The Scene

Wherein we approach the scene:

The scene is the single most important element in your screenplay. It is where something happens—where something specific happens. It is a specific unit of action—and the place you tell your story.

Good scenes make good movies. When you think of a good movie, you remember scenes, not the entire film. Think of Psycho. What scene do you recall? The shower scene, of course. What about Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid? Star Wars? Citizen Kane? Casablanca?

The way you present your scenes on the page ultimately affects the entire screenplay. A screenplay is a reading experience.

The purpose of the scene is to move the story forward.

A scene is as long or short as you want. It can be a three-page dialogue scene, or as short as a single shot—a car streaking down the highway. The scene is what you want it to be.

The story determines how long or how short your scene is. There is only one rule to follow; trust your story. It will tell you everything you need to know. I've noticed many people have a tendency to make a rule for everything. If there are 18 scenes and two sequences in the first 30 pages of some screenplay or movie, they feel their first 30 pages must have 18 scenes and two sequences. You can't write a screenplay following numbers as you do a drugstore painting.

It doesn't work—trust your story to tell you what you need to know.

We're going to approach the scene from two sides: We're going to explore the generalities of the scene, that is, the form, and then we'll examine the specifics of the scene; how you create a scene from the elements, or components you have within that scene.

Two things are in every scene—PLACE and TIME.

Where does your scene take place? In an office? A car? At the beach? In the mountains? On a crowded city street? What is the location of the scene?

The other element is time. What time of day or night does your scene take place? In the morning? Afternoon? Late at night?

Every scene occurs within a specific place at a specific time. All you need to indicate, however, is DAY or NIGHT.

Where does your scene take place? Inside or outside; or INT. for interior, EXT. for exterior. So the form of the scene becomes:

INT. LIVING ROOM—NIGHT
or
EXT. STREET—DAY

PLACE and TIME. You need to know these two things before you can build and construct a scene.

If you change either place or time it becomes a new scene.

We saw, in the first ten pages of Chinatown, Curly in
Jake's office, upset because of his wife. Gitties gives him a drink of cheap whiskey, they walk out of his office into the reception area.

When they move from Nicholson's office into the reception area, it is a new scene; they have changed place.

Gitties is called into his associate's office and hired by the phony Mrs. Mulwray. The scene in the associate's office is a new scene. They have changed the place of the scene—one scene in Gitties' office, another in the reception area, and another in his associate's office. Three scenes in the office sequence.

If your scene takes place in a house, and you move from the bedroom to kitchen to living room, you have three individual scenes. Your scene might take place in the bedroom between a man and woman. They kiss passionately, then move to the bed. When the CAMERA PANS to the window where the sky changes from night to day, then PANS back to our couple waking up, it is a new scene. You have changed the time of your scene.

If your character is driving a car up a mountain road at night and you want to show him at different locations, you must change your scenes accordingly: EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD—NIGHT to EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD, FURTHER—NIGHT.

There's a reason for this; the physical necessity of changing the position of the CAMERA for each scene or shot in the new location. Each scene requires a change in Camera position (Note: the word Camera is always capitalized in the screenplay) and therefore requires a change in lighting. That's why movie crews are so large and the cost of filming a movie is so expensive, approximately $10,000 per minute. As the price of labor escalates, the cost per minute increases and we end up paying more at the box office.

Scene changes are absolutely essential in the development of your screenplay. The scene is where it all happens—where you tell your story in moving pictures.

A scene is constructed in terms of beginning, middle, and end, just like a screenplay. Or, it can be presented in part, a portion of the whole like showing only the end of the scene. Again, there's no rule—it is your story, so you make the rules.

Every scene reveals at least one element of necessary story information to reader or audience. Very rarely does it provide more. The information the audience receives is the nucleus, or purpose, of the scene.

Generally, there are two kinds of scenes: one, where something happens visually, like an action scene—the chase that opens Star Wars, or the fight scenes in Rocky. The other is a dialogue scene between one or more persons. Most scenes combine the two. In a dialogue scene, there's usually some action going on, and in an action scene, there's usually some dialogue. A dialogue scene is usually about three pages long or less. That's three minutes of screen time. Sometimes it's longer, but not often. The "aborted" love scene in Silver Streak is nine pages long; a few scenes in Network are seven pages long. If you write a dialogue scene between two people, try to keep it under three pages. There's no room in your screenplay to be "cute," "clever," or "gimmicky." You can tell your life story in three minutes if you have to; most scenes in contemporary screenplays are only a few pages long.

Within the body of your scene, something specific happens—your characters move from point A to point B; or your story moves from point A to point B. Your story always moves forward. Even in "flashback." Julia, Annie Hall, and Midnight Cowboy are structured to include the flashback as
an integral part of the story. The flashback is a technique used to expand the audience's comprehension of story, characters, and situation. It is also a dated technique in many ways. Tony Bill, the producer/director/actor, says, "When I see a flashback in a script, I know the story's in trouble. It's an easy way out for the novice writer." Your story should be executed in action, not flashback. Unless you're really creative, like Woody Allen in *Annie Hall*, or Alvin Sargent in *Julia*, avoid them.

They "date" your material immediately.

How do you go about creating a scene?

First create the *context*, then determine *content*.

What happens in the scene? What is the *purpose* of the scene? Why is it there? How does it move the story forward?

What happens?

An actor sometimes approaches a scene by finding out what he's doing there, where he's been and where he's going after the scene. What is his purpose in the scene? Why is he there?

As writer, it's your responsibility to know why your characters are in a scene, and how their actions, or dialogue, move the story forward. You've got to know what happens to your characters in the scenes, as well as what happens to them *in between* the scenes; what happened between the office Monday afternoon, and Thursday evening at dinner? If you don't know, who does?

By creating *context*, you determine dramatic purpose and can build your scene line by line, action by action. By creating *context*, you establish *content*.

Okay. How do you do that?

First, find the *components* or *elements* within the scene. What aspect of your character's *professional* life, *personal* life, or *private* life is going to be revealed?

Let's go back to the story of three guys holding up the Chase Manhattan Bank. Suppose we want to write a scene where our characters definitely decide to rob the bank. Up until now, they've only talked about it. Now, they're going to do it. That's *context*. Now, *content*.

*Where* does your scene take place?

In the bank? Home? Bar? Inside a car? Walking in the park? The obvious place to set it would be in a quiet, secluded location, perhaps a rented car on the highway. That's the obvious place for the scene. It works, but maybe there's something more visual we can use; this is, after all, a movie.

Actors often play "against the grain" of a scene; that is, they approach the scene not from the obvious approach, but the *unobvious* approach. For example, they'll play an "angry" scene smiling softly, hiding their rage or anger beneath a façade of niceness. Brando is a master at this.

In *Silver Streak*, Colin Higgins writes a love scene between Jill Clayburgh and Gene Wilder in which they talk about flowers! It's beautiful. Orson Welles, in *The Lady From Shanghai*, had a love scene with Rita Hayworth in an aquarium, in front of the sharks and barracudas.

When you're writing a scene, look for a way that dramatizes the scene "against the grain."

Suppose we use a crowded pool hall, at night, as the setting for the "decision" scene in our Chase Manhattan Bank story. We can introduce an element of suspense in the scene; as our characters shoot pool and discuss their decision to rob the bank, a policeman enters, wanders around. It adds a touch of dramatic tension. Hitchcock does it all the time. Visually, we might open with a shot of the eight ball, then pull back to reveal our characters leaning over the table talking about the job.

Once the *context* is determined—the purpose, place, and time—then the *content* follows.
Suppose we want to write a scene about the ending of a relationship. How would we do it?

First—establish the purpose of the scene. In this case it is the ending of a relationship. Second—find out where the scene takes place and when, day or night. It could take place in a car, on a walk, in a movie theater, or a restaurant. Let's use a restaurant; it's an ideal place to end a relationship.

Here's context. Have they been together long? How long? In relationships about to end, usually one person wants it to end and the other person hopes it won't. Let's say he wants to end it with her. He doesn't want to hurt her; he wants to be as "nice" and "civilized" as he can.

Of course, it always backfires. Remember the breakup scene in An Unmarried Woman, where Michael Murphy has lunch with Jill Clayburgh, but can't force himself to say the words. He waits until they're on the street, after lunch, then breaks down and blurts out the words.

First, find the components of the scene. What is there in a restaurant that we can use dramatically? The waiters, the food, someone sitting nearby; an old friend?

The content of the scene now becomes part of the context. He doesn't want to "hurt" her, so he's quiet and uncomfortable. Use the uncomfortableness: run-on sentences, starting off into the distance, watching nearby diners; perhaps the waiter overhears a few remarks, and he's a surly Frenchman, possibly gay. You get to choose!

This is a method that allows you to stay on top of your story, so the story's not on top of you. As a writer, you must exercise choice and responsibility in the construction and presentation of your scenes.

Look for conflicts; make something difficult, more difficult. It adds tension.

Remember the scene at the outdoor restaurant in Annie Hall? Annie tells Woody Allen that she just wants to be his "friend," and not continue their relationship. Both are uncomfortable and this adds tension to the scene by heightening the comedic overtones; when he leaves the restaurant he collides with several cars, tears up his driver's license in front of a policeman. It's hysterical! Woody Allen utilizes the situation for maximum dramatic effectiveness.

Comedy works by creating a situation, then letting people act and react to the situation and each other. In comedy, you can't have your characters playing for laughs; they have to believe what they're doing, otherwise it becomes forced and contrived, and therefore, unfunny.

Remember the Italian film Divorce, Italian Style, with Marcello Mastroianni? A classic film comedy, only a thin line separates it from being a classic tragedy. Comedy and tragedy are two sides of the same coin. Mastroianni is married to a woman who makes enormous sexual demands on him and he can't cope with it. Especially when he meets a voluptuous young cousin who's crazy about him. He wants a divorce but, alas, the Church won't recognize it. What's an Italian man to do? The only way the Church will recognize the end of the marriage is for the wife to die. But she's as healthy as a horse.

He decides to kill her. Under Italian law, the only way he can kill her with honor and get away with it is if she's unfaithful; he has to be cuckolded. So he sets out to find a lover for his wife.

That's the situation!

After many, many funny moments, she is unfaithful to him, and his Italian honor demands he take action. He tracks her and her lover to an island in the Aegean Sea, and searches for them, gun in hand.

The characters are caught within the web of circumstances...
and play their roles with exaggerated seriousness; the result is film comedy at its best.

Woody Allen generates beautiful situations. In Annie Hall, Sleeper, and Play It Again, Sam, he creates a situation and then lets his characters react to them. In comedy, says Woody Allen, "acting funny is the worst thing you can do."

Comedy, like drama, depends on "real people in real situations."

Neil Simon creates marvelous people who operate at cross-purposes, then lets the "sparks fly" as they encounter obstacle after obstacle. He establishes a strong situation, then puts strong, believable people in it. In The Goodbye Girl, Richard Dreyfuss sublets an apartment from a friend, and when he arrives to take possession, in the midst of a driving rainstorm at three o'clock in the morning, he finds the apartment occupied by Marsha Mason and her daughter. She refuses to leave because "possession is nine-tenths of the law!"

What follows is scene after scene of verbal humor; they hate each other, tolerate each other, finally love each other.

When you set out to write a scene, find the purpose of the scene, then root it in place and time. Then find the elements or components within the scene to build it and make it work.

One of my favorite scenes from Chinatown is when Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway are at her house after the Mar Vista Home for the Aged sequence. During the previous 18 hours, Gittes has almost drowned, been beaten up twice, had his nose sliced, lost one Florsheim shoe, and has had no sleep at all. He's tired and hurts all over.

His nose hurts. He asks her if she has any peroxide to clean his nose wound, and she takes him into the bathroom. She daubs his nose, and he notices something in her eye, a slight color defect. Their eyes hold, then he leans forward and kisses her.

The next scene takes place after they've made love. It's a beautiful illustration of what you should look for when you plan a scene. Find the components within the scene to make it work; in this case, it was the hydrogen peroxide in the bathroom.

Every scene, like a sequence, an act, or an entire screenplay, has a definite beginning, middle, and end. But you only need to show part of the scene. You can choose to show only the beginning, just the middle, or only the end.

For example, in three-guys-holding-up-the-Chase-Manhattan-Bank, you can start the scene in the middle when they're playing pool. The beginning of the scene, where they arrive, get a table, practice, then start the game, does not have to be shown unless you choose to show it. The ending of the scene, when they leave the pool hall, doesn't have to be shown either.

Very rarely is a scene depicted in its entirety. The scene, more often than not, is a fragment of the whole. William Goldman, who wrote Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and All The President's Men, among others, once remarked that he doesn't enter his scenes until the last possible moment; that is, just before the ending of some specific action in the scene.

In the bathroom scene in Chinatown, Towne shows the beginning of the love scene, then cuts to the ending of the bed scene.

You, as writer, are completely in control of how you create your scenes to move your story forward. You choose what part of the scene you are going to show.

Colin Higgins is a writer of unique film comedies. (With Foul Play he's become a director as well.) Harold and Maude is a fantastic comic situation—a young man of twenty and a woman of eighty create a special relationship together. Har-
old and Maude is a case where the audience gradually found the film and over a period of years made it an underground “classic” of the American cinema.

In Silver Streak Higgins creates a marvelous love scene that is “against the grain.” Gene Wilder, as George, and Jill Clayburgh, as Hilly, have met in the dining car, like each other, and get drunk together. They decide to spend the evening together. She gets the room, and he gets the champagne. The scene opens as George returns to his compartment, flushed with alcohol and expectation.

INT. THE CORRIDOR—NIGHT
Giggling to himself and humming “The Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe,” George makes his way down the corridor. Suddenly one of the Fat Men steps out of his compartment at the far end and begins walking toward George. George stops and leans against a door to let him pass. It is a very tight and difficult maneuver for the Fat Man to pass and in the struggle George’s hand lands on the door handle. Immediately the door flies open and George staggers back into the room. He turns to see a large, ugly MEXICAN LADY in her nightshirt kneeling at her bed saying her prayers. She takes one look at George and in violent Spanish begins panic-praying to ward off the oncoming rape.

George freaks, and bowing and mumbling apologies, hurriedly exits to the safety of the corridor, closing the door behind him. He pauses for a moment to regain his composure, burps, and then starts off again. Immediately the second Fat Man

Man exits from his compartment and makes his way toward George. George sighs but not wishing to go through the whole scene again he backs up past the Mexican Lady’s door, and knocks on the next door down. He opens it, steps inside for a second to let the Fat Man pass, then turns to the occupant. He is a very distinguished gentleman, suavely attired, who looks up from the papers he has been reading. This is ROGER DEVEREAU.

GEORGE

Excuse me.

Not waiting for a response George smiles and quickly closes the door. He continues on down the corridor.

INT. GEORGE’S CORRIDOR
George arrives outside his door and knocks.

HILLY’S VOICE

Come in.

George enters.

INT. GEORGE’S COMPARTMENT
True to her word Hilly has gotten the porter to push back the partition and make their two rooms into one. The effect is remarkably spacious—and very romantic as the two couches have been turned into beds. George looks around and smiles.

GEORGE

This is very nice.

Hilly is lying on her bed with her shoes on. She is putting a tape into her portable cassette player.