceptual, technical, and logistical activity on a film project should serve the filmmaker's creative vision. Making a film begins with someone wanting to tell a story, wanting to bring an idea to the screen for the world to see. The next step then involves gathering together the people, equipment, and resources to produce the movie. However, it's quite common these days to hear people who don't want to bother themselves with the technical or conceptual fundamentals of filmmaking say that "it's not about tech, it's not about rules, it's all about the story." That's a little too facile. The fact is, it's not enough to just have a story, no matter how good it is; you have to be able to tell that story well. It's not simply "all about story," it's all about storytelling, and in this medium storytelling involves actors, a camera, lights, sound, and editing. To develop your ability to tell a story on film necessarily means understanding the basic visual vocabulary of cinema, the process of production, as well as the function and expressive potential of the tools; like a camera, a light meter, and editing software. In a recent filmmaker's master class, the great director Abbas Kiarostami stressed

the point that a mediocre idea brilliantly told is preferable to a brilliant idea poorly told. Film is a complex art form, and in order to make the right decisions and express oneself successfully you must be clear about what your ideas are and what you want to say; and you must gain control of the film language, tools, and production process in order to say just that. As James Broughton, one of cinema's great poets, once wrote:

> *Every film is a voyage into the unknown. . . . It is unwise to embark on the high seas without knowing a few of the laws of navigation. To have a shipwreck before you have cleared the port is both messy and embarrassing.*
>
> (From *Making Light of It*, 1992)

Voice & Vision elaborates on all of the essential information and skills necessary to ensure that the student filmmaker will acquire the technical, logistical, and conceptual authority needed to "speak in film" with cinematic eloquence and fluency. Think of the book like a map—it may not predict every wondrous sight or challenge you'll encounter on your voyage, but it'll get you sailing into open waters.

Obviously, it is not possible for one book on filmmaking to be a completely comprehensive resource on such a vast and evolving subject. In fact, all of the film books on the bookstore shelves put together don't even manage to say all there is to say—and thank goodness for that. *Voice & Vision* is written for the introductory and intermediate film student or independent filmmaker. It aims to provide a solid foundation in narrative filmmaking, from idea to distribution, including essential technical information on production tools, a thorough overview of the filmmaking process, and, of course, a discussion of the conceptual and aesthetic dimensions of telling a motion picture story.

FILM IS A COLLABORATIVE ART FORM

The act of making a film, on any scale, is an endeavor that requires enormous effort, concentration, and a broad range of knowledge. It also requires the execution of several tasks simultaneously. For this reason, narrative filmmaking is always a collaborative art form, requiring the collective energy and expertise of a team. A filmmaking team can be anywhere from two to two dozen (or more), but the basic dynamic is the same—a film becomes better when everyone on the team is allowed to make creative contributions and when everyone takes serious responsibility for their practical and technical duties. You will see these ideas of team creativity and responsibility emphasized throughout *Voice & Vision*. This book is also written with the understanding that not every film student will become, or even wants to become, a director. Knowing that students can follow so many creative and fulfilling paths in film (cinematography, sound design, editing, art direction, etc.), I have provided ample technical information, creative context, and discussions of aesthetics to thoroughly engage those many students who are enthusiastic about areas other than directing. Whether they are writing, directing, shooting, or editing, the ultimate goal of *Voice & Vision* is to guide each student of film to develop their own creative voice while acquiring the practical skills and confidence to use it.

TEACHING AND LEARNING FILMMAKING

> *Film writing and directing cannot be taught, only learned, and each man or woman has to learn it through his or her own system of self-education.*
>
> Alexander Mackendrick (From *On Filmmaking*, 2004)

The great film director Alexander Mackendrick (*The Ladykillers*, *Sweet Smell of Success*) raises a pertinent issue when he states in his book, *On Filmmaking*, that you cannot teach film, but you can learn it. The interesting twist, however, is that Mr. Mackendrick was also a legendary film teacher at the California Institute of the Arts for 25 years, so he must have believed that something about film could be taught, or at least conveyed, and that

a teacher plays some role in learning about filmmaking. I believe that you can, in fact, teach a great deal about filmmaking. One can teach the essentials of technique, cinematic language, the technology, and the expressive capabilities of the instruments of the art form. One can teach an understanding of how the production process itself supports the creation of a movie. One can teach a student a method for recognizing and appreciating exceptional examples of filmmaking from the history of movies. All of this can bring the serious student right to the threshold. The rest of what is necessary, albeit the core of being an artist in any medium, must be learned through example and experience, and here a teacher, and a book, can serve as a guide. This core consists of imagination, visual intuition, initiative, an aesthetic sense, and personal style. These qualities can't be taught, but they can certainly be nurtured and developed.

So where do we go to learn those things that cannot be taught? The first thing an aspiring filmmaker must do is watch films, especially the films of the masters, old and new. Writers read great writers, painters look at paintings and, in fact, often copy the works of masters when developing their craft. It is imperative that young filmmakers look carefully at films for what they express and how the filmmaker actually achieves that particular mood or emotion, or that specific narrative point, or how they develop a theme, or move you to laugh, or cry, or vote, through images, actions, and sound. Movies themselves are our most useful textbooks. Think about it: not one cinematic storytelling technique in the history of film has become extinct. Every filmmaking technique that has been developed remains part of the lexicon of the art form and it's all there for you to learn from, rework, customize, and apply to your own story. Knowing this, I have included throughout the text numerous illustrations from movies. The "In Practice" feature provides brief analyses of scenes or techniques from films that illustrate how a specific technology, process, or technique is used to support a conceptual, narrative, or aesthetic impulse—in essence, the creative application of a principle or a technology. This encourages the student to look at films analytically and to use the wealth of material available for rent as a research tool. You will notice that I reference films from all eras and from all over the world and at all budget levels. This book celebrates the vast diversity of voices, approaches, perspectives, and innovations in cinema throughout its history. A smart film student will understand that great movies and creative innovations are as likely to come from Taiwan, Denmark, Brazil, and Iran as Los Angeles. Film is truly a global art form, and every continent continues to make vital contributions.

The second way we can learn about filmmaking is to listen to the tales from the trenches of production. Everyone has on-set experience stories: challenges that they faced, puzzles that they solved, issues with which they struggled, ideas that they held on to and those that they had to let go, accounts of their crafty accomplishments, shrewd fixes, and innovative workarounds. It's important to listen to these stories. We learn from the experiences, ideas, ingenuity, solutions, knowledge, advice, strategies, difficulties, disappointments, and successes of other filmmakers, from students struggling with their very first film to seasoned pros struggling with their 30th movie—there are lessons in all of it. Pick up any trade magazine, like *American Cinematographer*, or go to a website like www.filmsound.org, or pick up a book like Laurent Tirard's *Moviemakers' Master Class* or Walter Murch's *In the Blink of an Eye*, and what you'll find are people with experience in cinematography, sound design, directing, editing, or any other creative aspect of filmmaking sharing what they've accomplished and what they've learned along the way. You can tuck all of these illuminating stories, all of this first-hand information, into your tool kit and bring it with you to your next project. Then, after you've spent even one day on a film set, you'll have your own stories to share. It's all about storytelling after all.

You will find real-world stories sprinkled throughout the book and also in the "In Practice" boxes, which often contain brief anecdotes detailing common and characteristic production challenges from professional film shoots as well as student productions. Many of these on-set stories come directly from the experiences of my students during my 13 [now 24] years of teaching introductory and intermediate production courses. Some of

them come from filmmakers ranging in experience from first-time feature film directors to legendary masters of cinema.

In the end, however, the best way to learn about filmmaking is simply to make films. Here is some advice from someone who's made a few himself:

> *The advice I would give today to anyone who wants to become a director is quite simple: make a film. In the sixties, it wasn't so easy because there wasn't even super 8. If you wanted to shoot anything, you had to rent a 16-millimeter camera, and often it would be silent. But today, nothing is as easy as buying or borrowing a small video camera. You have a picture, you have sound, and you can screen your film on any TV set. So when an aspiring director comes to me for advice, my answer is always the same: "Take a camera, shoot something, and show it to someone. Anyone."*
>
> Jean-Luc Godard (From *Moviemakers' Master Class*, by L. Tirard, 2002)

So there you have it. What are you waiting for? It's time to make movies!

What's New in the Third Edition

CELLULOID FILM INFORMATION IS RELOCATED TO THE WEBSITE

The most obvious change from previous editions of *Voice & Vision* is the removal of the chapters and sections dealing with celluloid filmmaking from the text (i.e., film cameras, film stocks, film-to-tape transfers, and film workflow in general). This material, however, is not gone; I have simply relocated it to the *Voice & Vision* companion website under the tab "The Celluloid System." You may download all celluloid film related chapters from the second edition if you wish.

CHANGES IN *VOICE & VISION* THIRD EDITION

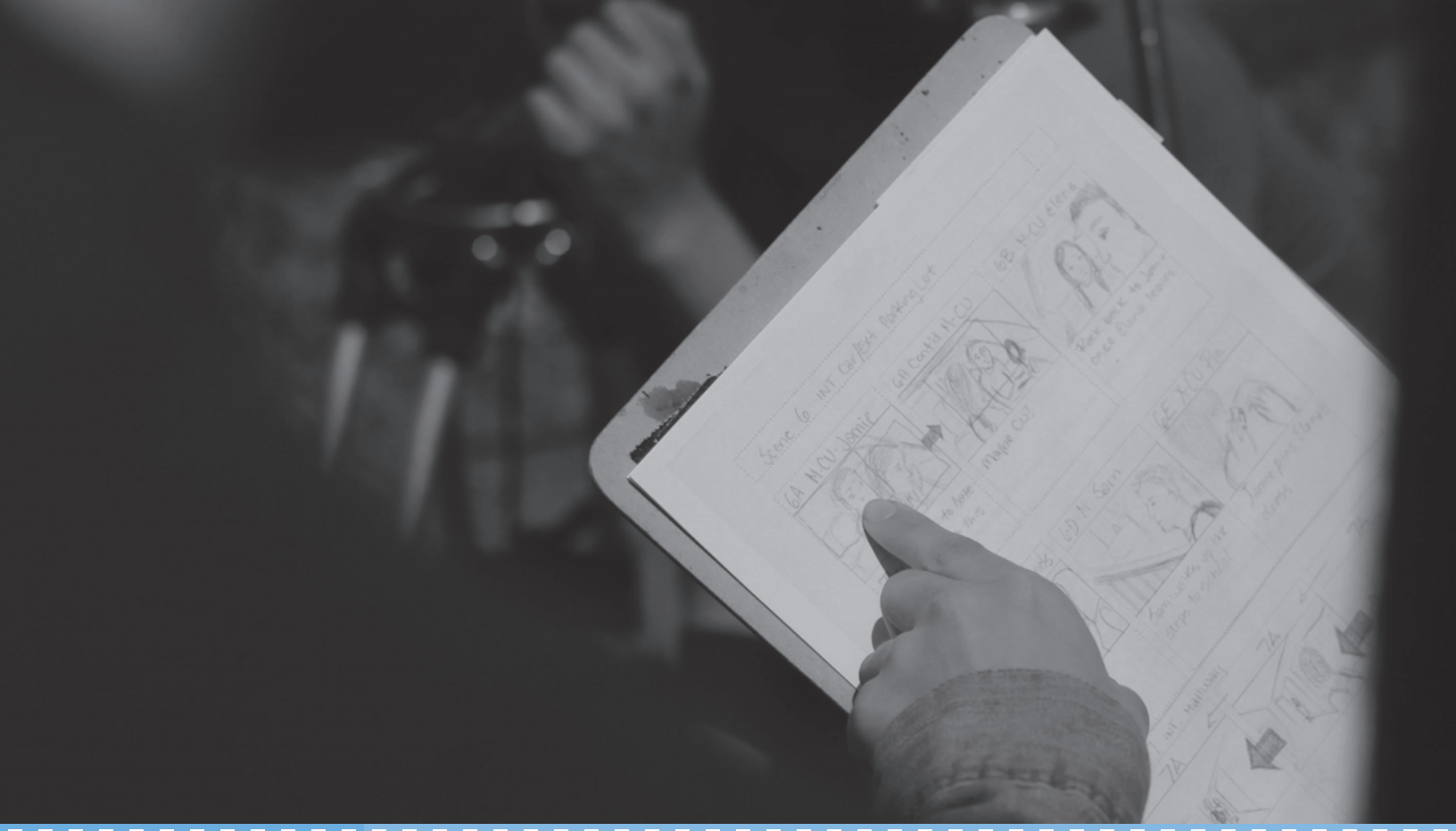
For this new edition, every single chapter has been refreshed and updated to a greater or lesser extent. Clearly, the small changes are far too numerous to list, but some of the chapters dealing with the technical aspects of digital shooting and postproduction have been overhauled, and significant updates have also been made to many of the sections on production procedures. Following is a list of some of the major changes you will find in the third edition of *Voice & Vision*:

- **New Example Films**: I am very excited to include three excellent new short example films: Gemma Lee's *The Wake*, Alexander Engel's *This is It*, and Jared Hess' *Winner Take Steve*. These films are excellent models of tight, effective, and innovative filmmaking on slight budgets. Along with the previous collection of short films, these new shorts are discussed as examples throughout the text and are available on the *Voice & Vision* companion website for streaming.
- **Expanded and Updated Digital Workflow Information**: I have greatly expanded and updated the information on the digital filmmaking workflow. This includes updates on the ever evolving ATSC digital standards, shooting formats, image sensor technology, camera settings and options, and standard record media. I have also augmented the section on the digital video cameras which now lists many more available varieties and their unique features. The new discussion of workflow also takes into greater account the increasing integration of processes that were once thought of as distinctly preproduction, production, or postproduction tasks. Much of the filmmaking process these days happens simultaneously, for example, color grading is no longer strictly a postproduction process, but often "looks" are designed in preproduction, during camera tests.
- **Picture Profiles and Log Format**: Directly related to the digital workflow, I have also included information on working with various picture profiles (gamma settings), including detailed information (across several chapters) on the Log gamma workflow and the use of LUTs in the field and in postproduction.
- **Exposure Control for Video**: Given the ever increasing sensitivity and latitude of modern imaging sensors, I have also greatly expanded the discussion of exposure control for video. Divided between a "basics of exposure" section and later an "advanced exposure control" section, the specific topics include the proper use of in-camera meters, zebras, handheld light meters, external field monitors, and waveform monitors (for both standard Rec. 709 and Log shooting). All in all, lighting and exposure control comprise three full chapters (Chapters 12, 13, and 14) with further discussion of image refinement emerging in the section on color grading as well.
- **New Editing and Color Tools**: In general, the chapters on picture and sound editing and project finishing were updated to reflect the recent developments in the non-linear editing software landscape (i.e., the tremendous expansion of Avid Media Composer and Premiere Pro into the academic market). Along with this platform shift came an

increased sophistication of color tools bundled with software packages which compelled me to also expand the section on color correction and color grading.

- **Data Wrangling, the DIT, and Gear Prep**: Now that this text is given over entirely to the digital workflow, I found it essential that I augment my discussion of data management on the set and include information on the role of the Digital Imaging Technician—a position that has grown in importance so much that the DIT is often considered a D.P.'s principle creative collaborator (along with the 1st A.C.). In addition I have updated the production forms available online, improved my section on the role of the script supervisor, and provided detailed checklists for prepping a digital camera and sound recorder.
- **Independent Film Distribution**: Perhaps one of the most radical transformations to occur since the last edition has been the rapid changes occurring in the world of independent film distribution. At this moment, film distribution is the new "wild west," a territory that favors the intrepid pioneer, where the rules are being written and broken regularly. Who knows when the dust will settle, or if it will settle. In an attempt to keep up with developments in contemporary film distribution strategies, paths, and opportunities, I have expanded this section and provided many new examples.

Obviously, it's impossible for a published book to remain absolutely current with the technological state of the art for any field of digital production. As before, I've concentrated on the broader concepts and more enduring information concerning what the purpose of a thing is, or how something works, or why we follow a certain procedure, rather than fall down the rabbit hole of trying to catalog every button on every camera and every menu option on every NLE workspace. Not only would this be futile, but that information is readily available in product manuals and online tutorials. I've carefully designed each section involving technology around the fundamental knowledge underpinning the hard specs, and *that* information should prove to be somewhat future proof. Also, consistent with my personal teaching philosophy, I've assiduously maintained my focus on the creative application, aesthetic impact, and expressive possibilities embedded in the digital technologies used in film production—and they are substantial.



PART I DEVELOPING YOUR FILM ON PAPER

CHAPTER 1

From Idea to Cinematic Story

Our first job is to look,
Our second job is to think of a film that can be made.

Abbas Kiarostami

There's no doubt about it. Filmmaking is exciting stuff. Working on a set, surrounded by the energy of a great production crew, collaborating with actors, setting up lights, lining up shots, calling out "Roll camera! Action!" Seeing a film project come to life can be an exhilarating experience. In fact, most aspiring filmmakers simply can't wait to get their hands on a camera and start shooting. Once they get an idea, they're ready to go! But wait. What are you shooting? What is your idea? Are your characters interesting? Does the idea have a shape? Just what do you want to say and how will you say it? What does all this activity on the screen add up to? What about the practical side of making this film? Are the subject and visual approach appropriate for your resources? Can you get it done?

Whether your project is a two-minute chase scene with no dialogue or a complex psychological drama, the first step in any narrative film production is coming up with an idea that is stimulating, engaging, and ripe with visual possibilities. The idea is the DNA of the entire filmmaking process—it informs every word written into the script, every shot you take, and every choice you make along the way. The better your basic idea is, the better your film will be. But an idea is only the first lightning bolt of inspiration. All ideas have to be developed—fashioned into stories that can be told through the medium of film. This means turning an idea into a story that can be captured and conveyed by that camera you're dying to get your hands on.

FINDING AN IDEA

At the beginning of any film, there is an idea. It may come at any time, from any source. It may come from watching people in the street or from thinking alone in your office. . . . What you need is to find that original idea, that spark. And once you have that, it's like fishing: you use that idea as bait, and it attracts everything else. But as a director your main priority is to remain faithful to that original idea.

David Lynch (From *Moviemakers' Master Class*, by L. Tirard, 2002)

Where do we find ideas? Where does inspiration come from? As Lynch reminds us, ideas can come to us anywhere and at anytime: an act of kindness we witness on the street, an individual we watch on the bus, a piece of music that moves us, a personal experience or a memory we can't let go, or even an experience a friend relates to us. John Daschbach's *Waking Dreams*, as the title suggests, came from a particularly vivid dream; Gemma Lee's *The Wake* was based on the true story of producer/actor Charlie Clausen's own father's death and the quirky family friend who helped him through the tough period; and the details for Alexander Engel's *This is It* came from his personal experiences with bad roommates.[1] Ramin Bahrani's 2007 feature film *Chop Shop* was inspired by an evocative location that struck him as a perfect setting for a dramatic story (see page 137). I once

[1] All three of these short films are available for viewing on the *Voice & Vision* companion website.

Figure 1-1 Director Abbas Kiarostami.

attended a reading by the fiction writer Raymond Carver, and someone in the audience asked him if he had any secrets to becoming a writer. He said simply, "You have to be a sponge, you have to constantly absorb the world you live in." If you keep your eyes and ears open, you will discover that material is all around you. Everyday life provides fertile ground for story ideas, visual ideas, and character ideas. Stay alert and connect to the world around you, then you'll be able to connect with your audience.

In an interview with Houshang Golmakani (done for the 1996 Locarno International Film Festival), the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami (**Figure 1-1**), speaking about inspiration, shared the following thoughts:

> *Gabriel Garcia Márquez once said, "I don't choose a subject; it's the subject that chooses me." The same goes for me. The subject depends on whatever happens to be keeping me awake at night. . . . I have dozens of stories stored away in my memory. There's a story happening in front of me every day, but I don't have the time to make a film out of it. In the course of time, certain stories start taking on importance; one of them will end up becoming the subject of a film.*

Precisely what strikes us as a good idea, one that could develop into a great movie, is a highly individualistic thing. In fact, where you get your ideas and what strikes you as a good idea for a movie, is *the* thing that makes your films your films and not someone else's, which is why it is best that ideas come from your own observations and responses to the world around you. The only way that a movie will contain your individual voice is if your core idea comes from you, from your imagination, interests, and perspective. Only Martin Scorsese can make Scorsese films. You may love them, but to try and duplicate them, because they are successful or because you think Mafia violence is the *ne plus ultra* of drama, is to avoid the most important work a filmmaker can do, and that is to find out what your unique cinematic voice and contribution might be. Finding your own voice is not easy work, but it's essential, and that process begins with your very first film.

Here is an example from the screenwriter and director Peter Hedges, who is discussing where he got the idea for his 2003 feature film *Pieces of April*:

> *In the late 1980s . . . I heard about a group of young people who were celebrating their first Thanksgiving in New York City. They went to cook the meal, but the oven didn't work, so they knocked on doors until they found someone with an oven they could use. I remember thinking that this could be a way to have all sorts of people cross paths who normally wouldn't.*
>
> (From *Pieces of April: The Shooting Script*, by P. Hedges, 2003)

Hedges jotted the idea down, made a few notes, and then forgot about it. This idea is like many lightning bolts of inspiration—it's interesting and compelling, but not yet fully formed. Hedges would not find the story in the idea until ten years later.

FROM AN IDEA TO A STORY

One's initial idea—that first spark of inspiration—more often than not is vague. Sometimes it's no more than an observation or a feeling. In the case of Peter Hedges, the idea was a simple situation that was not much more than fertile ground for interesting interactions,

but it wasn't a story yet. The most basic elements of film are images and sound, those things that we can capture with a camera and a microphone. Think about it: when you are in a theater watching a movie, everything you understand about a character, the story, the mood, and the themes of the film, is delivered exclusively through sound and images. We cannot point our camera and microphone at ideas, desires, intentions, or feelings, but we can record characters who react, make decisions, and take action as they struggle and strive to achieve something It's through their actions that we understand who these characters are, how they are feeling, what they are after, and what it all means. This is the fundamental principle behind **dramatization**, transforming what is vague and internal into a series of viewable and audible behaviors, actions, and events (also see page 36).

in practice

THE *VOICE & VISION* ONLINE SHORT FILM EXAMPLES

The following section refers extensively to the eight short films streaming on the *Voice & Vision* companion website (**Figure 1-2**). These films illustrate many of the central storytelling considerations for fictional narrative films (especially in relation to the short form). Also, these eight shorts were selected because they represent a broad range of characters, themes, and approaches to cinematic storytelling and technique. Go to the book's companion website to screen these films.

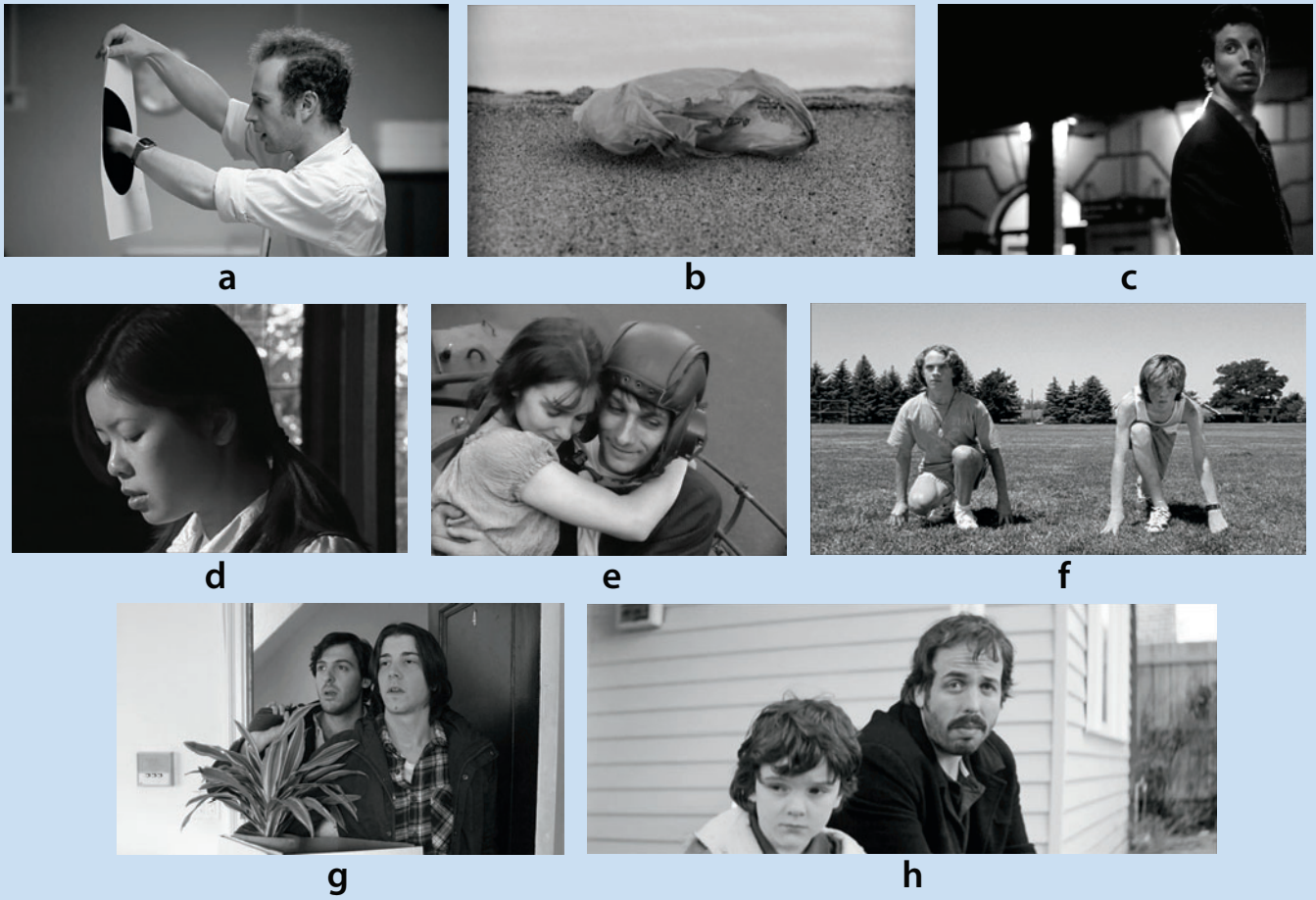


Figure 1-2 The *Voice & Vision* online short film examples streaming on the companion website (a) *The Black Hole* (Phil and Olly, 2009), (b) *Plastic Bag* (Bahrani, 2009), (c) *Waking Dreams* (Daschbach, 2004), (d) *When I Was Young* (Lu, 2004), (e) *Vive le 14 Juillet* (Rouget, 2004), (f) *Winner Take Steve* (Hess, 2004) (g) *This is It* (Engel, 2013) and (h) *The Wake* (Lee, 2009).

NARRATIVE BASICS I: ESSENTIAL STORY ELEMENTS

The next step in the process is to turn your initial inspiration into a dramatic story. In making this transition, it is important to understand the essential characteristics of a dramatic story. Most fictional narrative films have five basic and common elements:

1. A central character
2. A dramatic situation and central question
3. Conflict and stakes
4. Action and development (story dynamism)
5. Resolution and meaning

The Central Character

Drama is based on things that happen to characters, things characters do, and ways characters change. Whatever the story is, it all starts with character. It doesn't matter if your film is about a single business executive (*Waking Dreams*), a recent Chinese immigrant (*When I Was Young*), a sweet, mild mannered guy (*Vive le 14 Juillet*), a bored office clerk (*The Black Hole*), a social misfit (*The Wake*) or even a plain brown plastic bag from the supermarket (*Plastic Bag*); the central character is the primary point of engagement for an audience—the element that encourages narrative involvement. If you really want your film to connect with an audience, you must create a central character who is compelling—a person people want to watch.

One common way to do this is to create a central character a viewer can like or admire, someone who displays very human longings, needs, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and some noble qualities as well, like being fair, courageous, kind, or standing up for what is right; a figure with whom audiences can identify, empathize, or at least sympathize. This is called a **sympathetic character**. The main character in Ramin Bahrani's feature film *Chop Shop*, for example, is Alejandro, a 12-year-old boy, with no parents in sight, who is working hard to build an honest future for himself and his 16-year-old sister (**Figure 1-3** *left*). He works adult manual labor jobs, he's resourceful beyond his years, he saves money, and he has noble, selfless goals. We easily like this smart, industrious, street-tough but open-hearted kid. We sympathize when he's not able to completely comprehend the nuances of the very adult situation he is in, and we feel for him when he stumbles. We want him to succeed, so we cheer him on (see page 137). And take a look at Bahrani's short film *Plastic Bag*, which is on the *Voice & Vision* companion website, and see how the first-person voice-over imbues an inanimate object with painfully human traits (loyalty, loneliness, the need for purpose) so much so that we feel immense sympathy for the desperate plight of a piece of trash, a brown plastic bag (read page 10).

However, *the* critical factor in building a main character is audience engagement, not necessarily likability. You can certainly engage an audience with a character who is unkind, unpleasant, mean, despicable, or even repulsive, if that character offers a glimpse at

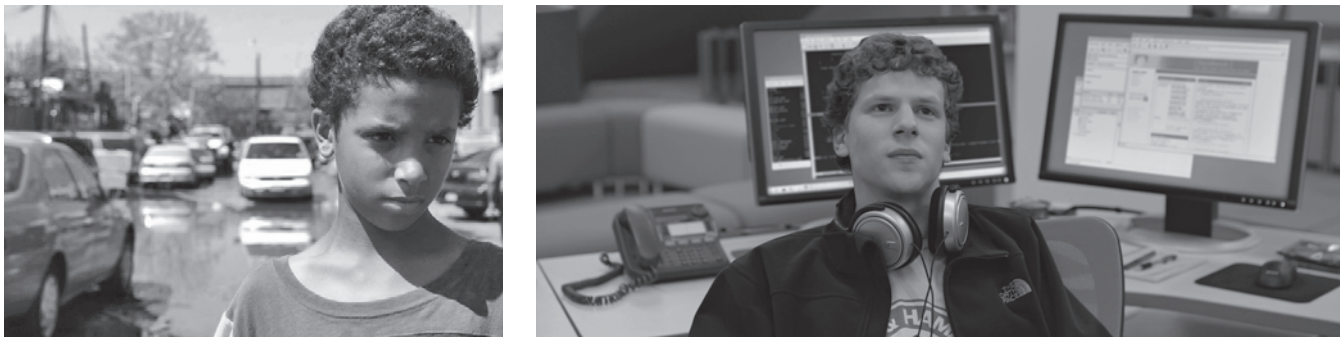


Figure 1-3 Engaging central characters can be conceived as valiant and likable, like Ale (Alejandro Polanco) in Bahrani's *Chop Shop* (2007, ***left***), or unsavory and vindictive like Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) in Fincher's *The Social Network* (2010, *right*). It's also common to combine noble and ignoble qualities in a single character, as long as they remain compelling figures.

something fascinating, intriguing, and engaging (even if unsavory) to watch. This type of character is sometimes called an **antipathetic** character—but you can just call them unlikable—and boy, oh boy, can they be fun to watch. Mark Zuckerberg from Fincher's *The Social Network* is not likable in any traditional sense (**Figure 1-3** *right*). In fact, he's kind of an immature, selfish, arrogant jerk with a superior attitude and a nasty ambition fueled by envy and spite. So why do we want to watch a story about this guy? Well, there is certainly something interesting about getting a behind-the-scenes glimpse at someone's speedy rise from an unpopular tech geek to CEO billionaire, especially if that achievement pushes the borders of ethics, scruples, and friendship. It's also fascinating to see a person with utterly no social skills become rich by creating a social network. Intellectually, Zuckerberg understands the zeroes and ones of a social network, but emotionally he cannot function in a social situation—a delicious central irony. But isn't there also something about this character that, despite his unsavory pettiness, we can understand on a human level? He's brilliant but he's awkward, terribly insecure and yearning to become someone people admire. He just doesn't know how to get there without being duplicitous and stomping on friends. We may not go so far as to feel *sympathy* for America's youngest billionaire, but we can, on some level, connect to him and be engaged in his story. Also, keep in mind that these two character approaches, sympathetic and antipathetic, are only the extreme ends of a sliding scale. Many characters, like most human beings, are created somewhere between these two poles, with a few qualities we can admire and some qualities that are troubling.

You may have noticed in these examples that I mention both who the central character is and what happens to them. How an audience feels about a character is integrally linked to that character's dramatic situation and what that character *does*. This is, after all, the way we come to conclusions about anyone we meet in our lives. We know who people are by seeing what they do. So we cannot really talk about character without talking about what the character does.

The Dramatic Situation: Conflict, Action, and the Central Question

A dramatic narrative film involves a **character** in a **dramatic situation** that has a clear effect on the character and provokes **action**. That situation is almost always initiated by the introduction of **conflict** in their lives or the need for the character to accomplish a task or gain something that involves negotiating **obstacles** and **conflict**. What emerges from the chemical reaction between a particular character in a particular dramatic situation is a specific **central dramatic question**. Very often the dramatic question revolves around a **goal** or **objective**: Will he get the girl? Will she get the job? Can she leave home without losing her father's love? Can he follow orders and remain true to his principles? However, especially in short films, a direct goal is not always necessary; we can develop dramatic questions around a mystery like: Why is he behaving so erratically? Why does she have so much power over him? Who is this guy, really? However you frame the dramatic question, it functions as the narrative core of the film and all other characters and events serve to develop that dilemma, mystery, or idea. We will explore in more detail the characteristics of goal-oriented and alternative dramatic questions starting on page 12.

The first step to developing a good dramatic story is to understand that the character's response to the situation of conflict—the *actions* they take, the *decisions* they make, their *behavior*, what they do or fail to do—reveals to the audience who they are and also moves the story forward. This is the engine at the heart of all drama; this is what it means to *dramatize a story*. The ultimate goal of drama is to create a story that essentially tells itself—allowing an audience to understand character, story, and thematic meaning purely by witnessing a character negotiate a situation of conflict. You should not need to concoct convenient devices—like an explanatory voice-over or expositional dialogue—to broadcast who your characters are, what's going on inside them, what they're thinking, what's going on, or indeed the final meaning of the film. The audience's understanding comes from what they witness—not what they are told.

Take a look at the short film *The Black Hole* by Phil and Olly, which you can find streaming on the *Voice & Vision* companion website. Working late one night, a bored office clerk receives a mysterious and magical black hole from the photocopy machine. He does not utter one word in the entire film, yet we always know what he's thinking, from his initial "WTF?" moment when he discovers the magical properties of the black hole, to the rapacious action of crawling into the safe to reach the *very last* stacks of cash. No one has to tell us what's going on because the story unfolds with the clerk's behavior and actions revealing everything the viewer needs to understand (see pages 40–41 for a more detailed look at the expressive use of action in *The Black Hole*).

Story Dynamism: Action, Change, and Development

In addition to actions and decisions revealing character, it's also important to understand that actions can (and should) cause changes to the story situation itself and therefore to the direction the story takes. In other words, by thoughtfully and strategically varying the nature of our main character's choices you can create a dynamic story.

Here again, *The Black Hole* provides a perfect example. This is a very simple and very short film, but the story never stops evolving and developing fresh territory: (1) A bored office clerk receives a mysterious black hole while doing photocopying chores. (2) He discovers the supernatural "nature" of the mysterious black hole by accidentally dropping his coffee cup through it. (3) Astounded, he tests this nature by pushing his hand through it; he now understands the "capability" of the black hole. (4) Next he decides to test this "capability" for personal gain and he uses it to successfully steal a candy bar. (5) Fully realizing the "power" of the black hole, he's ready to exploit its power and go for the cash—which of course (6) leads to the "power" backfiring on him and his ultimate downfall. Notice how each character decision creates a line of rising actions and elevated stakes. As you can see, in only two minutes this film moves through six (!) escalating dramatic beats.

The dynamism of *change* and *development* over time is essential to keep any story from feeling repetitive, one dimensional, and predictable. Change and development creates story momentum, narrative shape, and allows the story to reveal different facets of your character and even change the character by the end—as happens in *The Black Hole* where the main character's avarice emerges and gets the better of him. Character transformation can occur through a discovery, an accomplishment, an experience, an epiphany, an ordeal—whatever it is, the main character is not quite the same at the end of a film as they were at the beginning, or if the character remains relatively unchanged, then it is the viewer's understanding of that character that is not quite the same.

The Stakes

These concepts, "central dramatic question" and "conflict" sound big, but in the hands of a skilled storyteller, small or subtle conflicts can be just as compelling as large conflicts. Yes, of course, stories that revolve around life-or-death struggles, or James Bond style fate-of-the-world plots, are intensely engrossing, but if you are able to truly convey in specific terms not just the conflict, but the personal importance of the outcome for the central character (i.e. what's at stake), then practically any story can become captivating, even though the situation may be very small in the global scheme of things.

A perfect example of this is Jared Hess' ultra small-scale *Winner Take Steve* which you can also stream from the *Voice & Vision* companion website. The film is mostly just a foot race between two high school frosh named Steve: Steve Caulkin and Steve Dingle. But we're clear what the stakes are—what this race means to those boys—the winner gets to be called "Steve" while the loser will be referred to by his last name (probably for his entire time in high school). Granted, this isn't a life-or-death situation BUT who would want to be called "Dingle" for four years of high school? So, while the situation is comparatively small, the personal stakes are huge! And we know it. And those boys run that race as if their lives depend on it!

What this tells us is that it's not the magnitude or gravitas of the conflict that matters, but *the personal stakes* that are involved for our central character in this particular story. This is why it's important to be clear about what the character stands to lose, or win, or discover; or how the character might be changed.

Resolution and Meaning

In any film, all the narrative activity leads to a conclusion of some sort. This means that the dramatic situation you've established is resolved and the central dramatic question you've posed is answered, even if the viewer understands that life goes on for the character after the movie ends. This resolution can be positive or negative for your central character; you can have ironic endings, Pyrrhic victories, unexpected outcomes, humorous twists, epiphanies, or any sort of conclusion that satisfies the questions you've raised. In Hess' *Winner Take Steve*, the question "Who will win the name Steve?" is answered—Steve wins and poor Dingle loses.

Beyond simply ending your story, however, the nature of your resolution must be carefully considered. Not only do they emerge from and answer back to the dramatic situation, but the way you resolve your movie is a significant part of the ultimate meaning of your movie. To find the most dramatically satisfying and thematically appropriate resolution, you need to ask yourself what the point of all this narrative activity (character/conflict/action) was and what it all adds up to. This ultimate meaning can be as big as a universal theme or as small as a clever ironic point. Is your film an allegory with a broad moral lesson? Is it a mystery with a surprising dramatic twist? Is it a glimpse into a unique person's life that connects a viewer to a new perspective? Is it a comedy that will give viewers a great belly laugh?

In *The Black Hole*, the dramatic question is, "What will the clerk do with this magical ability?" In the end the major dramatic question is answered: he abuses the magical powers and dooms himself—he is defeated by his own greed and avarice. Coming in around two minutes, this film turns out to be a little morality tale. Like nearly every other allegorical story about a person given magical powers (or three wishes), the irony of the conclusion is that he is undone by the very magic that promised to make his life better. Knowing specifically what effect you want to have on an audience and what you want them to be left with will help you organize your material into a dramatically satisfying narrative shape and find the strongest conclusion to your story.

Story Essentials in Practice

Now that I've laid out the essential elements for fictional narrative films, let's turn our attention to some of the other short films from the *Voice & Vision* companion website and see how these elements of cinematic storytelling play out. These movies were chosen specifically because they represent a variety of approaches, styles, and even running times, yet they all contain, in some form, the five basic narrative elements:

- John Daschbach's short film *Waking Dreams* has a simple premise to express a complex idea. Office executive Mr. Saroyan (*central character*) is all set to go on a scuba diving vacation. But Becky, an eccentric office temp worker whom he doesn't know, tells him she had a dream in which he was attacked by sharks and killed. She's certain that this was a premonition and warns him that he's going to die if he goes in the water (*dramatic situation, conflict*). The *central dramatic question* is, does he or doesn't he believe her? Which, in practical terms also poses the question, will he or won't he go in the water? In order for this premise to work, Daschbach must plant small seeds of plausibility in her clairvoyant prediction, and he does so by conveying that she could not possibly have known he was going on a scuba diving vacation, and by showing her seemingly predict an incoming phone call. Daschbach only needs to establish a tiny bit of probability precisely because the *stakes* here are so high, life and death, so there is no margin for error. Although this film is built around dialogue scenes, dialogue is not used to directly relate the story or internal character struggles, rather, each scene essentially traces the actions taken by Mr. Saroyan—namely the various strategies he employs to uncover the falsity of her prediction (*narrative shape*) (see pages 40–41 for