VAT 151 / Prof. Stevenson

Setting the Scene

As any screenwriter will tell you, the first few pages of a screenplay are the most important--for both your audience and the people responsible for producing your film. Script readers are an impatient lot, and if you don't engage them right away, they will drop your script and move on to the next. The opening pages should actively introduce your audience to the protagonist and provide them with a hint at the main conflict. The setting should be vividly evoked. Consider the first moments of Paul Schrader's screenplay for *Taxi Driver*:

Manhattan cab garage. Weather-beaten sign above driveway reads, 'Taxi Enter Here.' Yellow cabs scuttle in and out. It is winter, snow is piled on the kerbs, the wind is howling.

Inside garage are parked row upon row of multi-coloured taxis.

Echoing sounds of cabs idling, cabbies talking. Steamy breath and exhaust fill the air.

Corridor of cab company offices. Lettering on ajar door reads:

Personnel Office

Mavis Cab Company
Blue and White Cab Co.
Acme Taxi
Dependable Taxi Services
JRB Cab Company
Speedo Taxi Service

Sounds of office busy at work: shuffling, typing, arguing.

Personnel office is a cluttered disarray. Sheets with headings...are tacked to crumbling plaster wall...Desk is cluttered with forms, reports and an old upright Royal typewriter.

Disheveled middle-aged New Yorker looks up from the desk. We cut in to ongoing conversation between the middle-aged PERSONNEL OFFICER and a young man standing in front of his desk.

The young man is TRAVIS BICKLE. He wears his jeans, boots and Army jacket. He takes a drag of his unfiltered cigarette.

The Personnel Officer is exhausted: he arrives at work exhausted. Travis is something else again. His intense steely gaze is enough to jar even the Personnel Officer out of his workaday boredom.

Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) makes an immediate impression within the first few moments of the film *Taxi Driver*.

In less than a page, Schrader has given us enough information to set the stage and pique our interest. Immediately we get the *milieu*, or world, of the story, a busy urban taxi company housing many fleets. We meet Travis Bickle. At this point, we don't know if Travis is the protagonist or antagonist, but based on his clothes and "steely gaze," we sense that he is a force to be reckoned with.

Scene structure

Just as the screenplay as a whole has structure, so should individual scenes. Although a screenwriting rule of thumb stipulates that scenes should not run much more than two minutes (two full script pages), you should still regard them as mini-dramas. Some short scenes, called transitional scenes, merely connect one place or time to another like a bridge and don't require special treatment. Each character in a scene should have an objective, or need, and the tension created by these needs should rise throughout the scene.

In this scene from the film *The Water Ghost*, both the dialogue and actions of the characters create a compelling scene that describes both the relationship between Ling and her father, as well as the background that underscores the main conflict.

Where you begin a given scene is called the "point of attack." In general, it's best to start in mid-stream. In the above *Taxi Driver* scene, for example, we meet Travis in mid-interview, having skipped his entrance and introduction to the personnel officer. The scene ends abruptly, with Travis admitting that he doesn't own a telephone. Unless an entrance or exit reveals something meaningful about a character or situation, it should be excluded.

Back story

In the next page of the *Taxi Driver* script, while being interviewed by the personnel officer for a job, Travis reveals his military background and the fact that he has no criminal record. These facts, which later become important, are called "back story" or exposition. They are elements of the character's biography that the screenwriter has deemed crucial to the storytelling. Every screenplay contains back story because every character brings a certain amount of baggage to a drama.

Discussion

What individual scenes from movies stick out as memorable

Some facts about a person can be revealed through props, costumes, makeup and behavior. For example, if Travis had spoken with a heavy Southern accent, we would assume he was not a native New Yorker. If he had deep scars on his face, we might assume he had suffered war wounds. If he touched the scars repeatedly, we might assume the wounds were recent.

effective ways of weaving different scenes and storylines together?

{Dis: Discuss with others scene structure.}

Most back story, however, is conveyed through dialogue. Good exposition doesn't stick out and is presented in a believable context. Introducing Travis in the context of an interview provides the screenwriter with an easy, natural way to get out back story. The personnel officer needs to know about Travis's background, as does the audience. Meeting or "getting to know you" scenes work well for exposition, as long as they're not overloaded with too much information.

In this clip from the film *The Water Ghost*, back story is conveyed through dialogue between Ling and her grandmother, as well as more subtly without dialogue through the behavior of both Ling and her father at the end of the clip.

For obvious reasons, most back story tends to be revealed early in the script, but certain facts may be withheld for dramatic effect. Secrets are the most powerful form of back story, and whole dramas can revolve around them. Knowing how and when to expose details about a character's past is a trial-and-error process and may require several rewrites to nail.

Set-ups and pay-offs

Set-ups and pay-offs are narrative devices commonly used in screenplays. As the word suggests, a set-up introduces a bit of action or gag that will become significant later on and lead to a pay-off. Set-ups, which usually are found in the first half of a script, should appear tacked-on or inconsequential. In Robert Zemeckis's 2000 thriller *What Lies Beneath*, for example, it is established early on that the couple's cell phones won't work until they have driven a certain distance from their home, half way across a bridge. The first time this fact is mentioned, the situation is benign. Later, however, with her life in jeopardy, the wife desperately tries to use the cell phone but can't get a connection. This moment is the pay-off. Because the audience already knows that she won't be able to get through on the phone, tension has been greatly heightened.

Ending on a button

Ideally, scenes should end with "buttons." Buttons are like little *denouements*; they seal off a scene with a punch. Like set-ups and pay-offs, buttons are small but effective narrative tools that will make your screenplay stand out.

American Film Institute

After witnessing the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, Jerry (Jack Lemmon) and Joe (Tony Curtis) hide out in an all-girl band led by Sugar Kane (Marilyn Monroe).

A terrific example of a button can be found in the final scene of *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond), when Jerry finally reveals to Osgood that their romance has been based on a lie:

JERRY

Look, Osgood--I'm going to level with you. We can't get married at all.

OSGOOD

Why not?

JERRY

Well, to begin with, I'm not a natural blonde.

OSGOOD
(tolerantly)

It doesn't matter.

JERRY

And I smoke. I smoke all the time.

OSGOOD

I don't care.

JERRY

And I have a terrible past. For three years now, I've been living with a saxophone player.

OSGOOD

I forgive you.

JERRY
(with growing desperation)

And I can never have children.

OSGOOD

We'll adopt some.

JERRY

But you don't understand!
(he rips off his wig; in a male voice)
I'm a man!

OSGOOD
(oblivious)

Well--nobody's perfect.