



**Get Your Hero
Up a Tree**

**How to Write a Movie
(That Doesn't Stink)**

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EMPATHY

Empathy. This is one of the greatest concepts that any storyteller understands and is the essence of motion pictures. Master this concept and you will succeed as a writer and as a filmmaker. Film works best when it works in emotion and empathy. When someone says that they go to the movies to “escape,” they are saying that they want to *experience* something. They want to experience joy and laughter (comedy), fear (horror), joy and sadness (drama), excitement (action adventure) and anxiety (mystery/thriller). There is not a better artistic medium that captures these emotions and it is the reason we love movies. This is something the screenwriter needs to understand. The combining of pictures and sound is powerful. It can be extremely moving and extremely visceral. What you need to do as a screenwriter is to aspire to those extremes. Understand the medium and wield it.

KNOW THE MEDIUM – TAME THE BEAST

The movie is never as good as the book. This is the conventional wisdom of most audiences that enjoy both movies and books. These audiences are almost always disappointed in the film adaptation, which leads the screenwriter to ask, “Why is the movie never as good as the book?” The answer to this question reveals a lot about the differences between novels (and short stories) and film scripts. It is also an excellent place to start when thinking about writing a movie. Before we get into this, it is important to note that there are always exceptions to the rules.

And I will repeat this phrase many times over the course of this book. There are always exceptions. Is the book always better than the movie? No. Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler improved James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*. Cain had written the novel under pressure to deliver and didn't quite solve some issues with his plotting. Cain himself admitted that Wilder and Chandler had come up with great solutions to the problems he was having with the novel. There are also many who would say that Francis Ford Coppola and Mario Puzo improved what Puzo himself had written in the novel *The Godfather*. Again, there are always exceptions to the rule.

So what are the differences between writing a novel and writing a feature film? Why is the movie "never" as good as the novel? I like to think that writing for film is like putting on a pair of handcuffs. When you write for the movies you are handicapped by not having the ability to tell the audience what your characters think or feel. You have to *show* this. You cannot delve into the backstory of your characters. This is a form of digression and *film hates digression*. You need to be moving forward in your story or you are dead in the water. In film writing, we have dialogue, action, and editing. This is how we tell the story. What is your character doing? What are we learning from the dialogue? You cannot tell the audience what they are thinking unless you employ a voice-over. You cannot tell the audience exactly what they are feeling. You cannot break the scene to tell the audience that the feeling the character is having reminds them of how their father treated them as a kid. You could use a

voice-over, or write a soliloquy or monologue, but these are not techniques that audiences expect in modern film. Woody Allen might break the scene and talk to the camera in *Annie Hall*, but this is one of those rare exceptions. Voice-over is the most used technique, but it has been derided over the years as being “lazy” writing. Voice-over was also a staple of old Hollywood, including the highly stylized track in Wilder and Chandler’s classic *Double Indemnity*. In the modern day, film dislikes digression and voice-over is a last resort for a poorly written script. I will put the technique of voice-over off until later.

As an example of how a film is not like a novel or short story, we can look at Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado.” Poe is particularly interesting, as there have been many films made based on his writings and most have failed. Why? Most writers want to capture his macabre and psychological horror and translate it to film. This is aided by the fact that Poe’s stories are in the public domain and free for any budding filmmaker to use.

Poe was one of the first writers of genre, and his texts have inspired many writers and readers of horror and mystery. Why have so many filmmakers failed at bringing these stories to the screen with any degree of success? Let us look at the opening of “The Cask of Amontillado” to see how much we can adapt for the screen.

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul,

will not suppose, however, that gave utterance to a threat. At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely, settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong. It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation.

“Punish with impunity!” This is a great setup for a short story, but what is the film writer going to adapt? Poe has set up his story of revenge and punishment and the duplicity of the narrator. What do we see here? None of this is filmable. You might suggest a voice-over here but to what end and over what image? To think like a filmmaker, you need to shed that idea.

“You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that gave utterance to a threat.”

The audience just sees a man on film, nothing more. What can we *show* the audience that makes them think “nature of his soul?” So far, nothing. Let us read on.

He had a weak point —this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even

feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity, to practise imposture upon the British and Austrian millionaires. In painting and gemmery, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack, but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially; —I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could. It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend. He accosted me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand. I said to him— "My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking to-day. But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts."

Now let's put this into screenplay format.

EXT. CARNIVALE - NIGHT

FORTUNATO, wearing a tight-fitting parti-striped dress and conical cap and bells, approaches Montresor. Fortunato is not sure on his feet as he's had too much to drink.

Montresor greets him with a firm handshake and a large smile.

MONTRESOR

My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking today. But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts.

There is a lot of information in Poe's story as written, but what is useful for the film writer? The idea of revenge has no context on screen. If we start to build a scene, we will see two men meeting and there can be a little bit of dialogue representing some niceties but nothing else. How do we know about Fortunato's "connoisseurship of wine?" What is said in the film scene that tells the audience what Poe has already told us so easily in the story? Do we know its Carnival season? Does it matter? Showing this might cost the production a lot of money. The audience has no idea of the narrator's fondness of wine and we have no idea that Fortunato has a weakness, in that, he needs to be respected and feared. An audience in a theater has not learned anything, even though the written story has given us many details. You might ask, why not create a narrator like the book? To this I say, you are missing the entire point. Let us move on.

What happens next is that Montresor lures Fortunato to the damp catacombs towards the Cask of Amontillado. He has sent his staff home for the night, and Montresor plays with his victim by giving him ample opportunity to go back; but Fortunato wants to drink the rare Sherry in the cask. Eventually, when they get to the end of their journey, in what Poe describes as a niche,

Montresor binds Fortunato to the wall with chains. He gets to work quickly, and with trowel and brick, he walls Fortunato in. We find out at the end of the story that half a century later, no one has ever discovered the remains of Fortunato.

There is a lot of appeal in Poe's work for a filmmaker. His story drips with dread and atmosphere. His description of the catacombs leads the visual imagination into places that film loves—moody lighting, texture and shadow. There is a high sense of drama from the life and death struggle of Fortunato and the sinister plan by Montresor. The problem is that fundamentally, it is not a filmic story, although it feels like it should be. Why? The answer lies in the fact that most of this story is dependent on Montresor, who is the narrator of the story. This is his revenge. What is he avenging? Even the story itself is quite slight on this. As we read earlier, he justifies his revenge based on Fortunato's "insult." For this his murder will be done as punishment and punishment with impunity.

In adapting this to a more filmic narrative, what does the audience need to know, and how do they get this information? Remember, we aren't using the voice-over as a crutch (it wouldn't make the film any better if you were to use it). The audience needs to understand the nature of Fortunato's "insult." This is the question of *why* the story is taking place. Most likely, this would have to be done with dialogue. You might write the dialogue for Montresor while he is busy building the wall of bricks. This is the murderer's time for confession, but this takes on a James Bond villain technique (or what *The Incredibles*

referred satirically to as *monologuing*).

The main problem with “The Cask of Amontillado” is that it is an interior story where very little happens. It is in the mind of Montresor, and our experience with the story is through that point of view. Despite a weak reason for revenge, the story has an element of horror and darkness that draws us in. Poe’s use of the catacombs and their vivid description lights our imagination. Unfortunately, this does not translate well to film. Film is not an *interior* medium—it is an *external* medium. This means that we are more involved in a story when the characters are doing something that reveals character. In this story, we see Montresor lure Fortunato to the catacombs, and he effectively buries him alive. So what? Who does the audience engage with? Do we want Montresor to succeed in his revenge? We don’t even know what Fortunato has done, and an “insult” doesn’t really justify this act of madness. Poe’s story works because of the interior voice of Montresor and the reader’s own imagination. In film, we build the sets and watch the action unfold, and there is little need for imagination. For this story to work on film, we would have to create a story outside of this story. We would have to invent the incident where Montresor is slighted so the audience can relate to the story and to Montresor’s point of view. We would start to ask what Montresor wants from Fortunato that he has been denied, and we would ask the same of Fortunato. What does Fortunato want from Montresor? What would cause such a grave insult? The idea here is that we want to relate to these characters in the world of film so that we care about the outcome. What if

the audience knew that Fortunato had plans to give Montresor what he wanted and is bricked up before the information gets out? The murder then becomes tragic. And you will say that I am messing with Poe's story too much. And I will say that the film will not be as good as the book. Poe's story is not a film story.

Even the scene where Fortunato is bound and bricked up needs careful consideration. The idea of being bricked in and left to die in the dark is horrific for the reader. What you need to consider as a filmmaker is how this will take place in time. How will it play? We might be intrigued when Fortunato is bound and curious as to what Montresor has in store for him. Yet, laying bricks is not an exciting thing to watch. He might as well grab a paintbrush and paint the place too. It works in the novel because Poe can just say it and time is not a factor for the reader. It occurs in their imagination. In film it needs to play. Adding a big dissolve right after Montresor lays the first brick will kill any tension the scene has. Film has great tools to compress time (editing and transitions), but to do this in the climax of your story seems ludicrous. It becomes a big problem.

How do you sustain the tension for the audience? How do you sustain the dread and horror?

To bring Poe's story to life on film, the writer would have to do a lot of inventing, and this is where the fan of the book will say the film isn't as good as the book. Often the reader fails to understand why his or her favorite characters or incidents were cut out of the movie, and there is a great amount of disappointment because the film cannot contain the contents of the book. There

is also an entirely different pace and narrative drive with books and movies.

This brings us to one of the fundamental things that writers should ask themselves: Is my idea a good “film” idea? Having taught writing for years, I have found that many of my students want to write films but often submit ideas that are better suited for the theater. They write scenes that are verbal exchanges between characters in singular locations. If it works better, write it as a play. I will tell you this—you will have a much better chance of someone seeing your work if you write it as a play. Film is an expensive and logistically difficult medium and it is hard to get anything made and even harder to get it seen.

A prime example of an idea that is well suited for film is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, based on Cornell Woolrich’s short story, “It Had to be Murder.” It is the story of a voyeur who thinks he has witnessed a murder based on the unexplained circumstances he has seen in an apartment across the courtyard. Just as Hal Jeffries is the witness in the book, the audience becomes a witness in the film (with Jeffries played by Jimmy Stewart). Even though this story was meant to be short fiction, it begged for a film treatment as the nature of the story was of the protagonist *watching*, an ideal concept for a movie. What makes this material outstanding is that it centers on a character who comes to conclusions about an event based on what he *sees*. He watches the actions of his neighbor across the courtyard, and he comes to conclusions based on what he has seen. It is a perfect story for film. Just as Jeffries sees the actions of his neighbor, we

see them also. We can judge Jeffries based on what we have seen because we, as the audience, are participants in the experience of the protagonist. This is a purely cinematic idea and one that Hitchcock seized on in making this film.

It is very interesting to see *Rear Window* develop from the short story to Hitchcock's film, adapted superbly by John Michael Hayes. The short story is quite simple and sparse, and Hayes and Hitchcock had to invent a great deal of story to fill in the two-hour running time. The short story basically has three characters: Jeffries, his houseman Sam, and the detective Boyne.

Thorwald is the object of Jeffries suspicion. In the adaptation Hayes and Hitchcock created, Lisa Fremont (Grace Kelly) is a model and the love interest for Jeffries. Jeffries, a freewheeling adventurer and professional photographer, resists a committed relationship for fear that it might change his high-octane lifestyle. Hays and Hitchcock change the fairly straight character of the houseman Sam to a wise-cracking Stella (Thelma Ritter). They also flesh out the story with small silent stories of the neighbors across the courtyard. In addition, Hayes and Hitchcock invent "Miss Lonelyhearts," the frustrated Songwriter, "Miss Torso," and they expand on the newlyweds. For the most part, the main thrust of the short story provides the blueprint for the structure of the film. Jeffries notices that Thorwald's wife is no longer with him, and he begins to believe that Thorwald has murdered her in the apartment, dismembered her body, and buried her somewhere.

What makes *Rear Window* so cinematic and a great example of visual story telling is that we see what Jeffries sees. We never

change this perspective. We see what he sees and we must come to the conclusion that his imagination has gone into overdrive, or that Thorwald has indeed murdered his wife. We experience the film through Jeffries, and this is one of the great concepts of filmmaking.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK* VERSUS *ATTACK OF THE CLONES

To try to illuminate the point further, we can compare the two middle films in the *Star Wars* trilogies. Both of these films start out with a bang. The first act of *The Empire Strikes Back* starts with the Rebels being discovered on the ice planet Hoth. Luke learns of the Jedi Master Yoda, and the Rebels flee when Vader arrives and a battle ensues. The first act of *Attack of the Clones* features an attempted assassination of Senator Padmé Amidala. She is put under the protection of Obiwan and Anakin, and upon the second attempt on her life, a large scale hunt ensues with the two Jedis attempting to capture the assassin. The assassin is killed by a poison dart sent from a second assassin before they can identify who is behind the plot to kill the Senator.

This is where the two films diverge. In *Empire*, Luke escapes and makes his way to find Yoda in order to complete his training as a Jedi. This is a very active idea and the audience has to go on this journey with him. In the subplot of *Empire*, Han, Leia, Chewbacca, and the Droids are under heavy pursuit by Imperial Starships. Their hyperdrive is broken and they can't jump to light speed to get away.

In *Attack of the Clones*, Obiwan discovers the source of the poison from the dart, and he is sent to the planet Kamino to investigate. Again, Obiwan is active, and there is a mystery to be solved. In the subplot, Anakin is sent to Naboo to protect the Senator, who is going to be hidden away from further attempts on her life. Now, this seems to be an active goal, but it turns out that nothing actually happens. There is no danger or tension in these scenes, and they seem to be designed to be “conversations” that would lead to the development of the love story. This is where the story halts and the audience gets restless.

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Han and Leia’s love story is developed while they are *doing* something. Little moments are drawn out while they try to fix the hyperdrive. It happens while they duck and dodge their Imperial pursuers. There is momentum and tension in the story, and during this Han and Leia learn that they are attracted to each other, and this culminates in the third act where love is professed. This is a very cinematic approach. We learn about characters as they *do* things and react to the pressures of the conflict. Compare this to the development of the love story in *Attack of the Clones*. Everything that happens, happens through dialogue. At one point, they are discussing politics during a picnic and Anakin hints at his dislike of democracy and his interest in an autocratic rule. In literature, this is called “foreshadowing,” but in this film, there is no need for it. What they need to do is show us. What does Anakin *do* that suggests he doesn’t like democracy? Does he shut down all discussion

and make everyone go with his ideas? Since nothing actually happens on Naboo, the answer is no. It is all tell and no show.

This is what “visual” story telling means. It isn’t symbolism; it’s about trying to express your story through the actions of your characters. If you were to remove the dialogue, would the audience get a sense of what is going on? If the answer is yes, then your film is working as a film.

If the answer is no, then you might be writing a radio play.