7

The Scene Text

Format

One of the arguments frequently advanced against the screenplay as a literary form is that it is obliged to follow rigidly defined rules of format that reveal its function as an industrial blueprint. The problem with the blueprint metaphor has been addressed in Chapter 3, but it is undoubtedly the case that, to a far great extent than with the superficially comparable stage play, it is required to demonstrate the mechanisms by which it may be realised within its target medium in terms prescribed within the conventions of a more or less standard format. Some of its conventions are rather arbitrary (a screenplay usually begins with the words 'FADE IN', whether the writer actually envisages a fade or not), and much of the language is purely functional, as in the form of the slug line (see below). Margins, layout, and lineation are subject to established convention, which are all specified in any competent screenwriting manual. The purpose of this aspect of format is partly to enable individual members of the cast and crew (actors, location managers, lighting technicians, and so forth) rapidly to locate those places in the script that call for their individual input. Nevertheless, within the 'master-scene' format reproduced here, this is less important initially than ease of reading for the target reader of either the selling or the published script.

The present book follows Claudia Sternberg's separation of the screenplay into the 'scene text', considered in this chapter, and the 'dialogue text' in the next. Essentially, the scene text is everything bar the dialogue text, the latter of which includes not just the words spoken by the characters but also indications of whether the speech is voiceover (V.O.), offscreen (O.S.), or continued (CONT.) after interruption by either a

page break or an element in the scene text. Parenthetical direction concerning the delivery of the line is widely discouraged on the grounds that it is the job of the actor or director, but not the writer, to determine how it should be delivered. Screenplays vary widely in the degree to which they conform to this and other prescriptions of this kind; if such a direction is indicated, it will be centred below the speaker's name.

The scene heading, unattractively but generally termed the 'slug line', contains three elements: an indication of whether the scene is interior or exterior, the location, and time of day. This is frequently merely a statement of whether it is day or night, but for local reasons, a more specific indication of time will sometimes be given. The elements in the slug line contain information that assists location managers, lighting crew, camera operatives, and so on. The slug line also, of course, indicates scene divisions. Most screenplays and films consist of a large number of short scenes, and it is usually argued that in classical narrative films these scenes are linked together into coherent sequences of cause and effect. Just as in cinematic montage the meaning of the individual shot is only revealed in the succession of images, so the meaning of the individual scene is determined by its position in a sequence of scenes.

Although screenplays take this form for collaborative industrial reasons, the result is a form that incessantly and inescapably refers to its own construction: this is the most self-reflexive of textual genres. Not only does it continually identify itself as a fictional construct, as does the lineation of poetry, for example, it also constantly reminds the reader of the industrial process that is its *raison d'être*. Unlike poetry, then, the conventional communication between implied author and implied reader is broken, and the non-professional reader is forced to recognise that the implied reader appears to be someone other than himself or herself. Once this is recognised, however, and once the conventions of the format have become sufficiently familiar, there is no intrinsic reason why reading screenplays should be any more alienating an experience than reading any other kind of text. Moreover, many aspects of this format tend to be used quite flexibly by the most accomplished screenwriters; arguably, the better (or at least more successful or prestigious) writers have greater scope for experimenting with the form without jeopardising the commercial prospects of the script.

Modes

Aside from the dialogue, the most prominent aspect of the screenplay text is the prose narrative. As with theatre plays, this is written in the

present tense, for the same reason: the script is a direction to a reader who is imaginatively present at the performance. Sternberg helpfully distinguishes between three 'modes' in the prose narrative: description, comment, and report (she adds a fourth – speech – but as this is simply the dialogue text she considers it separately). To illustrate these, Sternberg discusses the Prologue sequence from the Third Revised Final Script of *Citizen Kane* (dated 16 July 1940 and incorporating revisions from 19 July). This is the script published alongside Pauline Kael's essay 'Raising Kane' in *The Citizen Kane Book*.

'The *mode of description* is composed of detailed sections about production design in addition to economical slug-line reductions'. Description generally combines two qualities to create a unique hybrid. The first is the 'frozenness' of prose description: a prose writer who pauses on an object in order to describe it in detail generally renders it inactive, and freezes the narrative action in so doing. The second, unique to the screenplay, is the frequent indication of camera movement.[1]

'The *report mode* is typified by events and their temporal sequence and generally centers on the actions of human beings' (p. 72). This focus on human activity, combined with the movement of the camera in the description mode, gives the screenplay its characteristic quality of dynamic movement in time.

The remaining mode, that of 'comment', which 'explain[s], interpret[s] or add[s] to the clearly visible and audible elements' (p. 73), is on the face of it the most problematic. As Sternberg notes, screenwriting manuals tend to insist that a screenplay should omit comment, because it cannot be translated into visual terms. We may add that the convention that one page equals a minute of screen time means that excessive comment will interfere with this temporal equivalence. While all screenplays are written substantially in the report, action, and dialogue modes, there is considerable variation between scripts concerning the comment mode. Sternberg suggests that 'screenwriters rarely miss the opportunity to use the mode of comment. It is in this mode of presentation that even new forms and designs of screenwriting shall be revealed' (p. 74). This is certainly the case with the Prologue of *Citizen Kane*, which is replete with comment, such as information about the past history of the location, or the screenplay description of Kane's Xanadu as 'literally incredible', which by definition cannot be filmed. The Prologue is extraordinarily evocative, largely because of such comment. The mythical associations of ancient, dead kingdoms summoned up by 'Xanadu' are amplified by the 'exaggerated tropical lushness, hanging limp and despairing – Moss, moss, moss. Angkor Wat, the night the last king died'.[2]

Citizen Kane is undoubtedly a remarkably rich text, offering a wholly different kind of experience either from other screenplays or from watching the film, and it repays careful analysis. Precisely because it offers perhaps the most extreme example in all of screenwriting of a very literary use of the comment mode, however, it does not well illustrate how that mode functions in screenplays more generally. The textual qualities of a given screenplay are inseparable from the anticipated production context. Welles was co-authoring a screenplay that he knew he was to direct, and therefore was at liberty to develop a style that was appropriate for him as his own reader. The scripts of some other directors (such as David Mamet) are exceptionally minimalistic when it comes to the scene text, but arguably for the same reason: he either knows how he wants to film it, or he knows he will be relying on the contributions of others (notably the cinematographer) to help him realise it. In general, the scene text in a screenplay is skeletal, precisely to make it amenable to multiple realisations.

Sternberg considers the 'modes' separately from the rest of the scene text, it seems, because they can be considered aspects of *style* rather than of industrial *form*. This division, which has a certain logic, suggests a distinction between what might be termed literary and industrial aspects of the screenplay. Partly in consequence, she tends to give less emphasis to the former, in keeping with the overall methodology, which is that of a linguist and film scholar rather than that of a literary critic. Nevertheless, this rigorous approach can prove restrictive. The elements of the scene text combine clearly definable formal and semantic elements that can be pointed to within the script (specifications of light or setting, for example) with more dynamic, less concrete aspects of screenwriting, such as narration and characterisation. These are detectable less as a series of separate semantic elements than as effects of the dynamic structure of the screenplay as a whole. Moreover, the distinctions between the three modes are not as clear as they first seem. For example, action that is reported is also action that is described. The frequent absence of modifiers in screenplays is not an absence of description; it is a style of description, and one that could be regarded as commenting on, as well as describing, a reported action. In effect, Sternberg offers a version of 'close reading', but unlike the close reading of poetry, hers reveals a text that must constantly refer outside itself (to the film) and, in a kind of reflexive recoil, bring the film back into the verbal text as a reminder of that text's inadequacies.

Clearly, most screenplays suggest that the material can be realised on the screen; this is its *raison d'etre*. Equally, however, the majority of

screenplays do not make substantial reference to many of the 'elements' Sternberg identifies, including colour, lighting, sound, and music, which are ordinarily regarded as the responsibility of other specialists working on the film. The same is true to some extent of camera, montage, and mise-en-scène. This indicates not the proximity between screenplays and films, but their difference. Reading a screenplay, even of a film one has seen, provides a very different experience from watching a movie.

Constructions such as 'we see', or 'the camera moves' (rather than 'pans' or 'tracks', for instance), allow the screenplay to give an indication of what an image may look like on the screen without specifying how it is to be shot. Importantly, Sternberg finds that most of the scripts she studied 'occupy a middle position' between the master scene script, in which 'only changes of time and location directly designate cuts', and a shooting or numbered script 'in which each cut is predefined'. In these middling scripts, '[e]diting markers may sometimes be hidden in the report and description modes in the form of paratechnical "shadows"', such as indications of type of shot (pp. 209–10). Spatio-temporal change is easily indicated without specifying the precise technical means of transition (cuts or dissolves, for example), by the simple juxtaposition of images or scenes to create stylistic, narrational, or functional effects.

The relationship between screenplay and film is perhaps most persuasively discussed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, in an essay entitled 'The Screenplay as a "Structure that Wants to Be Another Structure"'. Here, Pasolini is concerned not with the screenplay as merely a stage in a creative process. Instead, he investigates 'the moment in which it can be considered an autonomous "technique", a work complete and finished in itself'.[3] He gives the example of a script that is neither an adaptation of another work nor has been filmed itself, although it could be argued that in theory one should be able to consider any screenplay according to these criteria, since one can always encounter a screenplay of a film one has never seen.

Pasolini argues that the methodology of what he calls 'stylistic criticism' is inappropriate to the analysis of the screenplay. First, the screenplay is distinguished not so much by the nuances of textual detail we might expect to analyse in a poem or a piece of prose fiction, but instead by 'an element that is not there, that is a "desire for form"' (p. 54). Second, the screenplay demonstrates 'the *continuous allusion to a developing cinematographic work*' (p. 53), and this compels the reader, whom Pasolini regards as a kind of collaborator with the screenwriter, '*to think in images, reconstructing in his own head the film to which the screenplay alludes as a potential work*' (p. 59). Once again we see a doubling, since 'the word of the screenplay *is thus, contemporaneously, the sign of two different structures*, inasmuch as the meaning that it denotes is double: and it *belongs to two languages characterized by different structures*' (p. 59). What connects these two things is an idea of a dynamic process moving between two different kinds of 'stylistic structure' or 'linguistic system' (p. 60). Pasolini thereby implies the necessity of both a macro-system of analysis, in which meaning is supplied by a post-facto recognition of form or structure, and a micro-level that attends to the specific ways in which the screenplay negotiates between, or simultaneously keeps in play, its verbal and visual sign-systems.

Radically different, less precise, but perhaps still more suggestive is a short essay by Sergei Eisenstein, which explores from a director's perspective the consequences of working with these two distinct sign-systems. The difference between a written text and a film cannot simply be erased. Eisenstein gives the example of a phrase uttered by one of the survivors of the *Potemkin* mutiny, which became the source of one of the director's most celebrated films. The veteran said that 'A deathly silence hung in the air'. Eisenstein saw no difficulty with a writer incorporating these words in the script, which

> sets out the emotional requirements. The director provides his visual resolution. And the scriptwriter is right to present it in his own language.... Let the scriptwriter and the director expound this in their different languages. The scriptwriter puts: "deathly silence". The director uses: still close-ups; the dark and silent pitching of the battleship's bows; the unfurling of the St. Andrew's ensign; perhaps a dolphin's leap; and the low flight of seagulls.[4]

Equally, of course, the emphases may be reversed: the script may describe a setting or character in literary terms that apparently exceed or cannot be resolved into the language of film, but the verbal language may prompt the director's imagination into providing a correlative image, mood, or texture.

Time

The screenplay is written in the present tense, because it specifies what the spectator is to imagine is happening on the screen at that moment. The use of the past tense in almost all prose fiction tends to draw attention to narration, because the discourse demonstrably comments

retrospectively on story elements that have occurred prior to the moment in which they are narrated. The use of the present tense in the screenplay obscures this gap between story and discourse, as does its construction as a series of more or less brief episodes, each of which purports to describe a short scene within the film. In other words, unlike the retrospection of conventional prose fiction, the screenplay hovers between present-tense narration and shadowy anticipation of a future realisation in a different medium.

The stage play similarly unfolds in the present tense, yet there is a significant difference between theatre and screenwriting on the one hand, and cinema on the other, because the image on the screen is at best an approximate record of an event that can only have happened at some point in the past. On the cinema screen, it is *never* now. The screenplay reads in the present, but it is the past of the film. Two of Woody Allen's films make great comic play with exposing this mechanism. In *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), a character within a film steps out from the screen and enters the auditorium to join one of the spectators who has fallen in love with his screen image. The joke lies not just in the erasure of the distinction between the fictional world of the film and the 'real' world of the spectator, but in removing the distinction between the past-ness of the film world and the present of the spectator. A similar conceit is seen in *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), in which an actor who is out of focus when filmed remains so in the 'real' world. In each case the conceit plays upon the powerful illusion of present-ness in a medium that is inescapably a record of the past.

Convention holds that one script page represents one minute of screen time, and that the writer will ordinarily construct the script in accordance with the rhythmic demands of this equation. This has important consequences: lengthy enumerations of the items in a room, for example, are precluded, and only the significant detail can be recorded. This means that the screenplay can never have the wealth of detail often found in the realistic novel; it is more akin to poetry, the short story, or the Chaucerian *fabliau*.

James F. Boyle goes a little further in positing a 'reading time' that is considerably shorter than the projection time:

A script page =	Reading time =	Projection time =	Fictional time[5]
eleven inches	approx 25 sec.	1 minute	variable

This is, of course, merely a hypothesis, a guess; different readers will read at different speeds, and some screenplays are harder to read than

others. Nevertheless, empirical observation of one's own reading habits tends to support this assumption, which is not surprising in view of the dialogue-intensive nature of many screenplays, the economy of their descriptive modes, and the generous margins and line spacing demanded by studio conventions. The experience of reading a screenplay, then, should correspond rhythmically to the viewing of a film, but at an accelerated speed: accepting Boyle's approximation, the hundred and twenty-page script for a two-hour film should take something under one hour to read.

Boyle's 'fictional time' is what most film theorists would describe as 'story time': that is, the duration of events as they 'really' happened. This is to be distinguished from 'discourse' or 'plot' time, which is the temporal frame within which the story events are narrated, and which, in the classical narrative theory of Gérard Genette and others, can distort story time in three basic ways.[6] The discourse may rearrange the order, by the use of flashbacks (analepsis) or flash forwards (prolepsis); it may alter the duration (much easier to quantify in cinema, by the use of slow motion for example, than in prose fiction); and it may change the frequency, as in *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950), in which the same event is shown on multiple occasions. The technological constraints on the earliest films, such as the Lumières' *Sortie d'Usine* (1895), meant that there was no distinction between story and discourse time. A rare example of a later film that supposedly unfolds in 'real time' is *High Noon* (Fred Zinneman, 1952), in which the discourse time purports to be exactly equivalent to that of the story time, with many shots of clocks to tell the spectator exactly how long they will have to wait before the climactic arrival of the train at noon. As such, it is an illustration of pure Hitchcockian suspense.

In fact, there are some slight distortions in this equivalence in *High Noon*, but it remains highly unusual, since almost all films condense story time in the discourse through the use of cuts and other transitional devices such as fades and dissolves. A much more radical experiment is *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961). Its writer, Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'saw Resnais's work as an attempt to construct a purely mental space and time – those of dreams, perhaps, or of memory, those of any affective life – without excessive insistence on the traditional relations of cause and effect, nor on an absolute time-sequence in narrative'. As an avant-garde novelist, Robbe-Grillet was interested in questioning out of existence the whole basis of narratology, which depends on the assumption that there is a story in the past that can be recovered in the present discourse. Instead, 'our three characters ... had no names,

no past, no links among themselves save those they created by their own gestures and voices, their own presence, their own imagination.'[7] Robbe-Grillet was so fascinated by the potential for fiction of Resnais's radical approach to time in cinema that he described his own script for the film as a 'ciné-novel'.

Narration

Narration has long posed a difficult problem for film theory, one with its roots in the Aristotelian distinction between 'showing' and 'telling'. The early *actualités* of waves breaking on a beach, trains entering a station, or leaves blowing in the wind had the appeal of apparently unmediated realism: for the first time, a technological apparatus could record the movement of natural forces that could not be captured in a theatre. The camera therefore appeared to be 'showing' incident, rather than 'telling' or narrating it.

A screenplay composed solely of Sternberg's modes of dialogue, description, and report, and lacking the mode of 'comment', is possibly the textual medium that comes closest to realising the ideal of 'showing' without narration. With the dialogue and report modes being simply a record of what is said or seen, the screenplay lacks either the first-person or third-person narrator of prose fiction. This is undoubtedly part of what is really an ideological argument against the use of voice-over that one frequently encounters in the same manuals that counsel against the comment mode.

The difficulty with this argument is that it presents screenplay and film in impossible terms: as media that evade mediation. This lies at the heart of the problem of cinematic narration, which needs to be differentiated from narration in the screenplay. A comparison to the beginning of a short story by Ernest Hemingway, who has a very 'cinematic' style in the sense that it is often rigorously confined to the report mode, the description mode, and dialogue, establishes this well:

> The door of Henry's lunch-room opened and two men came in. They sat down at the counter.
>
> 'What's yours?' George asked them.
>
> 'I don't know', one of the men said. 'What do you want to eat, Al?'
>
> 'I don't know', said Al. 'I don't know what I want to eat.'
>
> Outside it was getting dark. The street-light came on outside the window. The two men at the counter read the menu. From the other end of the counter Nick Adams watched them. He had been talking to George when they came in.
>
> 'I'll have a roast pork tenderloin with apple sauce and mashed potatoes', the first man said.
>
> 'It isn't ready yet.'
>
> 'What the hell do you put it on the card for?'
>
> 'That's the dinner', George explained. 'You can get that at six o'clock.'
>
> George looked at the clock on the wall behind the counter.
>
> 'It's five o'clock.'
>
> 'The clock says twenty minutes past five', the second man said.
>
> 'It's twenty minutes fast.'
>
> 'Oh, to hell with the clock', the first man said. 'What have you got to eat?'
>
> 'I can give you any kind of sandwiches,' George said. 'You can have ham and eggs, bacon and eggs, liver and bacon, or a steak.'
>
> 'Give me chicken croquettes with green peas and cream sauce and mashed potatoes.'
>
> 'That's the dinner.'
>
> 'Everything we want's the dinner, eh? That's the way you work it.'[8]

Superficially, such a style has the effect of minimising or even eliminating narration. It simply records a series of events as they happened, and invites the reader to supply the connections that would integrate them within a coherent story.

'The Killers' is a very well-known text, but even on first encounter the style is likely to seem very contemporary to a reader today, partly because the set-up of the two voluble hit-men has undoubtedly influenced, directly or indirectly, such well-known works as Harold Pinter's stage play *The Dumb Waiter* (1960), Quentin Tarantino's Academy Award-winning *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and Martin McDonagh's *In Bruges* (2008), nominated for an Oscar in the original screenplay category. It is not coincidental that Pinter and McDonagh were acclaimed dramatists before turning to film, or that in Tarantino's screenplays there is such a preponderance of dialogue that, in this respect, on the page they often bear a closer resemblance to stage plays. In all of these works the dialogue is both exceptionally prolix and remarkably vivid.

We shall consider a comparable sequence of dialogue in *Pulp Fiction* in the next chapter, but it is clear that part of the effect of the dialogue in 'The Killers' comes from its juxtaposition with the style of the prose

description. The latter is syntactically simple and eschews modifiers, enumeration, and metaphor. The same is largely true of the dialogue, except that the two men are extremely particular in detailing the items they want from the menu. This could be read in a number of ways (a psychopathic need to order the world by naming things with precision, as in the obsession with brand names in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, or indeed Tarantino's dialogue; an attempt to intimidate George by establishing linguistic mastery), but it clearly emerges as a distinctive idiolect, a style.

The description is also, on closer examination, heavily stylised in ways that bear comparison with the modes of report and description in the screenplay. Compare the first scene of a random example, William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973):

> An Old Man in khakis works at section of mound with excavating pick. (In background there may be two Kurdish Assistants carefully packing the day's finds.) The Old Man now makes a find. He extracts it gingerly from the mound, begins to dust it off, then reacts with dismay upon recognizing a green stone amulet in the figure of the demon Pazuzu.
>
> Close shot. Perspiration pouring down Old Man's brow.
>
> Close shot. Old Man's hands. Trembling, they reach across a rude wooden table and cup themselves around a steaming glass of hot tea, as if for warmth.[9]

The series of shots specified or implied in this passage (and almost any screenplay would have worked as well or better to illustrate the point) resembles the prose of 'The Killers' in privileging the report mode: actions are described simply and in sequence. Most important is the use, in each case, of parataxis: events are described without being connected by the use of conjunctions. This seemingly eliminates narrational commentary and plainly records events as they happen.

Hemingway's use of parataxis, however, contributes to what is in fact a highly distinctive style that creates his masculine, existentialist world view. 'Character' is action, as Aristotle – a ubiquitous authority in screenwriting manuals – observes. In 'The Killers', all of the characters decide to perform or not to perform certain actions (to give the men what they want or not, to contradict them or not), and this sequence of actions builds towards what will turn out to be the story's major event: the decision

of Ole Anderson, the man the killers are seeking, *not* to act on the knowledge that they have arrived in town. He does not explain this; it is decision, revealed in action, that defines the situation and the character. A similar effect is produced by the succession of actions in a screenplay. Because this sequence implicitly or explicitly anticipates its realisation in cinematic editing, it is usually presented, as in the example from *The Exorcist*, as a series of events without conjunction or comment.

Yet this does not at all mean that there is no narration here. On the contrary, narration is supplied in at least two ways. First, the style is metonymic: it is a *selection* of events or objects consciously chosen from within the implied story world. We are directed to look at the amulet, the perspiration, the hands, and the glass of tea. Realist prose fiction sometimes attempts to conceal this process of selection by providing excessive, redundant detail. By contrast, other forms, such as the medieval *fabliau*, depend for their effect on the conventions of metonymic selection. In Chaucer's 'Miller's Tale', for example, every element that is introduced in the first part of the story will contribute to the humiliations visited on the characters in its comic climax. Most screenplays therefore have something of the structure of a joke. Because of the compressed nature of the form, any object to which it directs attention is liable to be shown to be a set-up, to have a particular significance that will only be revealed later on: the child's red coat in *Don't Look Now*, the snowshaker in *Citizen Kane*, the amulet in *The Exorcist*.

The narration implied by the process of selection is then confirmed by a second, corollary process: the selected shots are arranged into a sequence, again in anticipation of film editing. Although this combination of shots is paractactic (there will ordinarily be no comment to explain exactly why the images follow in this particular sequence), the reader will ordinarily have no difficulty in inferring the explanation for it. Parataxis in the screenplay therefore appears to have the opposite effect to parataxis in prose fiction: in the former, knowledge of the conventions of montage causes the reader to detect a directorial or narrational presence, yet in fiction, parataxis attempts to suppress the effect of narration altogether.

The resulting problem in film theory has involved the question of who or what is doing the narrating. As Christian Metz observes, 'The spectator perceives images which have obviously been selected (they could have been other images) and arranged (their order could have been different). In a sense, he is leafing through an album of predetermined pictures, and it is not he who is turning the pages but some "master of ceremonies", some "grand image-maker".'[10] As the

scare quotes suggest, the question of how to describe the presence and activities of this image-maker remains problematic, because in Edward Branigan's words 'the "person" whose voice is "heard" in a [film] text may be a much more complex (invisible and inaudible) entity than a voice-over narrator or someone being interviewed'.[11]

These complexities have been discussed at length in at least two major studies, by Edward Branigan and David Bordwell, and the specifically filmic aspects of narration are not necessarily relevant to narration in the screenplay. What is remarkable about the analysis of cinematic narration in the present context, however, is that the screenplay is almost never mentioned as its possible source. For example, Bordwell notes that in Eisenstein's films 'there is the sense that the text before us, the play or the film, is the performance of a "prior" story', and is narrated by 'an invisible master of ceremonies who has staged this action, chosen these camera positions, and edited the images in just this way', so that there is 'a continual awareness of the director's shaping hand'.[12] This captures very well the ontological status of the film in relation to its 'prior' sources, and as noted in Chapter 3, the relationship between film and screenplay is of major importance in this respect. The difficulty in film theory appears to be prompted in part by the desire to construct a single narrator (hence perhaps the status of the director as *auteur*), even though Bordwell dismisses the 'implied author' of a film as 'an anthropomorphic fiction'.[13] Bazin's paradoxical 'genius of the system' appropriately suggests that the sense of a single centre of consciousness may in fact be the result of extensive collaboration.

Within the screenplay, as opposed to the film, Sternberg distinguishes between an impersonal narrative 'voice', which 'shows' by indications of editing, mise-en-scene, and overt or covert 'perspectivemes' (indications of perspective); and the personal narrative voice, which 'speaks' in voice-over, on-screen narration, or a written text (pp. 133–41). Yet it is difficult to concur that in the screenplay '*telling* by a narrative agent does *not* take place despite its high degree of prose. The text only anticipates a narrative perspective in the target medium of film' (p. 157). This sits uneasily with Sternberg's conclusion, in which she suggests that the 'scene text' tends to 'narratize' for the blueprint reader, and '[t]he screenwriter therefore becomes a *hidden director*' (p. 231).

Character

Superficially, character is a much more straightforward concept than narration; we all know what we mean by the characters in a film. Even so, much of what we think of as a film character is supplied by the actor, and this must be differentiated from a character in the written text. Screenplays are often vague when using the descriptive mode to portray a character, partly because it is not the writer who will cast the actor. The comment mode is also widely regarded as an inappropriate means of presenting character, as these comments cannot be filmed. As in the description of action, it appears that one is left with only the resources of dialogue and action, which consequently tend to construct the protagonist in particular as a more or less existential being. Moreover, because 'it is general screenplay practice to introduce and describe characters when they first appear',[14] the text usually lacks the resources available to the novelist of the accumulation, modification, and even contradiction of detail during the course of the narrative. Accordingly, characterisation in the screenplay, in this sense at least, is skeletal.

Before simply accepting this as fate, however, it is worth pausing to consider the enormous number of highly acclaimed screenplays that pay no heed to these strictures, and describe the characters in sometimes highly novelistic ways. At the beginning of *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976; written by Paul Schrader), before any slug line or action comes a detailed physical description of Travis Bickle, interspersed with a crisp, vivid dissection of his blasted past and inner life:

> [O]ne can see the ominous strains caused by a life of private fear, emptiness and loneliness. He seems to have wandered in from a land where it is always cold, a country where the inhabitants seldom speak. [...] He has the smell of sex about him: sick sex, repressed sex, lonely sex, but sex none the less. He is a raw male force, driving forward; towards what, one cannot tell. Then one looks closer and sees the inevitable. The clock spring cannot be wound continually tighter. As the earth moves towards the sun, TRAVIS BICKLE moves towards violence.[15]

The objections that could be made to this passage in its entirety require no elaboration: you can't film smell, you can't film the inevitable. Yet it would be difficult to deny that Schrader has captured the essence of the character as most spectators experience it; or, more accurately, that Scorsese and Robert De Niro have managed to film the 'unfilmable' elements of the script, and that this is done in the manner suggested by Eisenstein: the writer has one sign-system, the director another, and while it may be the job of the writer to think in the visual terms of the director, it is equally the director's job to find correlatives for the verbal text within the cinematic system. The issue returns to Steven Maras's

previously considered question of whether the film should be regarded as merely the execution of a prior conception detailed in the screenplay. In any case, even if the script contains material that cannot be filmed, it can still be read.

Some screenplays go still further, and preface the script with descriptions of the characters in a list of the most significant dramatis personae. In the 18 October 1950 'final' draft for Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (credited to Raymond Chandler and Czenzi Ormonde), two pages are devoted to paragraph-long descriptions of eight characters. The longest, of course, are for Bruno Anthony and Guy Haines, with Bruno's portrait being particularly novelistic:

> About twenty-five. He wears his expensive clothes with the tweedy nonchalance of a young man who has always had the best. He has the friendly eye of a stray puppy who wants to be liked, and the same wistful appeal for forgiveness when his impudence lands him in the doghouse. In the moments when his candor becomes shrewd calculation, it is all the more frightening because of his disarming charm and cultured exterior. It is as if a beautifully finished door, carved of the finest wood, were warping unnoticeably, and through the tiny cracks one could only glimpse the crumbling chaos hidden inside – and even then, not believe it.
>
> (p. 1)

After the opening description of the shoes, our first view of Bruno repeats the description from the first two sentences above; the same pattern is repeated with Guy, introduced at the same moment (p. 2).

Such descriptions can be viewed in several ways. They may, of course, be dismissed as merely the novelistic character sketches of a prose writer who has failed to realise the script in visual terms. Alternatively, the writer may be doing the very opposite: rather than continually interrupting the narrative to indicate aspects of character, providing a figurative insight into the character may enable the director and the actor to draw on this conception in the course of the film. The metaphor that describes Bruno has a temporal dimension: the door is 'warping unnoticeably'. The challenge to the director (and actor, and designer) is to translate this unfilmmable conceit into a cinematic equivalent, just as a similar challenge routinely confronts a screenwriter adapting a source novel.

The same script furnishes one of the most memorable introductions to a pair of characters in all of cinema: the feet – or, more precisely, the shoes – that serve to characterise Bruno and Guy. Chandler and Hitchcock rapidly fell out, and it has been widely accepted that Hitchcock simply abandoned Chandler's work and substituted Ormonde, an inexperienced and compliant writer, after which Chandler tried unsuccessfully to have his name removed from the credits.[16] However, Bill Krohn reports that, after previously submitting a short treatment on 18 July 1950, Chandler then wrote a second that anticipates the film's memorable opening:

> [Chandler's] next treatment, written between 29 and 12 August, begins with the image of the feet walking, although here and in all subsequent versions of the screenplay there are three tracking shots of the feet before they touch, rather than an alternating montage as in the film.... It is possible that Chandler ... misunderstood the idea of the feet, if it was in fact Hitchcock's, or else came up with it himself, but in a less 'cutty' form which Hitchcock simply never took time to change in the script.

Aside from one crucial scene 'where it looks as if Guy is going to kill Bruno's father, which Chandler [ironically] found absurd', 'all Hitchcock kept from [Chandler's] draft were the feet at the beginning.'[17]

It may be that this is all of Chandler that survives, but if so, there are other moments in the screenplay that follow a similar method. Towards the end, Bruno scratches around frantically for the incriminating cigarette lighter, which has fallen into a drain. Warners put out a press release to the effect that Hitchcock 'spent the afternoon directing Robert Walker's hand. At the end of the day the actor was exhausted, but Hitchcock was satisfied with his "performance"'.[18] The emphasis on the hand is anticipated in the script.

These are but two examples of a method of characterization that is peculiar to the screenplay among textual forms. As Sternberg points out, '[i]n contrast to the theatre, which must present the performer on stage as physically "whole", film is able to fragment space and objects as well as the human body' (p. 115). Samuel Beckett is radically different from almost all other playwrights in the frequency with which he *does* present the onstage body in a state of fragmentation: Nell and Nagg confined to dustbins with only their heads occasionally visible in *Endgame*, Winnie buried up to her neck in *Happy Days*, the isolated Mouth in *Not I*. As we shall see, there is also a cinematic quality to the use of voice-over in *Rockaby* and *Footfalls*. But Beckett is very much the exception that proves the rule.

methods of charac. presentation typical to film

In contrast to the excess of descriptive information in the realist novel, most screenplays indicate character with minimal recourse to modifiers. For example, *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1996, screenplay by Christopher McQuarrie), introduces two of its characters as 'Todd Hockney, a dark, portly man in his thirties', and 'Fred Fenster, a tall, thin man in his thirties'.[19] McQuarrie's screenplay is deservedly regarded as a masterpiece, but the characterization in this particular respect is pure Agatha Christie. The obvious alternative for a writer aiming to write 'cinematically' is to make a virtue of visual fragmentation by selecting a salient metonymic feature to indicate character. A part of the body stands for the whole body, or is selected as a particularly memorable feature, so that it simultaneously signifies something of the inner self while introducing a kind of shorthand method of reference to the individual.

There is a superficial resemblance to what E. M. Forster described as 'flat' characters in a novel, those who possess a single repeated quality that is not in contradiction with others. Some of Dickens's characters are represented by a dominant physical characteristic, such as the proto-detective Mr. Bucket in *Bleak House*:

> Mr. Bucket and his fat forefinger are much in consultation together under existing circumstances. When Mr. Bucket has a matter of this pressing interest under his consideration, the fat forefinger seems to rise, to the dignity of a familiar demon. He puts it to his ears, and it whispers information; he puts it to his lips, and it enjoins him to secrecy; he rubs it over his nose, and it sharpens his scent; he shakes it before a guilty man, and it charms him to his destruction. The Augurs of the Detective Temple invariably predict that when Mr. Bucket and that finger are in much conference, a terrible avenger will be heard of before long.
>
> Otherwise mildly studious in his observation of human nature, on the whole a benignant philosopher not disposed to be severe upon the follies of mankind, Mr. Bucket pervades a vast number of houses and strolls about an infinity of streets, to outward appearance rather languishing for want of an object. He is in the friendliest condition towards his species and will drink with most of them. He is free with his money, affable in his manners, innocent in his conversation – but through the placid stream of his life there glides an under-current of forefinger.[20]

What is noticeable, however, is how unnatural and *un*cinematic this seems: one cannot film 'an undercurrent of forefinger'. Dickens's method is more complex than at first appears, since the forefinger has become de-naturalised, and used to signify qualities that cannot easily be reconciled to the signifier itself. Another reason why it appears stranger than the seemingly comparable method of the screenplay, however, is simply because in the latter, bodily fragmentation is so ubiquitous as to have become naturalised, whereas in prose fiction it represents a conscious and seemingly perverse choice on the part of the author.

A concentration on the eyes is a staple of film theory and criticism: from the commonplace observation that the eyes are 'the windows of the soul', and therefore especially revealing of character, to the development of the 'eyeline match' and the need to avoid the direct look into the camera as principles of continuity editing, to more theoretical elaborations of the ways in which the 'eye' of the camera dramatises or destabilises the interaction of spectator and screen. Hitchcock's films have offered particularly fruitful illustrations: one thinks, for example, of the extraordinary crane shot that closes in on the eyes of the killer in *Young and Innocent* (1937), the dead eye of Marion Crane on the shower floor in *Psycho* (1960), or Norman Bates's unnerving stare into the camera at the end of the same film.

While the eyes may have a privileged status, the fragmentation of the body in general became almost a necessary condition of cinema once technological advances and innovations in editing in the early 1900s had allowed directors to dispense with the theatrical framing of the body in long-shot as the usual means of shooting character. Today, entire genres – the horror film, pornography, any post-watershed cop show with a wisecracking pathologist – exist partly to display the body in pieces. These are particular illustrations of the general ontology of film. Movies are almost compelled to cut up the body via close-ups and editing, although some will do so more self-consciously than others, and some will use the body part as a persistent signifier of character or motivation: the hands in *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959), the nose in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974).

In exploring the relationship of the fragment to the whole, this screenwriting method recalls the technical and psychoanalytical analysis of 'suture' – the stitching together of disparate shots in the continuity system to create an ideological effect of seamlessness – which has long been a staple of post-structuralist and Lacanian film theory. From this perspective, the film text can be deconstructed into its constituent elements to show that cinema, while offering an illusion of wholeness, never entirely succeeds in repressing its scandalous revelation that the human subject is not individual, indivisible, complete, but instead

decentred, incomplete, lacking. Cinema, then, may be a representation of the 'mirror stage', that moment when a mother holds a baby before a mirror and pronounces its name. For the child, this is a profoundly ambivalent event: the previously involuntary motor functions of hands and feet now appear to be the movements of a complete, individual self, its identity confirmed by its possession of a name; yet that self is revealed to be separate from the mother who confers the name, and the figure in the mirror is itself illusory, a representation of the self that perceives it. And this is, perhaps, what 'character' and 'identification' mean in the cinema: the spectator temporarily loses the sense of self-possession, and becomes caught up – or 'stitched up', via the effects of suture – in the world of a protagonist who problematically represents the viewer without being identical to him or her.

This process is unique to the experience of cinema spectatorship, and has no direct analogy in the screenplay, which nevertheless seems to prefigure it through the process of bodily fragmentation. Instead of gaining an illusion of wholeness, the reader oscillates between experiencing the visible character as an accumulation of body parts and as a rough sketch of a figure containing minimal signifying detail. This sense of fragmentation need not be confined to the visible. The multiply authored screenplay, depending on its stage of development, will often include contributions from writers brought in to change or add to an individual role, perhaps to accommodate the wishes or requirements of a particular actor. For this reason or otherwise, it is not difficult to think of roles that have been supplied with what might be termed 'personality' rather than 'character'. 'Personality' confers a sense of individuality by means of non-essential attributes (Nicolas Cage's Beatles obsession in *The Rock* [Michael Bay, 1996], for example), instead of subordinating the character to its structural functions within the plot.[21]

It is with character that creative writing classes and screenwriting manuals on the one hand, and literary criticism on the other, diverge most sharply. The former tend to promote 'naïve' thinking: that is, for practical purposes they encourage the reader and writer to think of the characters and the story world as 'real'. This has been outmoded in literary criticism at least since the 1920s, and some of the most important screenwriters (such as Mamet) and screenwriting gurus (Robert McKee) have explicitly rejected it in favour of seeing character as both a textual construct, and a concept that is meaningful only when the individual character is seen in relation to the structure of the screenplay as a whole. It is what enables Mamet to argue that '[t]here *is* no character. There are only lines upon a page'.[22] Whatever the creative advantages of naïve thinking, then, the analysis of screenplays as texts should insist on the critical distinction between writing a screenplay and reading it.

Mamet describes the task of the writer as beginning with the creation of a 'logical structure', after which 'the ego of the structuralist hands the outline to the id, who will write the dialogue'.[23] From this point of view, to speak of a 'character' as an individual would be misleading, because in a properly structuralist analysis the character has no essence – no 'positive' terms – but gains its meaning only from how it is positioned within a set of relationships. A less purist approach might see a creative contradiction in screenplays such as *Taxi Driver* that make a heavy investment in individuality. On the one hand, the character is to be seen as an autonomous person with the capacity for choice: life is goal-oriented, and redemption is available. On the other hand, he is a function of the structure of the screenplay, which maps out his life for him.

However we view this question, character is inseparable from the structuring role that is generally argued to be the screenplay's primary function. More broadly, then, and to borrow Rick Altman's terms in his analysis of film genres, we may see Sternberg's 'elements' as local, semantic properties of the screenplay text, but to understand fully how screenplays operate we have to understand their syntactic organisation.[24]

Structure and structuralism

In *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915, rev. 1922), and *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), Vachel Lindsay and Hugo Munsterberg, respectively, argued in different ways that film was a visual medium, whereas literature and drama are linguistic. Therefore, language should play no part in the ideal film, and a scenario must be 'entirely imperfect and becomes a complete work of art only through the actions of the [director]'.[25] Such arguments imply that the literary writer is concerned solely with the aesthetic effects of words in combination, and that drama is merely dialogue. This overlooks the structuring force both of the dramatic text, and of the scenario in silent film in particular, and in cinema in general. More perceptive in this regard is Victor O. Freeburg's *The Art of Photoplay Making* (1918), which explores film as a synaesthetic medium and recognises the effects of time, fluidity, and arrangement, all of which imply the writer's structuring role. Freeburg thereby anticipates some of the discoveries of Soviet montage, and it is perhaps

significant that both Vsevolod Pudovkin (in *The Film Scenario and Its Theory* [1928]) and Sergei Eisenstein were to write trenchantly on this function of the scenario. Eisenstein puts it simply: 'the basic and chief task of the shooting-script is in forming that compositional spine along which must move the development of the action, the composition of the episodes and the arrangement of their elements'.[26]

While this is arguably the major function of the screenplay, it provides one more explanation for its critical marginalisation, since it favours story structure over enunciation (the particular qualities and choice of words that are privileged in literary texts). Moreover, a reader cannot simply point to structure but, instead, has to infer it or construct it, usually retrospectively, since it is often only at the end of a screenplay that its shape becomes entirely clear. In this way the screenplay exemplifies at a purely structural level the temporal dynamics of anticipation, re-evaluation, and retrospection emphasised in literary reader-response theory.

Structuralism has always been most effective when used to analyse a large corpus of texts, especially those which are 'unliterary'. Literary criticism, by contrast, tends to privilege the individual, the different, the unique; indeed, it is arguably precisely these qualities, often combined with ideas of stylistic complexity and self-reflexivity, that constitutes literature itself. It is no accident that one of the most influential structuralist analyses, Roland Barthes' 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', used the James Bond novels to illustrate a structuralist methodology.[27] Barthes's predecessors include Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), studies that seek to uncover the pattern – the 'monomyth', in Campbell's revealing word – connecting an enormous range of fairy tales and myths, respectively.

It is not implausible to regard the story departments of the major Hollywood studios as possessing an acutely structuralist sensibility long before even Propp's investigations. From the beginning, Hollywood was developing a story-gathering organisation and analysing the results generically, and soon began the systematic combing of the world story market. America was producing two thousand five hundred films a year by 1910, six thousand five hundred by 1915, and with the Western European powers crippled by war, 'by 1917 the American industry was making nearly all the world's motion pictures'.[28] The producer Dore Schary reported that in the 1940s the readers at Loew's offices in New York, Paris and London would, between them, provide synopses of almost 25,000 items per year; of these, just thirty to fifty would go into production.[29] From all those synopses the producers were looking for just a few things:

> First of all a story must be 'for us': it must fit our program, permit practical casting, and generally be ready to go. But it must always have wide appeal to all kinds of people, it must be adaptable to visual telling, contain fresh pictorial elements to satisfy the audience eye, must be built around strong and intriguing characters (preferably with a good part for one of our contract stars), permit telling on the screen in not much more than ninety minutes, be non-topical enough not to 'date' before we get our investment back. And it must sparkle with enough of that intangible showmanship.[30]

Hollywood also shows parallels with structuralist thinking in its approach to story development. Michael Hauge's popular screenwriting manual argues that a 'story idea ... can be expressed in a single sentence: It is a story about a ———— [character] who ———— [action]'.[31] One reason for this is crisply explained by one of the Hollywood producers in Mamet's stage satire *Speed-the-Plow*: 'You can't tell it to me in one sentence, they can't put it in *TV Guide*'.[32] Yet the idea that a text, or body of texts, is structured like a language is classically structuralist. Hauge's sentence has both a linear (in structuralist terms, syntagmatic) axis, and a vertical (paradigmatic) axis. The linear axis provides the story development; the vertical axis allows for the substitution of different characters and actions. Such a model can very rapidly generate enormous numbers of 'different' stories.

In his analysis of the recurrent structural forms of the folk tale, Propp does not speak of character in the ways that a traditional, humanist literary critic would; instead he speaks of a common structure to the tales, each of which consists of a selection of thirty-one possible 'functions', performed in an invariable sequence by the dramatis personae, who occupy seven 'spheres of action' (villain, donor, helper, princess, dispatcher, hero, and false hero). In an early example of the practical application of this model to a cinematic genre, Will Wright offered a 'liberalized version' of Propp's methodology. He incorporated 'attributes' as well as 'functions' into his analysis of the Western, noted the distinction between simple and collectively retold folk tales and the complex individual film text, and found 'unnecessarily restricting' Propp's insistence on an unvarying sequence of actions.[33]

The structuralist model has certain advantages as an analytical tool in the present context. It is very clear; applicable to both adapted and

original screenplays; helps to account for the recurrence of narrative paradigms across different periods, cultures, and media; suggests that even most art-house films operate according to more codified generic demands than is the case with "literary" fiction; and shows how the individual screenplay is intertextually related to a large number of others. Sensitively applied, it can provide a particularly convincing demonstration of the internal structuring mechanisms of the individual screenplay. And it also helps to differentiate the screenplay from the film text: it is the latter that challenges the system of the screenplay by inescapably introducing the structurally redundant signifiers of the actor's appearance and performance, for example, and the general serendipity of production. The primary theoretical weakness of classical structuralism is that it has an unwarranted confidence in the stability of the system, as if stories were chess games that may have infinite number but that all obey the rules of a game confined to sixty-four squares. As an analytical tool, it is universally applicable – any narrative film can be expressed within Hauge's sentence or Campbell's monomyth – yet for this reason, lacks discriminatory power.

Most important from the present perspective, however, is that examining the screenplay as a self-reflexive structure problematises analysis that breaks it down into its constituent elements. The meaning of each aspect of the text is bound up with other, answering signs: 'Rosebud' changes its meaning, the action and report mode becomes a commentary on the nature of the character, an individual scene acquires its meaning through its position within larger sequences, and so on. Consequently the screenplay should make its own sense within its own structure, even though this verbal text will also be read in relation to an external, cinematic sign-system, so that its fragmentation into discrete elements suitable for reading by individual professionals in no way prohibits the reading of it as a text like any other.

8
The Dialogue Text

Dialogue in film has received very little attention in comparison to the technical and theoretical sophistication of image-based studies of cinema. Those attempting to establish the credentials of film as an art form have tended to emphasise its medium-specific qualities: in particular, the expressive possibilities unleashed by the editorial juxtaposition of moving images in a linear sequence. From this perspective, the introduction of sound in the late 1920s represents a retrograde step because it arrested the camera's freedom of movement and compromised the integrity of the medium, although Busby Berkeley's work for Warner Brothers amply demonstrates that the technical difficulties of marrying sound to the moving camera had largely been eliminated by 1933. Moreover, 'silent' movies had almost always had some form of aural accompaniment, from the commentary of early exhibitors to the near-ubiquitous use of a musical score, improvised or otherwise.

As Mary Deveraux observes, '[t]he first sound film, *The Jazz Singer*, brought not sound but a new kind of sound … [t]he real change brought about by synchronization was speech'.[1] It is dialogue specifically, rather than sound in general, that preoccupied much subsequent analysis of the medium. Devereaux surveys a range of theoreticians and practitioners, from Alexander Dovzhenko to René Clair to Charlie Chaplin, to show that there was a 'split conception of sound' in which the ideal was 'a wordless cinema, not a soundless one'.[2] For example, the theoreticians of Soviet montage, including Eisenstein and Pudovkin, were excited by the possibilities of counterpointing sound and image; but the problem with the voice specifically, as far as Eisenstein was concerned, was that it presented a kind of rhythmic tautology, since (in Devereaux's summation) 'the sound of human speech exactly correspond[ed] to a shot of a man talking'.[3]

The theoretical foundations of this position are perhaps most influentially expressed in Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art*, first published in German in 1933, significantly just after sound had eliminated silent film production. Devereaux shows that Arnheim's objections to dialogue derive from an aesthetic and philosophical essentialism, which holds that artistic value is inextricable from the materials peculiar to each medium. He is therefore obliged to enforce the boundaries that separate film from other arts, one consequence being that the sound film, which utilises a form of speech with theatrical antecedents, must be dismissed as (in Devereaux's word) a 'mongrel'.[4] Hence Arnheim's insistence that pantomime of the Chaplin variety was preferable to speech as a medium of human communication in cinema. In the slightly more liberal and equally influential view of Siegfried Kracauer, '[a]ll the successful attempts at an integration of the spoken word have one characteristic in common: they play down dialogue with a view to reinstating the visuals'.[5]

Although this hierarchical conception of film is still dominant in many areas of film study, Devereaux's conclusion that Arnheim 'refus[es] to see film as a continually evolving art form' and 'elevates the practices of a particular moment in film history to the principles of film art'[6] expresses an increasingly widespread view. As Noël Carroll observes, to object to sound films on the basis that they are theatrical is illogical: the specificity thesis itself shows that they are distinct. On the other hand, if one believes that the one can contaminate the other, then neither can in fact be unique and self-contained, and the specificity thesis falls. The plain conclusion is that art forms tend to be both more hybrid and more varied in their applicability than the 'specificity thesis' can concede.[7] The only result to be expected from creating a hierarchy of channels of communication within a medium as synaesthetic as cinema is a canon in which certain films will be excluded purely because they fail to meet a narrowly restrictive set of criteria. As Devereaux, Claudia Sternberg, and Sarah Kozloff all point out, certain genres are almost unthinkable without dialogue, while many others possess distinctively genre-specific modes of speech, as the second half of Kozloff's *Overhearing Film Dialogue* demonstrates in its analysis of westerns, screwball comedies, gangster films, and melodramas.

Although the prominence of the specificity thesis in film studies helps to explain the scant critical attention to screenwriting dialogue, even those scholars who have attempted to establish the screenplay as a serious form of writing have tended either to accord dialogue a relatively marginal status, or to have distinguished it insufficiently

from stage dialogue, everyday conversation, or the film actor's vocal delivery. Kevin Boon's chapter on 'dialogue as action' in *Script Culture and the American Screenplay*, for example, is inexplicably devoted to a scene from *Glengarry Glen Ross*, which David Mamet's screenplay reproduces almost verbatim from the same writer's original play for the stage. Consequently, Boon's analysis of the screenplay dialogue might with equal effect be applied to Mamet's published play text, and Boon discusses it in terms similar to those adopted by the theatre critics he cites.[8] Sternberg's chapter on the dialogue text occupies just fifteen pages, and although her account is much more critically rigorous than Boon's, it is noticeably sketchier than her analysis of the scene text, which at 121 pages takes up around half of her book.

Screenwriting manuals, too, routinely ignore dialogue almost completely. Robert McKee's discussion of dialogue in *Story* begins on page 388, occupies six pages, and concludes by counselling that '[t]he best advice for writing film dialogue is *don't*'.[9] In *Screenplay*, Syd Field simply tells the aspiring screenwriter not to worry about dialogue (it 'can always be cleaned up'), to remember that 'the more you do [it] the easier it gets', and to wait for the characters to 'start talking to you'.[10] Lew Hunter's *Screenwriting* devotes seven pages to dialogue, Michael Hauge's *Writing Screenplays that Sell* twelve, and so on.[11] The ostensible reason for this is that as far as the screenwriter's job is concerned, story or structure are assumed, no doubt rightly, to take priority over dialogue. This view is often accompanied by some variant of the specificity thesis: '[n]ever write a line of dialogue when you can create a visual expression', as McKee puts it.[12] Even granted that the structuring role of the screenplay is paramount, however, Kozloff demonstrates that the recommendations regarding dialogue itself that are routinely prescribed in screenwriting manuals '*have never been followed by American cinema*'.[13]

In short, the screenplay's dominant element proportionally is also, apparently, the least important critically. Devereaux puts it succinctly: 'Film dialogue is presumed to lack literary value or to possess it and lack cinematic value'.[14] Such constructions obscure the particular qualities of screenplay dialogue by substituting an artificial criterion of value for a critical set of discriminations. Three major distinctions need to be made in attempting to identify any unique qualities of screenplay dialogue: what distinguishes film and stage dialogue from everyday conversation is the implied or actual presence of an auditor in the cinema or theatre; what distinguishes film from stage dialogue is the relative fluidity of space and time in cinema; and what distinguishes

screenplay dialogue from film dialogue is that the former is written and the latter is spoken.

Sternberg argues that the screenplay offers an effect of more 'natural conversation' than that of the stage play, and that 'deviations from natural conversation' within the screenplay are due less to any quality of the language itself than to the technical devices – voice-over, split-screen, and direct address to the camera – by which it is mediated.[15] Such arguments are in a long tradition of film theory that seeks to ensure that dialogue does not compete for prominence with the visual. As Kracauer puts it, '[p]ractically all responsible critics agree that it heightens cinematic interest to reduce the weight and volume of the spoken word so that dialogue after the manner of the stage yields to natural, life-like speech'.[16] It is hard to agree. Kozloff proposes that 'a proportion of dialogue in every film serves primarily as a representation of ordinary conversational activities',[17] but it has to be stressed that it is only a proportion, and only a representation. 'Natural conversation' and 'ordinary conversational activities' are inherently problematic terms, but they serve very well if regarded not as categories within film dialogue, but as necessarily distinct from it. Unlike 'natural conversation', film and theatrical dialogue has not one but two addressees (at least): the character(s) to whom the words are spoken within the story world, and the spectator in the auditorium. It is not just the actor but the *character* who is speaking dialogue that has been written with this dual communicational model in mind. Kozloff quotes the words of drama critic Jean Chothia:

> The actor must seem to speak what in reality he recites ... it is not the hearing of the words by the interlocutor that completes the exchange, as it is in everyday speech, but the witnessing and interpreting of both the utterance and the response by the audience. Much of the particular effect of drama derives from the gap between two ways of hearing, that of the interlocutor on the stage and that of the audience, and from the audience's consciousness of the gap ... dialogue, however natural it may appear, must be most *un*naturally resonant with meaning and implication.[18]

Both screenwriting and the writing of stage dialogue consciously or otherwise take this dual audience into consideration.

This is not to minimise the differences between the two media. More so than with theatre, perhaps, 'films disguise the extent to which the words are truly meant for the off-screen listener',[19] although the film-specific modes of address, such as voice-over, that Sternberg identifies are but the most obvious 'deviations from natural conversation'. Drawing on Manfred Pfister's *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* for purposes of comparison and contrast, and perhaps finding many parallels as a result, Sternberg lists may of the 'auxiliary' kinds of stage dialogue that are rarely found in cinema. These include 'the messenger's report, teichoscopy, word-scenery or expository narrative'.[20] The primary explanation for this is that a film can combine several techniques in order to make speeches and dialogues shorter and to create a more fluid presentation of space and time. Such devices involve various ways of directing the audience's attention as to whether image or dialogue is more important, the use of radio and telephone conversations, a greater number of speakers in small roles, and other visual techniques, such as montage. In practice, however, the relative fluidity of space and time in cinema means that cinematic dialogue is radically different from stage dialogue, as we shall see in the discussion below of the particular functions of both.

Not surprisingly, the critics who have fought a rearguard action against the marginalisation of dialogue are almost invariably scholars of the general film text rather than of the written word specifically. Devereaux is 'concerned not with words as written but as spoken', and with 'the particular juxtaposition of aural and visual elements', so that '[i]nstead of proposing that we approach film dialogue as a literary text, I recommend we approach it as part of the cinematic text'.[21] Similarly, Kozloff seeks 'to understand how spoken words create meaning in *film*'.[22] Yet it does not follow that the performance of the dialogue will invariably be preferable to a silent reading. As Richard Corliss observes, a director 'can do one of three things [with a screenplay]: ruin it, shoot it, or improve it',[23] and the same may be said of an actor with the words on the page. In any case, directors and actors will always, by definition, produce something that is *different* from the written text. As film historian and commentator David Thomson remarks, 'I don't know that there is any reliable correlation between scripts and films. I'm not even sure that there should be in a medium so open to the vagaries of performance, accident, shifts in the light, or improvisational brainstorms'.[24]

Philip Brophy observes that '[w]hen the written becomes spoken, a whole range of potential clashes arise between the act of enunciation, the role of recitation and the effect of utterance, in that, for example, one can vocally "italicize" an earnest statement, just as one can compassionately "underline" a self-deprecating quip'. This captures well the slipperiness of cinematic speech in general, which is routinely

complicated and de-naturalised by the recognition that it is at once a recitation of a written text and an address delivered to multiple audiences simultaneously.[25] In practice, it is almost impossible for the film actor to disguise the act of recitation in the delivery of the dialogue – an ultra-realistic experiment such as *Nil by Mouth* (Gary Oldman, 1997) may be an exception – even should s/he want to. This is largely because dialogue in the screenplay text is written with certain structures and effects in mind that differ from those of everyday conversation. Moreover, a silent reading will be different from a vocal performance: any performance of any text will inflect it in various ways, while an unvocalised reading of the text will often cause the dialogue to be experienced relatively free of affect; hence the common phenomenon of dialogue in prose fiction that reads well on the page but fails utterly when spoken aloud. Still more generally, the meaning of any statement in any film is produced not simply by the soundtrack but by the interaction of word and image.

While it is important to bear these distinctions in mind, the studies of film dialogue by Brophy, Devereaux, and Kozloff clearly have a value to any study of the written screenplay text. In particular, Kozloff's chapter on nine 'functions of dialogue in narrative film' works very well as a provisional study of screenplay dialogue – even more so, perhaps, than the discussion of six 'structural and stylistic variables' that follows it, and which explicitly 'concentrate[s] on the dialogue as a verbal text'.[26] Six of the nine 'functions' concern narrative communication: exposition, narrative causality, speech acts, revelation of character, effects of realism, and attempts to direct the emotions of the spectator. The remaining three functions are more eclectic: 'aesthetic effect', which concerns 'exploitation of the resources of language'; 'ideological persuasion' ('thematic messages/authorial commentary/allegory and interpretation'); and the commercially driven exploitation of 'opportunities for "star turns"' for particular actors.[27] Of course, Kozloff concedes that these categories do not exhaust the possibilities: philosophical digression, for example, is rare in American film, but Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) both contain significant, if deeply ironic, examples. The six 'variables', meanwhile, concern the amount of dialogue within scenes, the number of speaking and non-speaking participants, the nature of their conversational interaction, the language peculiar to individual speakers, the use of foreign languages, dialects, and jargon, and the patterns of dialogue within individual films.

The critical distinctions outlined above offer a range of possible approaches to the analysis of screenplay dialogue. We shall now turn

to concrete examples, beginning with two kinds of dialogue commonly analysed in theatre plays.

Deixis and offstage space

One of the most important functions of stage dialogue is deixis. This is the set of signs that indicates relationships between speakers and between the speaker and the surrounding, on-stage space. It includes personal pronouns such as 'I' and 'you', adverbs of place and time such as 'here' and 'now', and demonstrative pronouns such as 'this' and 'that'. By implication, too, the definition of the spatial limitations of the onstage space helps to define its own relationship to the offstage world. Because deixis is almost unavoidable in the playwright's task of establishing relationships of space and time in the theatre, it is arguably 'the most significant linguistic feature – both statistically and functionally – in the drama'. It has been argued, for instance, that even in such a highly poetic and conceptual play as *Hamlet*, more than 5,000 out of 29,000 words are deictic.[28]

As well as establishing these on-stage relationships, dramatic dialogue ordinarily does far more work than film dialogue in creating an imaginative link between the scene that is presented to the spectator, and offstage or off-screen space. To cite only the most obvious example, the theatre audience of a play by Harold Pinter is wholly reliant on the characters for information about the world beyond the room. As Pfister remarks, '[t]his sort of semantic interpretation of the contrast between interior and exterior space is particularly common in modern dramas written under the intellectual auspices of existentialism'.[29] There is an insistent pressure on the Pinter character to justify his or her existence in the dramatic here and now; appeals to whatever may be happening or may have happened outside the room, in the past, are to be treated with suspicion. When Pinter adapted *The Caretaker* for the 1963 film version directed by Clive Donner, he created several new exterior scenes that, in cinematic fashion, 'opened out' the action. While largely wordless, these exterior scenes significantly alter the ontological status of the interior episodes. Combined with a number of cuts to the lengthier monologues, and some additional new writing, they make the screenplay of *The Caretaker* a substantially different text to the stage version.[30]

It was argued early in the history of film criticism that the restrictions of time and place confronting the dramatist make writing for the theatre a more exacting discipline than writing for the screen.[31] This is

possibly another contributory factor in the general evaluation of the two forms, since the essentially functional and expository demands of deictic dialogue are significantly reduced in film. Indications of camera movement, close-ups, establishing shots, and easy cutting between locations separate in space and time – for example in the now clichéd use of the expository montage sequence – are merely some of the most obvious illustrations of the screenplay's capacity to provide alternatives to deixis and verbal presentation of off-screen space. Moreover, the comparative brevity of scenes enables the writer and director to return at will to situations that in drama must be developed continuously and at greater length.

The differences between screenplays, films, and stage plays in their treatment of deixis and space, and the potential for confusion between them, are well illustrated by a consideration of the screenplays for two different versions of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. In the introduction to the published screenplay of the 1944 version, Laurence Olivier described his *Henry V* as 'perhaps, the first serious attempt to make a truly Shakespearian film'. In this, Olivier felt that he was simply exploiting a notable quality of the plays themselves. 'Shakespeare, in a way, "wrote for the films"' by 'splitting up ... the action into a multitude of small scenes', while 'more than one of his plays seems to chafe against the cramping restrictions of the stage'.[32]

Certainly, in *Henry V* Olivier exploits the space-time fluidity of film. He at first attempts a reproduction of Shakespearean staging, by having the Chorus speak within the confines of the Globe theatre. Then, beginning with the Prologue to Act II, the camera dissolves the stage walls by moving from the Globe to an obviously theatrical-looking ship that nevertheless is not contained within the confines of the stage, before moving to scenes that are clearly not to be regarded as being played in front of the theatre audience seen at the beginning. Yet it is not quite accurate to say with Olivier that '[f]rom the very beginning the play suggests a film'.[33] On the contrary, the play is unique in the Shakespearean canon in the degree to which it insists from the beginning that this is a play and nothing but a play, as the Prologue explicates with exceptional richness the deictic problem of using stage space to represent scenes that are imaginatively present yet physically absent.

Kenneth Branagh also saw the play as 'tremendously "filmic"', but his version was in part constructed in conscious opposition to Olivier's 'nationalistic and militaristic' wartime production. Instead, Branagh was excited by the prospect of using 'close-ups and low-level dialogue to draw the audience deep into the human side of this distant medieval world'. His original intention was to have the Chorus begin to speak in a disused theatre before 'throwing open scenery doors to allow the camera to travel outside and into the "real" world of our film'.[34] Early in the writing process, however, the decision was taken to situate the Chorus 'in a deserted film studio' with 'a semi-constructed set'.[35] Possibly to accentuate the cinematic effect Branagh cut lines 19–27, in which the Chorus, conceding the necessary limitations of stage representation, asks the audience to 'Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts' by imagining that the 'monarchies' of England and France are contained 'within the girdle of these walls'. Like Olivier, Branagh felt that the Prologue 'can be interpreted as alluding to the mystery and imagination employed in the medium of film'.[36]

Yet however impressive the respective films are in accommodating the Shakespearean text to the demands of cinema, they nevertheless remain bound by the essentially theatrical deixis. Russell Jackson has recently noted, in a discussion of Shakespeare on film, that Elizabethan plays may resemble cinematic adaptations of theatrical texts in the ways in which they 'open out' the action, yet 'changes of place and time' are generally indicated simply by 'statements in the dialogue'.[37] *Henry V* compels both Branagh and Olivier to find a space – a theatre or a film set – equivalent to that in which the Chorus speaks, and to preserve, with only very minor cuts, the rousing words that establish a spatial as well as temporal connection between the Chorus and the audience. This in turn is provoked by a desire to preserve a kind of authenticity (for all the radical cutting of the text later in the screenplay, Branagh wanted the film to remain 'Shakespearean in spirit'[38]) doubly prompted by traditional notions of adaptation and by the pre-eminent place of Shakespeare within the literary canon. A much more radical approach, difficult to visualise in film but perhaps attempted by Peter Greenaway in *Prospero's Books* (1991), might have been an attempt to realise in cinematic terms the insight of director Peter Brook, who once declared that 'the power of a Shakespeare play on stage stems from the fact that it happens "nowhere"'.[39]

Speech acts

Devereaux and Kozloff reject any assumption that speech stands opposed to action; speech itself is action. Drawing on the work of Seymour Chatman and other theorists of literary narrative, Kozloff notes that dialogue itself can itself often be a key story event, as in the disclosure of a secret or a declaration of love. She also enumerates

several different kinds of conversational interaction, noting that in each case the effect depends on the dramatic context, and the degree to which the speaker is successful in securing the understanding of the on-screen listener and the off-screen audience. For example, elliptical dialogue may signal to the audience that the characters are intimate, and part of our interactive engagement with the film will lie in trying to penetrate or decode a private language. Alternatively, the characters may misunderstand one another, leading to 'dialogues of the deaf'. The progress or interruption of dialogue can also reveal or change the nature of a relationship, as in overlapping dialogue, the deployment of 'tag questions', or the silencing of a character, including by the use of 'toppers' (killer lines that attempt to shut down a conversation and often conclude a scene).

Studying dialogue in this way naturally leads both Kozloff and Devereaux to mention speech-act theory, a philosophy of language developed by J. L. Austin. Austin began by proposing a distinction between 'constative' (proposition-bearing) utterances, and 'performative' utterances in which 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action'. He eventually concluded that the opposition was false, since 'stating is performing an act ... It is essential to realize that "true" and "false", like "free" and "unfree", do not stand for anything simple at all; but only for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions'.[40]

It is easy to see why speech-act theory has proved to be a productive method of analysing drama. As Andrew K. Kennedy observes, 'the very names given by Austin and other philosophers to "the speech act" and to "performative" utterances points to their relevance to both conversation and to dramatic/theatrical performance'.[41] Austin E. Quigley, for example, brilliantly clarifies the dialogue of Pinter's plays by recognising that apparent contradictions and uncertainties about facts, and about the past, are really the result of the characters' attempts 'to negotiate a mutual reality'. This challenges the referential theory of meaning as regards not only facts but also 'personality', which is not individual (or indivisible), but instead 'is a function of a compromise negotiated in a particular relationship'.[42]

Although speech-act theory can be relevant to the discussion of film dialogue, its range of application is much more restricted. It does not adequately serve the various kinds of dialogue detailed later in this chapter, principally because dialogic exchanges in cinema tend to be much shorter than in theatre. It is revealing that Boon, in a chapter

designed to elucidate the quality of film dialogue, selects a scene from *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a stage play transposed to the screen by the same writer, David Mamet. In the scene in question, one of the real estate salesmen, Moss, persuades his colleague, Aaronow, to participate in a robbery:

> AARONOW: I mean are you actually *talking* about this, or are we just ...
> MOSS: No, we're just ...
> AARONOW: We're just '*talking*' about it.
> MOSS: We're just *speaking* about it.[43]

Each character is self-consciously aware of using language to create relationships, in the literal sense of being particularly interested in defining precisely what words like 'talking', 'speaking', and 'saying' mean. This is part of a verbal negotiation of a contract by which they attempt to establish precisely the rules according to which the discussion is to be conducted. In the conversation above it appears that Moss has established a fine linguistic distinction, in which 'talking' is serious business while 'speaking' is merely idle or hypothetical banter. But this turns out not to be so at all: Moss almost immediately reassures Aaronow that 'We're just *talking*', thereby setting up an opposition not between 'talking' and 'speaking' but between 'talking' and '*talking*'. It soon transpires that even this remodelled distinction is of no use to Aaronow, who is startled to discover that 'we sat down to eat *dinner*, and here I'm a *criminal* ...', even though 'I thought that we were only talking'.[44]

Aaronow has been duped not just by the rule-governed nature of dialogue, but by what the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson called the 'phatic' or 'contact' function of verbal communication. These are 'messages serving primarily to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works', and which 'may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication'.[45] Aaronow repeatedly checks with Moss to confirm that the channel is working, and that the rules are clear, but Moss in fact has effectively severed the channel and made up the rules to suit himself.

The possibility of theatrical simulation challenges the very idea of "successful" performatives, which depend for their effect on a distinction between the genuine and the counterfeit. In fact, Austin's observation of 'infelicities' acknowledges the possibility of a mimetic, insincere replication of a speech act; and 'infelicity is an ill to which *all*

acts are heir which have the general character of a ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts'.[46] The danger is that the conventional procedures which constitute the successful performance of an illocutionary act by themselves eliminate the possibility of establishing the sincerity of the person who performs them, and Kennedy is certainly right to argue that '"Sincerity" can seldom be taken for granted in dramatic dialogue'.[47] The same is true of film dialogues, but since they are ordinarily briefer than those of stage plays, the opportunities for tracing the establishment, maintenance, and dismantling of a speech-act relationship are relatively limited. Even Mamet's screenplay adaptation of *Glengarry Glen Ross* follows the familiar cinematic method of breaking up some of the lengthier duologues by repeatedly intercutting between two scenes, each of which is self-contained in the stage play version.

Polyfunctionality

Of course, neither dramatic nor film dialogue is restricted to the establishment of personal and spatial relationships. Pfister observes that dramatic language is 'polyfunctional', and distinguishes six kinds: 'referential' (as when a character gives a report of events that happened off-stage, in the past); 'expressive' (the character reveals information about his or her thoughts or emotions, either to another character or, in the case of soliloquies, to the self and the audience); 'appellative' (as when a character addresses another in an attempt to influence or persuade – essentially, this is a speech-act function); phatic; 'metalingual' (a variant of the phatic in which the code itself becomes the object of discussion: the dialogue about 'talking' and 'speaking' in *Glengarry Glen Ross* provides an excellent illustration); and 'poetic', which refers to an 'external communication system and not to the communication processes taking place between the various figures'. An example is Shakespearean blank verse, which must be addressing the external but not the internal communication system, since 'if the opposite were true, the figures would presumably express their astonishment at this "unnatural" manner of speaking'.[48]

A given utterance may possess more than one of these functions, and all of them may be used in film as well as in stage dialogue. The difference lies in the proportion of speech that belongs to each function. These proportions vary according to genre: a highly realistic film drama such as *Nil by Mouth* will display a preponderance of appellative and phatic speech as the characters struggle to maintain their personal

relationships, while a Marx Brothers comedy will make great play with the metalingual and phatic functions. As Kozloff observes, however, film dialogue generally minimises the phatic function.[49] Post-Pinter, and for reasons discussed more fully below, the expressive function has come to be treated with great suspicion by many writers for both stage and film. The expressive and referential functions are instead staples of television soap operas, operating as a kind of short-hand for character development and action respectively, in a genre in which significant quantities of drama have to be written and filmed on a daily basis.

While all of these linguistic functions are equally available to stage and screenwriters, the greater visual flexibility of cinema means that dialogue tends to be more compressed in the screenplay. The resources of editing and camera enable the film director 'to select, emphasize, undercut, distract, reveal, or deform the filmgoer's interpretation', while 'the phenomenological absence of actors from the filmgoers' space and reality … allows the spectators' cathexis with the characters more free play'.[50] This also impacts on the proportional distribution of the functions. Broadly speaking, film writing tends to take advantage of the increased opportunities for visual representation to minimise certain kinds of dialogue. Scenic representation substitutes for the referential function; a good screenplay is likely to be deeply suspicious of relying on the expressive function to exhibit much truth-value in character interaction; and character relationships may be developed by means of metonymic visual representation and scenic juxtaposition, with a consequently lesser proportion of appellative and phatic dialogue than is commonly found in theatre.

Certain gangster movies, however, especially those of the post-Pinter era, have made great play of the sense of threat that can be generated by the phatic function, as in the unforgettable conversation about hamburgers in *Pulp Fiction*:

JULES:	Looks like me and Vincent caught you boys at breakfast. Sorry 'bout that. What'cha eatin'?
BRETT:	Hamburgers.
JULES:	Hamburgers. The cornerstone of any nutritious breakfast. What kinda hamburgers?
BRETT:	Cheeseburgers.
JULES:	No, no, no, no, no. I mean where did you get 'em? McDonald's, Wendy's, Jack-in-the-Box, where?
BRETT:	Big Kahuna Burger.

JULES:	Big Kahuna Burger. That's that Hawaiian burger joint. I heard they got some tasty burgers.[51]

The dialogue appears disproportionate in three different ways: the prolonged examination of trivial topics (Tarantino announced himself to the world in the conversation about Madonna at the beginning of *Reservoir Dogs* [1992]), the imbalance between this verbal frivolity and the dramatic situation in which the reader or spectator infers that murder is imminent, and the quantity of such dialogue in a medium that is routinely presumed to emphasise the visual.

The dialogue about hamburgers creates a sense of threat, not only because we have already seen Jules and his partner Vincent preparing themselves for violence against Brett and his associates, but because of an effect comparable to that of the extended shot in cinema. The theory of suture argues that the reverse shot in classical Hollywood editing exists partly to quell a potential unease. A single shot implicitly poses questions: who is looking at this, and why? The reverse shot reassuringly fills in the empty space that might be occupied by this hypothetical voyeur (and is in fact occupied by the camera), revealing that nothing is there that shouldn't be present in the diegetic world of the film. This creates the illusion that there is no narration; the events just exist, and they are not being shown to us by a mediating agent.

The above dialogue in *Pulp Fiction* creates an effect similar to that of an unanswered shot. After a while – the discussion about fast food continues for two pages – the reader is likely either to wonder why so much time is being expended on this particular dialogue (in effect, the narrator becomes present as a figure of whom such questions may be asked), or will begin to consider the dialogue as an object worthy of attention in itself (fulfilling the 'poetic' function). A conversation that would ordinarily be regarded as phatic – idle chit-chat as a means of keeping the communicational channels open – is therefore both poetic and performative, since in context it constitutes a form of aggression.

Pinter can be credited with first developing the theatrical possibilities of such dialogic forms in what have been termed his 'comedies of menace', but it is arguable that the screenplay routinely places greater emphasis than theatre plays on the poetic function. Because the realistic stage play relies on dialogue to develop character relationships, a certain suspension of disbelief is required on the part of the audience. Monologues and dialogues are liable to be lengthier and more syntactically articulate within the internal communication system than is to be expected in 'real life', and constant references to the metalinguistic and poetic functions would break this illusion by making the audience aware of its own status within the external communication system. Because the screenplay can more flexibly develop such relationships by means of visual representation, dialogue more frequently has the effect of addressing the external audience as well as, or even instead of, the internal audience. Such cinema-specific verbal phenomena as the one-liner and the voice-over consequently tend to call attention to themselves as constructs, as something *written*; and in this lies much of the textual specificity and pleasure of the screenplay.

Pfister's poetic function has much in common with the eclectic range of possibilities that Kozloff groups under the function of 'aesthetic effect'. As well as carefully patterned dialogue, she includes in this category jokes, irony, and internal storytelling. As the example of *Pulp Fiction* shows, however, any element of screenplay dialogue can take on a poetic function simply by virtue of being expressed within such a tightly controlled form.

Duologues

Abraham Polonsky's script for *Force of Evil* provides another frequently cited example of a script in which the dialogue attains a poetic quality, largely because of its rhythmic cadence. Film noir in general, indeed, tends to be marked by dialogue that draws attention to its own construction. Partly this is derived from some of the source novels, and the fact that 'hard-boiled' writers frequently gravitated towards Hollywood themselves. More importantly, it is because the world view of these films is of a ruthless existential masculinity that affirms itself in what Hemingway called 'grace under pressure'. This is frequently shown not in physical action but in the ability to respond to situations of extreme emotional intensity with verbal toughness and sangfroid, which is so mannered that it seems not to issue from within the situation itself, but instead to be a comment upon it by a character possessing an almost psychopathic detachment from events.

For example, in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), Walter Neff calls at the home of a client, Dietrichson, to sell him a renewal on his car insurance. Finding that he is out, Neff immediately becomes captivated by Dietrichson's wife, Phyllis, and starts flirting with her:

PHYLLIS:	There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles an hour.
NEFF:	How fast was I going, officer?

PHYLLIS:	I'd say about ninety.
NEFF:	Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket.
PHYLLIS:	Suppose I let you off with a warning this time.
NEFF:	Suppose it doesn't take.
PHYLLIS:	Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles.
NEFF:	Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder.
PHYLLIS:	Suppose you try putting it on my husband's shoulder.
NEFF:	That tears it.[52]

The impossibly smooth patterning of the dialogue takes place in Pfister's 'external communication system', but internally shows the characters playing a kind of verbal poker in which they must keep raising the stakes on the same root phrase. This strategy, by which erotic or violent tension is both contained and intensified by excessively mannered and articulate language, has been anticipated in the preceding scene, to which we shall return later, in which Neff's voice-over hints not only at the nature of his relationship with Phyllis, but also at the plot that they will hatch against her husband. The above exchange between Neff and Phyllis is a flashback inside the frame of Neff's voice-over, and both his monologue and the characters' dialogue function as commentaries upon the scene, even though the internal communication system unfolds in the here and now. This has the overall strategic effect of constructing the characters as possessing a sufficiently extreme degree of emotional detachment to make their almost whimsical decision to kill Dietrichson appear at least aesthetically credible.

The one-liner

In 2005 the American Film Institute published as part of its centenary celebrations its list of the top 100 quotations in the history of American movies.[53] Almost without exception, these were short, pithy one-liners of the kind that frequently acquire a resonance beyond the film in which they are first uttered. One-liners often furnish the most prominent signifier of a film or a star, being recycled as a movie's 'tag line' or in the 'Eastwood/Stallone/Schwarzenegger model of exploitation production[, which] has consistently centred not only on the self-defined iconic status of their personae, but also on the trailer whose climactic point is the delivery of a one-liner'.[54] And many lines from cinema have crossed the boundary into broader areas of cultural and political life, as when an anti-trespass law passed in several American states in 1985 became popularly known as the 'make my day law', after the three words uttered in *Sudden Impact* (Clint Eastwood, 1983) that most comprehensively define the character of Harry Callaghan (Eastwood) in the 'Dirty Harry' movies.

In 2003 the Writers Guild of America made prominent use of famous lines from the movies in a campaign to highlight the importance of screenwriters. In one sense, this gave writers their due as the providers of one of the most pleasurable qualities of films, as any number of anthologies of film quotations attests. Yet the Guild's own arbitration procedures for screen credit give a much higher priority to structure than to dialogue.[55] The Writers Guild itself, then, tends to de-emphasise the one quality of screenwriting that might most clearly establish a writer's individual style, and that most successfully translates from the written text into the cinema.

One reason for this is simply that the nature of much Hollywood rewriting in fact effaces authorial identity, with the spoken dialogue becoming an agglomeration of lines from many disparate sources. But another is a consequence of the reduced importance of deixis and speech acts in comparison to theatrical dialogue. The one-liner frequently offers a sardonic or ironic comment upon a scene, rather than contributing to its dramatic development; the use of such lines to close a scene is ubiquitous in the James Bond movies, for example. As Brophy observes in 'Read My Lips: Notes on the Writing and Speaking of Film Dialogue', the one-liner always has the effect of being recited, and therefore *written*, rather than of simply being spoken. 'In all the important scenes in a Bond movie, [Sean] Connery throws a heavily-scripted line of dialogue that is either the dry coda or wet cadence to some absurd act of espionage violence. Timing is crucial not in the sense of dramatic rhythm but in the structural placement of narrative cues. ... [I]n a Bond movie words speak louder than actions because words *announce* action.'[56]

Although such lines may be deployed for many different reasons in various kinds of film, Brophy's analysis indicates that they are predominantly genre-specific. They belong within the category of what Kozloff terms 'toppers' – they are, literally in the case of many horror films, killer lines that terminate the dialogue, the scene, and often the verbal opponent. Bond is like the heroes of many detective, action-hero, and science-fiction movies, such as Dr. Who, or Sam Spade in Humphrey Bogart's incarnation, who 'surrender themselves to the power of the written by evaporating themselves on-stage and in place manifesting

on-screen the presence of the script, of the structural organizer of the narrative, of the written word'.[57] In *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), Christopher Reeve 'looked *graphic* while speaking *literally*, as though you could almost see the speech balloons emanating from his mouth'.[58] In *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), the eponymous robotic antihero has to search his memory bank to find the most appropriate verbal response to a given situation. The database functions as a kind of searchable screenplay, moving the character (and arguably Arnold Schwarzenegger) a step further from realism, since the terminator 'doesn't quote dialogue – he quotes the act of delivering dialogue'.[59] The horror film furnishes further striking examples of characters who are largely defined in terms of their mode of delivering what is transparently scripted speech. In *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) 'is literally possessed by literal quotations', and 'appears to delight in ironic quotation', while in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), 'Freddy is a *blank page*, a cypher [sic] of scripted one-liners, almost to the extent that he is only killing innocent children so that he can crack a joke about their demise'.[60]

Monologue and internal storytelling

Part of the appeal of the one-liner is that it has the effect of pure style. Typically delivered deadpan at the climax of a scene of violent emotion or action, it makes the speaker seem unutterably 'cool'. Conversely, 'expressive' speech, in which the character seemingly provides a moment of verbal self-revelation, is apt to sound weak and suspect. The problem with the expressive function of dialogue is bound up with both speech acts and the ontological status of the screen or stage event as something that always occurs in the dramatic present. Any statement a speaker may make about himself or herself will always be perceived as an attempt to secure something from an addressee present within the scene. If the speech is not doing this, it can only be addressed to the external audience in a clumsy act of authorial exposition.

This recognition is perhaps most strongly associated in the theatre, again, with Pinter. As he famously remarked early in his career, '[t]he desire for verification ... is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. ... A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is

as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things'.[61] Holding to this principle demands eliminating exposition, including any speeches that reveal in earlier experiences a formative incident that would provide a psychological explanation for the character's behaviour. For Mamet, similarly, any such speech is simply a technical flaw in the writing, because it needlessly interrupts the action in order to display feeling or emotion in what he memorably dismisses as the 'death of my kitten' speech,[62] or what one of his mentors, Sidney Lumet, ridicules as 'the "rubber-ducky" school of drama: "Someone once took his rubber ducky away from him, and that's why he's a deranged killer"'.[63]

There is one major exception to Mamet's otherwise rigorous adherence to this rule when Bobby Gold, the secular Jewish detective who is the protagonist of *Homicide* (1991), reveals to Chava, a female member of a Jewish resistance group, his own self-loathing: 'They said I was a pussy, because I was a Jew. Onna' cops, they'd say, send a Jew, mizewell send a *broad* on the job, send a *broad* through the door ... All my goddamned life, and I listened to it ... uh-huh ...? I was the donkey ... I was the "clown" ....'[64] It is a noticeably unconvincing speech, however, and perhaps deliberately so. Gold appears weak at this moment – it is he, and not Mamet, who is trying to generate an affective response by resorting to a rubber-ducky monologue – and he is about to discover that Chava will betray him, leading to the climax in which he is brutally disabused of the notion that any of his fellow Jews, let alone one who is also a woman, will be moved to sympathy by his account of being made to feel like a 'pussy'. This is an excruciating 'death of my kitten' speech *par excellence*, and Gold is duly punished for it.

Screenplay dialogue need not either describe character, place, or relationship (deixis), or advance, change, or constitute either plot or relationship (speech acts). Instead, for the same reasons as indicated in the discussion of one-liners, what Kozloff terms 'internal storytelling' need not be expressive, but can instead offer a poetic or thematic commentary on the story. Some of the most striking examples are the stories or digressions delivered by Orson Welles in a number of different films. The story about the sharks in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Welles, 1947) is one; another is the unforgettable parting speech of Harry Lime to Holly Martins in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949):

> When you make up your mind, send me a message – I'll meet you any place, any time, and when we do meet, old man, it's you I want to see, not the police ... and don't be so gloomy ... After all, it's not

that awful – you know what the fellow said ... In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, bloodshed – they produced Michaelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love, five hundred years of democracy and peace and what did that produce ...? The cuckoo clock. So long, Holly.[65]

It is in the nature of screenplay texts that this, one of the most famous speeches in all of cinema, exists in published form only as a footnote. The text printed first by Lorrimer and reprinted by Faber was derived from the shooting script; material deleted in the film is indicated in square brackets, and interpolations are recorded as footnotes. Accordingly, the cuckoo clock speech, which was improvised by Welles himself during the filming, quite properly appears only as a note at the foot of the page, and is presumably transcribed from a viewing of the film rather than from any textual material supplied by Welles.

To think of the speech as a footnote is also peculiarly appropriate, since it is a marginal comment both within and about the film. It does not further the story; nor does it develop the relationship between Lime and Martins, but instead terminates it in the manner of a classic 'topper'. As such, it comments on the moral world of the story and of Lime himself. Because it is spoken (and written) by Welles, however, it has the distinct feeling of being uttered by two different speakers to two different audiences: by Lime to Martins, within the diegetic frame, but also by Welles to the audience outside it, for it is absolutely in keeping with the beautifully crafted anecdotes and stories associated with the Welles persona both on- and off-screen. The speech has become so well-known that, despite its tangential nature, it is now difficult to think of *The Third Man* – or, unfortunately, Switzerland – without bringing it to mind. It is thereby representative of film dialogue in general: marginal, and therefore essential.

Voice-over

For very similar reasons, Welles is also among the most prominent examples of film-makers who obsessively return to the voice-over. Kozloff notes that voice-over narration appears most commonly in films made by writer-directors; prominent among these are figures like Billy Wilder and Woody Allen, and it is significant that as well as writing and directing, both Allen and Welles usually deliver their own

off-screen narration. Welles had come to cinema not only from theatre but also from radio; 'two-thirds of Welles's finished feature films use voice-over', and both in his own films and as a narrator in films directed by others, 'we see clearly the imprint that radio narration made on Welles, and the influence that his delight in narration has had on the history of American cinema'. As he remarked, 'I know that in theory the word is secondary in cinema but the secret of my work is that everything is based on the word. I do not make silent films. I must begin with what the characters say'.[66]

Film criticism has long regarded voice-over with suspicion, for reasons (or 'prejudices') that Kozloff helpfully summarises. Many are again variations on the specificity thesis, but the assumption that underlies most of them is that the presentation of images is somehow less manipulative than the often overtly narrational function of language or soundtrack. This distinction, as Kozloff demonstrates, is false. Just as 'showing' is always just another way of 'telling', so 'all [voice-over narration] does is superimpose another type of narration on top of a mode that is already at least partly narrative'. Moreover, far from being merely a clumsy expositional device, or simply redundant, 'all complementary pairings of narration and images provide more information than would have been available from either alone', the result often being an ironic interplay between the two.[67]

Partly to rebut the common charge that voice-over narration is a 'literary' device that calls attention to writing, Kozloff compares it instead to the onstage narrators sometimes found in theatrical works, on the grounds that the narration is both spoken and intermittent. The differences, however, are far more significant. In plays such as Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (1956), the narrator is a visible presence. The voice-over narrator by definition is not, since such narration consists in 'oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an *unseen* speaker situated in a space and time other than that being simultaneously presented by the images on the screen'.[68] The physical presence of the stage narrator is one reason why, from Plautus onwards, s/he is generally the focus of the audience's attention while speaking. By definition, s/he addresses the audience; whatever else is visible on the stage behind or beside her is of lesser importance during the narration. The cinematic equivalent is the character who speaks to the camera directly, as in *Alfie* (Lewis Gilbert, 1966). In voice-over narration, by contrast, the speaker is absent, and audience attention is divided between soundtrack and visual image.

The only theatrical analogy that springs readily to mind is the 'Voice' heard in some of the shorter plays of Samuel Beckett. In *Footfalls* (1976) the sole figure on the stage, a woman called May ('M'), paces to and fro while the voice of another woman ('V'), apparently that of her mother, speaks 'from dark upstage'; in *Rockaby* (1980), similarly, a woman identified simply as 'W' sits in a chair, rocking to the rhythmic accompaniment of her own 'recorded voice'.[69] The combination of precisely calculated movement and the amplified voice of an unseen speaker is highly cinematic, and the versions arranged specially for videotaping, starring Billie Whitelaw, are extraordinarily powerful. Yet the Voices differ from voice-over narration because they are, however mysteriously, part of the diegetic world inhabited by M and W, who interact with them, responding to what they say and even commanding them to speak. Beckett is most unusual in experimenting with the severance of words from action on stage, but the separation of diegetic and non-diegetic worlds is never as absolute as in voice-over narration. The Beckettian Voice is an interlocutor, rather than a narrator, and its function illustrates the centrality to Beckett's vision of the 'narrator/narrated', with the protagonist's actions seemingly prompted by a voice that appears to issue simultaneously from within and outside the self.

Dramatising this perception constitutes the entire action of *Film*, written in 1963 and the only one of Beckett's works intended directly for its eponymous medium. Rarely described as a screenplay – but that is what it is – the five-page 'outline' of the action is equalled in length by the prefatory material and notes, which describe the proposed method for realising cinematically the ontological drama, in which 'the protagonist is sundered into object (O) and eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit'. Numerous diagrams show the precise spatial relationships between O and E, essential to a film that depends on the conceit that O will experience the 'anguish of perceivedness' if E, following behind O, breaks the 'angle of immunity', which Beckett sets at 45°.[70] This breaks the illusionistic frame of cinema: the camera becomes the gaze to be avoided.

Film looks like no other screenplay before or since. Although a script for a film that is to be silent save for a single 'sssh!', it is typical of screenplays in its struggle with the inadequacy of the word to find an appropriate textual form in which to represent a complex relationship between the object perceived and a perceiving or narrating agent. Similarly, *Rockaby* is prefaced by a diagrammatic representation of the pacing of the feet, and *Footfalls* by extensive directions orchestrating the lighting, which just as much as the Voice appears both to prompt and to be prompted by W. In all three cases, the framing of the visible action by extensive textual matter represents an attempt to resolve the difficulties of approximating the duration of the action as the spectator is to perceive it, while also indicating for the reader the nature of the relationship between visible action and the offstage or off-screen voice.

This relationship is expressed quite differently in the screenplay as compared to the film, and to contrary effect. An audience watching a film experiences the soundtrack and the image simultaneously, including of course in the case of a scene accompanied by a voice-over. Disconcertingly, however, voice-over in the dialogue text of a screenplay cannot comfortably approximate this. Instead it must do one of two things: either the description may precede the voice-over (or vice versa), or the scene text must be presented in one column and the dialogue text in another. In either case, the scene text insists that the events described are unfolding in the present tense, while simultaneously – or *nearly* simultaneously – the voice-over casts them into the past and installs its own moment of narration as the present. We are in the realm of the uncanny, of déjà vu.

The difference between this and on-screen narration is well illustrated by the screenplay for *Double Indemnity*. In the source novel by James M. Cain, Neff writes his confession as a memoir. Wilder and Chandler – prompted, perhaps, by the recognition that voice-over creates a presumption of direct oral transmission[71] – instead came up with the brilliant idea that he would speak his confession into a dictaphone. His narration begins after he struggles, wounded, into his office at the insurance company in dead of night:

> He presses the button switch on the horn. The sound stops, the record revolves on the cylinder. He begins to speak:
>
> NEFF: Office memorandum, Walter Neff to Barton Keyes, Claims Manager. Los Angeles, July 16th, 1938. Dear Keyes: I suppose you'll call this a confession when you hear it. I don't like the word confession. [...]

The confession continues for a whole page, interrupted only by two brief descriptions of Neff looking at his wounded shoulder and taking a drag on a cigarette. The layout then changes:

DIETRICHSON HOME – LOS FELIZ DISTRICT	NEFF'S VOICE
Palm trees line the street, middle-class houses, mostly in Spanish style. Some kids throwing a base-ball back and forth across a cou-ple of front lawns. An ice cream wagon dawdles along the block. Neff's coupe meets and passes the ice cream wagon and stops before one of the Spanish houses. Neff gets out. He carries a briefcase, his hat is a little on the back of his head. His movements are easy and full of ginger. He inspects the house, checks the number, goes up on the front porch and rings the bell.	It was mid-afternoon, and it's funny, I can still remember the smell of honeysuckle all along that block. I felt like a million. There was no way in all this world I could have known that murder sometimes can smell like honeysuckle...

The double-spacing in the second column indicates an effort to syn-chronise the delivery of the lines with the visuals in the first; elsewhere in the screenplay both columns are single-spaced, again providing an approximate indication of timing.[72] The screenplay reader, however, is presented with not an image and a soundtrack, but with two forms of writing. The necessity of doing this exposes voice-over as a particularly cinematic device, but it also creates a highly unusual, and in a certain sense impossible, textual form within the screenplay itself: it is as if the eyes were being asked to scan a column each and then report back.

The difference in register between the two columns emphasises the differences between prose description and oral narration. More spe-cifically, Neff's voice gives not a statement of the action but an inter-pretation of it. Objections to voice-over tend to state or imply that it introduces a subjective, literary form of narration, whereas the camera simply records what is put in front of it. If this were so, however, the left-hand column would present us with an irresolvable contradiction. On the one hand, it states without inflection the succession of images that are to appear in the film. On the other hand, it is every bit as bound up with literary, verbal narration as is the material in the second column; it possesses the characteristically metonymic, paratactic style of the scene text as discussed in Chapter 7.

Style that doesn't draw attention to itself is the most manipulative style of all. Neff's narration, being a confession, has a kind of honesty: he has already told us he is a murderer, and here he elaborates on the emotions that will lead him to become one. The depersonalised description in the left-hand column, by contrast, insidiously sketches out an ideology. The houses, the children, the baseball, and the ice cream van metonymically represent a clean-cut, all-American life, healthily balanced between home and sports, with the nuclear family at its centre. These are the images to be presented on the screen, while the voice-over leads us towards the homewrecker, the femme fatale, the killer. The opposition could not be clearer, but it is not an opposition between visual truth and narrative fiction. It is between narration that takes the form of a sequence of images chosen to create one effect – perhaps a reality effect, to borrow Barthes's term, but still an effect – and an oral narration designed to draw us into complicity with the speaker.

For Neff is a sympathetic character, while even the plastic, psychotic object of his attraction, Phyllis Dietrichson, possesses a ghoulish fasci-nation. At least they are not boring, and perhaps that is why theorists influenced by the specificity thesis have a problem with voice-over: if it is well written it becomes intrinsically interesting, effectively challeng-ing the hierarchical dominance of the visual. How dull the images in the left-hand column are, how relatively drab the language that creates them, and how stiflingly conformist the world they represent. That, at least, is part of the meaning of *Double Indemnity*, just as it is part of the meaning of *film noir* in general. You can have the American Dream, it seems to be saying, but once inside that antiseptic domestic nirvana you'll want to commit bloody murder to get yourself out.

Action as speech

The verbal sign-system of screenplays, combined with the convention that a page of text equals a minute of screen time, means that reading a dialogue-intensive scene will be very different from seeing the same scene in a film, irrespective of how the text attempts to visualise it, because the reader's attention will focus on the language rather than the action. In *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995; screenplay by Christopher McQuarrie), Verbal Kint watches as his lawyer and the pros-ecutor engage in pre-trial negotiations about which charges are to be brought against him.[73] The scene text reports simply that 'Verbal's eyes follow the voices back and forth', and the dialogue text scrupulously

repeats before each of the lawyers' speeches that it is delivered off-screen. The scene will therefore be visualised as a close-up on Verbal's face, or possibly just his eyes, in keeping with the convention that the expressive potential of eyes receives priority in classical cinema. Such a shot will keep the spectator's attention focused on Verbal, and a director has the option of mixing the lawyers' voices either high or low on the soundtrack to signal to the viewer whether or not the words themselves are significant; it may be that we simply need to register that Verbal is peculiarly attentive to what is happening to him, with the precise topic under discussion being of little importance. In such cases a screenplay may simply report that a discussion is taking place, without providing the dialogue itself, in which case it will be improvised and mixed in the film to indicate its low priority. For example, towards the end of the lawyers' exchanges, their voices 'mumble off-screen. Verbal fidgets in his chair', and the written dialogue resumes with the information that Verbal is to be charged only with 'Misdemeanor one'.

Up to this point in the scene, McQuarrie's screenplay records all of the lawyers' dialogue, without interruption from the scene text. It occupies two full pages, topped by the one-line report about Verbal's eyes, and tailed equally laconically with the report that 'Verbal lets out a long-held sigh of relief'. When reading those pages, rather than seeing the film, the visualisation of the image is likely to be subordinate to the dialogue, in which Verbal's lawyer ruthlessly negotiates immunity from prosecution in return for his testimony. The dialogue lays bare some of the intrigues within, and jealous competition between, the political networks in New York and Los Angeles, a theme that emerges more prominently in the script than in the film. Regardless of thematic considerations, however, reading and viewing the scene will be two markedly different experiences.

On second reading, moreover, other interpretive possibilities become apparent. The lawyer scene is experientially different from many in *The Usual Suspects*, a script in which Verbal's voice-over forms the principal mode of narration. At a crucial point, towards the end, Verbal tells a story of how Keyser Söze came to acquire his terrifying reputation – a story which, he tells us, may or may not be true, though he himself believes it. Söze had returned one day to find his wife and children violated by a Hungarian mob, with whom he was engaged in a turf war. Rather than let his family live with the humiliation, Söze kills both them and the gang, aside from one that he allows to flee to begin circulating the story of Söze's terrible vengeance. The events are described in Verbal's voice-over as well as in a series of images in the scene text:

He kills their kids, he kills their wives, he kills their parents and their parents' friends.

We see glimpses of Keyser Söze's rampage. Bodies upon bodies in homes and in the streets. Then, the fires.

Stores and homes burn, engulfed in flames.

He burns down the houses they live in and the stores they work in, he kills people that owe them money. And like that, he was gone. Underground. No one has ever seen him again. He becomes a myth, a spook story that criminals tell their kids at night.[74]

Because the images that would arrest the attention of a spectator in the cinema lack detail in the scene text, Verbal's proportionately more prominent narration accordingly receives greater attention in the screenplay.

The stunning final revelation is that much of what we have seen in the film is just a tale that Verbal has been improvising serendipitously from scraps of texts pinned on a notice board behind his questioners. Scenes played out before our eyes must now be retrospectively reinterpreted as his inventions. This is a little less shocking in the screenplay, because the textual sign system has concentrated attention on Verbal as a narrator. It still surprises, however, because while the unreliable narrator is a familiar convention in prose fiction, it is almost forbidden in cinema.

There is a crucial difference between *The Usual Suspects* and a spate of superficially similar films that followed in its wake, including *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), and *A Beautiful Mind* (Ron Howard, 2001). In each of these later examples, the spectator finally recognises that many of the events previously shown are to be interpreted as the projection of events in the mind of a central character possessed by an extreme subjectivity (an idea deliciously parodied in the story attributed to Donald Kaufman in *Adaptation*). The protagonist is mentally ill, or dead, and does not realise that the world in which he appears to move is, to a large extent, his own mental construction. The reassuring solidity of the cinematic world, which film audiences have come to accept as real in a 'suspension of disbelief', dissolves. In other words, these films are variations on a kind of cinematic expressionism with a long history, stretching back at least as far as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919), in which the meaning of the entire film was altered by the controversial addition of a frame story that casts all of the events as the delusion of a madman.

In *The Usual Suspects*, however, the principal narrator, Verbal, is not deluded. He invents the plot that the spectator sees to gain a tactical advantage in the here-and-now; he is attempting to secure his escape. Although by the end the ontological status of many of the events remains uncertain, some, if not all, are to be understood as the fabrications of what had until this point appeared a relatively minor character. There is a significant difference between this and a lie told by a character on the stage, since the latter does not alter the perceptual space of the theatrical set. In the theatre, words will always be scrutinised for their reliability, and all speech acts will change the relationships between the characters on stage, but they will not physically alter the stage itself. In *The Usual Suspects*, however, the audience is finally forced to reinterpret whole sequences as visual representations of a story Verbal is making up: the action in such sequences is a representation of Verbal's speech. The challenge then lies in determining what degree of reliability to give to any of the scenes in the film.

The exchange between the lawyers is clearly an incident that is not invented by Verbal, since it is in response to the legal procedures that he begins to fabricate the story. Equally but conversely, the episode of Söze and the Hungarians is explicitly presented as a story told in voice-over by Verbal, who stresses that he is merely reporting a tale that may or may not be true. There is a certain complicity here between Verbal as an embedded narrator and the problematic 'image-maker' who is the impersonal narrator, or implied author, of *The Usual Suspects*. Just as the former stresses that nobody knows what Söze looks like, so the latter reports that when Söze enters the house, '[w]e are never allowed to see his face' (p. 90). This definitive statement has a different effect when followed in the film, because film tends to imply that such decisions are a choice of the director rather than an instruction in the screenplay. Nevertheless, as the unreliability of this particular episode about Söze has clearly been signalled to both reader and spectator, there is no great difficulty at this point.

The problem emerges at the end of seeing the film or reading the text. Now alert to the unreliability of everything Verbal says, there is a compulsion to go back and examine retrospectively the verifiability of every scene in the film. In many cases this is far from straightforward. Previously, Verbal has recounted under police interrogation the history of another mass killing that we know to have taken place from several pieces of independent corroboration, and which has left the authorities dumbfounded. Knowing that although the police investigation is 'real' much of Verbal's account is a fabrication, a question now surrounds the transitions from one to the other, as in the following:

KUJAN

Now what happened after the lineup?

Verbal sneers at Kujan, unable to change the subject.

EXT – POLICE STATION – NEW YORK – NIGHT *SIX WEEKS PRIOR*

Keaton stops at the top of the front steps of the police station and lights a cigarette. Edie comes out behind him, fuming mad. (p. 46)

Although the syntax indicates that the scene outside the police station represents Verbal's response to Kujan's question, the absence of any textual indicator of subjectivity (such as a dissolve or a voice-over) introduces an ambiguity. Customarily, film permits the conflation of these two possibilities: a transitional device indicating subjective memory may segue imperceptibly into an objective record of events, with the narrator's recollection taking on the status of accepted fact. If there is reason to doubt the reliability of the witness, the spectator will usually be made aware of this, as happens even in such a problematic case as *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950).

But it is extremely unusual for the spectator to be compelled to reinterpret a scene as a lie. The notorious precedent is *Stage Fright* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1950), in which a character's narration introduces a flashback that is only revealed at the end of the film to have been an untruth: the character himself had committed a murder, and the scene presented on the screen is the story he has told to cover his tracks. The film fails because the scene is not integrated into any larger structure that would call the cinematic narration as a whole into question; one scene, and one scene only, is a deception, and as the audience can have had no way of knowing this, the effect is of a cheap contrivance.

The Usual Suspects is different, because it calls into question the reliability of its narrational strategies in general. It is not simply the historical bias in favour of cinematic realism that creates an illusion of truth, it is also a result of the unfolding of cinematic time in the present tense. Each element of the story that the discourse reveals to us takes place in the continuous present, even when it is presented within the frame of a flashback. The same is also the case in the screenplay text. If *The Usual Suspects* were written as prose fiction, the narrator would cast the confrontation between Kujan and Verbal into the past tense ('Verbal sneered at Kujan'). The scene with Keaton and Edie would not only be narrated in the past

tense but would also be revealed, by the presence or absence of inverted commas, to be either an event recounted by the narrator or embedded narration spoken by Verbal. This would alert the reader to the need for caution in assessing what degree of credence to give the narration.

Instead, the screenplay reader is faced with an ambiguity that is temporarily irresolvable other than by the conventional presumption in favour of the truth of the image. This is supported by the statement that the events happened 'six weeks prior', an assertion that is not attributed to Verbal. The director will have to decide whether and how to indicate this time frame to the spectator, but (slightly unconventionally) McQuarrie has given no indication within the script of how this is supposed to be done. Accordingly, the words are likely to strike the reader as a small piece of omniscient narration, although in retrospect it appears that this is probably another of Verbal's fabrications.

Faced with these doubts, attention shifts from the unreliability of Verbal's narration to that of the screenplay itself. The problem arises because some of the images and events are not to be interpreted either as mere fabrications by Verbal (since there is independent corroboration in the police reports), or as unmediated representations of events that have really happened in the story world. Instead, they are a visual *interpretation* of his words, and (if we are to make diegetic sense of the film) not an interpretation supplied by the director, nor by his auditors (the police, but also the spectators in the cinema), but by Verbal himself. This becomes apparent in the final twists, after Verbal has left the police station. A fax machine receives a copy of an image of Keyser Söze drawn by a survivor, following which Verbal is picked up by a man in a car:

> INT. DISPATCHER'S OFFICE
> *Jasper Briggs pulls the sheet out of the fax machine and turns it over, revealing the composite sketch of Keyser Söze.*
>
> *Though crude and distorted, one cannot help but notice how much it looks like Verbal Kint.*
>
> EXT. STREET
> *The car stops. The driver gets out.*
>
> *It is Kobayashi, or the man we have come to know as such.* (p. 133)

The conjunction of the two images plays havoc with the differences between the semiotic systems of screenplay and film. That the sketch

of Keyser Söze resembles Verbal immediately begins the process of retrospective analysis, as we will start to consider whether the actions attributed to the former could in fact have been carried out by the latter. The image of Kobayashi, however, creates mayhem. Throughout the script, we have known of Kobayashi, Keyser Söze's lawyer, only from Verbal's account. A shot near the end shows us that Verbal has simply borrowed the name from that of the manufacturer of a coffee cup.

The arrival of 'Kobayashi' in the getaway car at the end, however, complicates matters. Verbal has taken the signifier 'Kobayashi' and attached it to an associate, who must 'really' be called something else, in a textbook illustration of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified in Saussurean linguistics. The problem is that signifieds are mental concepts, raising the bewildering question at the end of *The Usual Suspects*: whose mental concept is the signified of 'Kobayashi'? On reading the screenplay, one will have formed a certain visual impression of Kobayashi. Or not: *The Usual Suspects* is very perfunctory in describing the physical appearance of its characters. For reasons noted Chapter 7, screenplay texts in general rarely offer the concrete visualisation of characters routinely found in realist fiction. In any case, the reader legitimately assumes a certain interplay with the text in the creation of the character. In this concluding moment, however, the screenplay seems suddenly to have usurped that autonomy and told us what we have been visualising all along.

The film is no less disorientating, but for the opposite reason. Now the answer to the question 'what does the mental concept "Kobayashi" look like?' is 'he looks exactly like the English actor Pete Postlethwaite, heavily suntanned'. Suddenly, someone other than Kobayashi, but with an identical facial appearance, emerges at the very end of the film. Again, the obvious explanation is that this is because 'Kobayashi' is *Verbal's* mental concept. The bafflingly unanswered questions that remain after either reading or seeing *The Usual Suspects* are therefore the result of the unresolved interplay of three different ontological fields: that of realism (the police and the lawyers, searching for clues within the diegetic world of the film); that of the reader or spectator, who when told a story naturally supplies the mental concepts for herself; and that of the narrator (whoever that is) of the screenplay or film, who has usurped this autonomy of the reader by asking us to accept that certain scenes are presented directly from the inside of Verbal's head. That this does not fully add up is partly due to the idea that Verbal has actually been improvising a story from signifiers pinned to the notice board that do not fully cohere within a consistently and coherently imagined world.

The Usual Suspects exploits with exceptional subtlety the resources of dialogue within the screenplay. The quasi-realistic scenes concerning the investigation initially follow a dramatic structure well known in detective fiction, whereby the authorities act as readers constructing a discourse which attempts to decode a story 'written' by the criminals. Like many contemporary films, such as those analysed by Temenuga Trifonova and discussed at the end of Chapter 1 of this book, this leads to the disturbing possibility that there is also, or instead, a non-realistic pre-text for the story, which is nothing other than the screenplay itself. McQuarrie's brilliant innovation is to introduce to this fascinating but relatively familiar idea the conceit that the film is an act of oral improvisation. Instead of referring back to a story, Verbal is to be regarded as actually creating the discourse that we see on the screen. This introduces a new level of interaction between two aspects of the screenplay, in which the voice-over of the dialogue text is seen to be responsible for the creation of the scene text (and of the dialogue of the other characters within it). In so doing, however, McQuarrie's script creates a new kind of palimpsest, in which a story that would make complete sense always appears to be almost within view, but is at the same time being rubbed out by the voice-over. Instead of the convention that a voice-over provides expressive revelation, Verbal's provides tactical concealment. In creating these interlocking dramas between the dialogue text and the scene text, the story and the discourse, *The Usual Suspects* takes the screenplay into new and challenging fields.

Epilogue: *Sunset Boulevard*

'... before you hear it all distorted and blown out of proportion, before those Hollywood columnists get their hands on it, maybe you'd like to hear the facts'.[1] The facts in the case of *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) concern the melodramatic encounter of the failing screenwriter Joe Gillis and a faded star of the silent years, Norma Desmond, who imagines that Gillis can transform her own script of *Salome* into a vehicle for her triumphant return. Unable to accept that he does not love her, and that her plans for a comeback are delusional, Norma shoots Gillis as he attempts to leave.

From the beginning, the script is obsessed with writing, with text, even with orthography: 'START the picture with the actual street sign: SUNSET BOULEVARD, stencilled on a curbstone' (p. 9). The credit titles are to be superimposed in the same style, as they accompany the police who have been called to a crumbling mansion where a body lies in a swimming pool. The dead man is a writer; other writers, men from the papers, surround the pool. The screenplay, by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, and Dave Marshman, Jr., starts to play games with the text. Gillis's voice-over in the right-hand column in the script tantalisingly syncopates the personal pronouns and changing time-frame of his narration with the images described in the column on the left: the B-movie writer in the pool is a 'he', but six months earlier it is an 'I', Gillis, who sits beside the typewriter in the Alto Nido apartment. Gillis must be the man in the pool, but how? The writer has drawn us in: he will tell us 'the whole truth' (p. 9) – except that, in the event, he won't – but only in his own time; and if he is speaking from beyond the grave, what time is that?

Norma's beloved silent movies are full of faces; sound films, as she says, are full of 'talk, talk, talk', and writing is just 'words, words' (p. 27).