

KEEPING IT VISUAL

Using The Director's Perspective

By Kate Tremills

As writers, our first love is the written word. We continually search for the perfect phrase or the right expression. As screenwriters, we work in a visual medium where directors literally call the shots. This article explores ways to bridge the gap between simple words on a page and the visuals that will have directors lining up to make your script.

PERSPECTIVE

The core of every great film is the story. The screenwriter's first job is to build a solid script with real characters, a clear theme, and an interesting plot. Regardless of how good the visuals are, they mean nothing if the story is weak. Even in an action film, the fight scenes and car chases need to evolve naturally from the story and play a key role in moving the plot forward. Otherwise, your visuals are wasted on a movie that no one wants to see.

Once you know your story is solid, it's time to shift gears. Film truly is a director's medium and directors are attracted to scripts that inspire them. While you can't (and shouldn't) go so far as to specify the shots, you can create unique environments, great locations, and character tension. Think about the film visuals that stay with you for weeks after you leave the cinema. These scenes are your models.

Set aside the time to do a "visual draft." Read through your pages with an eye for ways to add impact to the story and to provide information in a visual, rather than an expository, way. If you're writing an adaptation, ask yourself the hard questions. Be sure that you haven't just re-told the novel or play in a different format. You must always remember that you are writing for a *visual* medium where actions speak louder than words.

Unlike theatre and even television, film tells a story on a grand scale. You may be writing a delicate character piece, but what makes it a feature film? What locations provide impressive visual impact? Paint pictures in the reader's mind. Inspire your audience to see things on a different scale. Use the big screen to its full potential. Visuals set the tone for your story and can be used to establish not just location, but theme, character, and even history.

THINK LIKE A DIRECTOR

The best way to get a sense of what directors look for in a script is to ask. Even better, show your script to a range of directors that you respect. Make it clear that you're looking for feedback to improve your visuals. Ask what appealed to their director sensibilities. What would they change? What did they like?

Did the script read as filmic? If not, why not?

As with any read, you'll get a wide variety of responses. You can wade through the opinions and take the advice that hits home. Use their feedback to take your work up a notch and write with more impact. Their advice will also help to build your visual instinct. Your next project will be more powerful from the idea stage instead of waiting for the polish.

Embracing director feedback is a critical step in every writer's career. Unless you plan to direct your own work, someone else is going to put a cinematic stamp on your story. By learning to think and write visually, you get to build the foundation for this collaboration.

Go one step further and educate yourself about the director's role on a film, from script to post-production. This may seem like overkill, but it will actually give you perspective on what is required to create a film from the words you write. Listen to the director's commentary on DVDs to understand how *they* see a scene and what their major concerns are.

Another approach is to read the original, selling script for your favorite movies. The script often looks completely different from the final movie. Make notes on what changes were made and whether you think they made a difference to the visual impact of the film. Each

of these steps makes you a more knowledgeable, and therefore more powerful, collaborator.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The biggest visual impact in your script comes from your locations. Unique places always grab a director's interest because they haven't lost their impact on the audience. If you haven't fixed your locations yet, brainstorm for fresh possibilities. How would the setting add perspective or humor to the character dialogue? Does the location offer a variety of interesting angles and viewpoints? Setting the camera angles is not your responsibility, but being aware of the options makes you a better collaborator.

Directors love "set pieces." These are scenes with a big event, a great location, and/or many interesting things to watch. They are the kind of scenes that you always remember. Think about your favorite movies. What scenes came to mind? Some of the most famous scenes from *When Harry Met Sally* either use classic New York City locations as the backdrop or create an unusual scene in a very typical location. The restaurant and the car scenes are unforgettable because the writers pushed the limit of what they could do in those locations.

If you are writing a small

film or know you have a small budget, you don't need to be limited by your locations. Use your restrictions as a jumping point for brainstorming. Locations are more than just a backdrop; they add to the tension and/or set the tone for the scene. Placing a heated argument in a church creates immediate tension. Think about what the place adds to the scene. If the entire script is set in a house, how can you play with the familiarity? Can a room reflect the theme or echo the tension between your characters? What can you do that hasn't already been seen?

Certain locations have been used so often that they have become clichés. Try to stay away from locations that have been overused like strip clubs, casinos, and bars. If one of these places is critical to your

story, think about how you can use them in a fresh way. Where can you give a director room to shoot something that will grab the audience? Work hard to make your locations as interesting as possible. You can be sure that your director will return the favor.

SHOW DON'T TELL

Every writer has heard about this golden rule of screenwriting. In a visual medium, you need to show what happened instead of having characters talk about what happened. More often than not, however, writers let their characters discuss an event instead of letting audiences see the scene. Talking may work in a courtroom drama, but in most other genres action speaks louder than words. Directors will

always be more interested in stories where characters directly move the story forward rather than talking it forward.

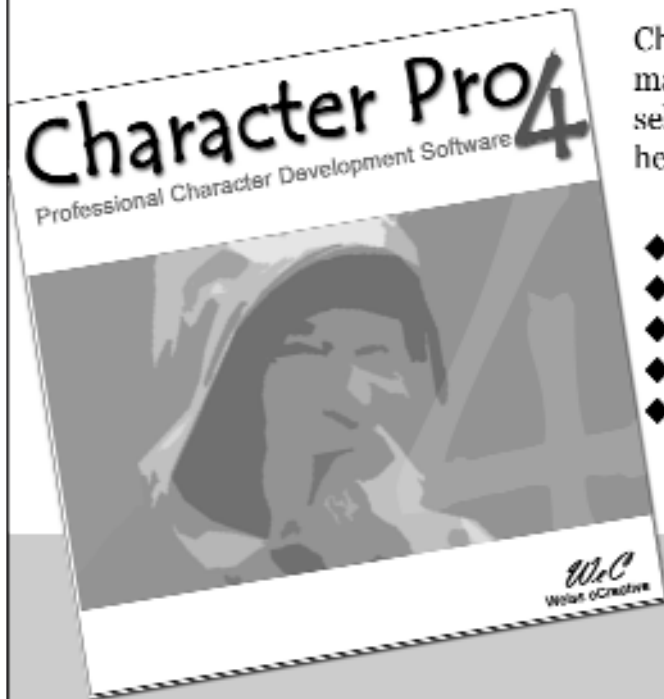
This rule doesn't just apply to avoiding expository dialogue. Strong scripts also open with visual scenes to establish the theme of the story right away. By doing this, you are simultaneously setting up your story and giving directors confidence that you understand your medium. Think about movies such as *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* or *The Sixth Sense* that open with powerful cinematic scenes to establish character, theme, and conflict. The audience is immediately hooked because they follow gripping (or touching) action and draw their own conclusions instead of being spoon-fed the information.

These principles also apply

to comedy and drama. In comedy, physical humor brings a refreshing contrast to wise-cracking and joke telling. Actors and directors enjoy the challenge of making an audience laugh without words. The lack of dialogue also opens the possibility for sympathy and vulnerability, adding depth to the humor. Movies such as *Six Days, Seven Nights* and *Tootsie* use physical humor to expose the characters in a way that dialogue cannot. Use this as an opportunity to take greater comedic risks instead of worrying over direct dialogue.

In drama, perhaps more than any other genre, the balance between action and words is delicate. Too much dialogue can destroy a tender or a tense moment. When writing these crucial scenes, less is always more. Focus your energy on

Story is 90% Character



Characters drive a story forward. Great characters make a story exciting, memorable and, ultimately, sellable. Now there's a software program that can help you create those great characters every time.

- ◆ Instantly generate a complete character spine
- ◆ Detail your character with development tools
- ◆ Format the profile with a built-in word processor
- ◆ Keep your characters handy with Writing Mode
- ◆ Based on the Enneagram personality types

Available at writersstore.com,
screenwriterstore.co.uk or buy direct.

www.characterpro.com
511 S. First Street, #261, Arcadia, California 91006

conveying the subtext of the scene. Trust that your talented collaborators, the director and actors, will understand how to convey the powerful emotions. Movies such as *Solaris*, *Cast Away*, and *Run Lola Run* are classic examples of stories with minimal dialogue but maximum emotional impact. Study the scripts for these movies to see how to convey the key elements of a story with action. Push yourself to use visuals where you instinctively want to use dialogue. Your writing will grow and directors will be impressed.

GIVE YOUR STORY SPACE

One of the best things about dialogue is that it gives your script space on the page. By giving up dialogue to write more descriptive action, your

pages are going to appear crowded. Breaking up the action gives your scenes space and improves the pace of the read. This may seem like a superficial point, but the quality of the read makes all the difference in selling your script. Directors (and producers) want to see a solid story with strong pacing on the page before they commit to the movie. Good ideas and clever dialogue aren't enough.

Use this principle to punch up your action and tighten the focus of each scene. Strip out sentences that slow down the flow of the emotional tension. Be brutal. The fastest way to excite someone about your script is to write scenes and scene sequences that she cannot put down. Directors in particular will be passionate about capturing that dynamic pace



on film. The more you can excite and challenge directors, the harder they will fight for your project to get made.

ACTION, CUT, PRINT

Directors and writers are natural allies in the creative process. By writing stories that are visually strong, your work will rise to the top of the script pile. A passionate director has the power to get the project

rolling and, more important, the talent to realize your vision. Embrace the collaborative process by using the director's perspective to write more powerful scripts. ■

Kate Tremills is a writer/producer based in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. She works as a writer and editor in many capacities including screenwriter, business writer, columnist, and story editor. She has five feature screenplays and several short scripts to her credit. Kate can be contacted via e-mail at ktremills@telus.net.

EXCELLENT
MovieMaker

TERRIFIC
Creative Screenwriting

RECOMMEND
CineWomen

ACTION/CUT FILMMAKING SEMINARS

EXCELLENT
Filmmakers Alliance

ESSENTIAL
Script

ILLUMINATING
ScreenTalk

THE MOST NATIONALLY ACCLAIMED FILMMAKING SEMINAR IN THE INDUSTRY



IN 2-DAYS, YOU WILL LEARN

FILMMAKING SHOT-BY-SHOT

Only industry seminar taught by working director/writer: Guy Magar



FALL 2003 USA TOUR SCHEDULE

DENVER	HOUSTON	PHILADELPHIA	LOS ANGELES	SAN FRANCISCO	NORWALK
Oct. 11-12	Oct. 18-19	Oct. 25-26	Nov. 1-2	Nov. 8-9	Nov. 15-16

ESSENTIAL INDUSTRY SEMINAR
FOR FILMMAKERS & SCREENWRITERS

Writing Visually & Selling Your Scripts - Filmmaking Tools - Director's Techniques - Schedules & Budgets - Casting Actors Location Scouting - Camera Shots & Angles - Cinematography - Blocking & Working With Actors - Editing - Magic of Music Visual & CGI Effects - Financing Your Film - Distribution Deals - Festivals & Creating Buzz - Making Your Reel - Digital Revolution

Also Available

DVD & VHS

The most successful 12-hour home filmmaking course sold worldwide!

(800) 815-5545



IGNITE YOUR
PASSION

Workbooks - Film Clips - Shot Lists
Set Diagrams - Financing - Distribution

WWW.ACTIONCUT.COM

Source: © 2002 Twentieth Century Fox. All Rights Reserved. Photo by Bob Mumshak.