

Words Into Pictures:
Adapting Literary Works for Film and TV
AWP19
Saturday, March 30, 10:30AM

PARTICIPANTS

Brian Price is an award-winning screenwriter who's worked with major studios and independent producers from around the world. He teaches screenwriting at UCLA, Yale University, and Johns Hopkins University, and is the author of *Classical Storytelling and Contemporary Screenwriting* (Focal Press).

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Ayn Carrillo-Gailey's memoir *Pornology* has been adapted into the upcoming feature film, *A Nice Girl Like You*, starring Lucy Hale (*Pretty Little Liars*) and Jackie Cruz (*Orange is the New Black*). She is also a co-executive producer. Ayn has written for *Elle*, *Latina*, *Documentary*, Showtime, PBS, and Fox Studios, and is currently finishing her first novel.

@ayngailey

Samuel W. Gailey is the critically acclaimed author of *Deep Winter*, hailed by the *NY Times* as 'Beautifully written'. The *NY Journal of Books* describes his newest novel, *The Guilt We Carry*, as 'the *Breaking Bad* of the book world'. Samuel has also worked as a screenwriter for Showtime & Fox.

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Cheryl Eagan-Donovan is a filmmaker whose new documentary *Nothing Is Truer than Truth*, based on the book "*Shakespeare*" *By Another Name*, is available on iTunes, Amazon, and in stores. She teaches screenwriting and cinema at Lesley University, Northeastern University, Lasell College and Grub Street.

@controversyfilm

Aesthetic Rubric for Film Translations of Literature

From Literature Into Film by Lina Costanzo Cahir

The critical evaluation of a film translation of a novel should not be purely arbitrary. Instead, it needs to be grounded in an informed aesthetics, a defined standard against which all critical appraisals of literature-based films are gauged. At its most basic and constitutive, four fundamental qualities contribute to the success of a literature-based film.

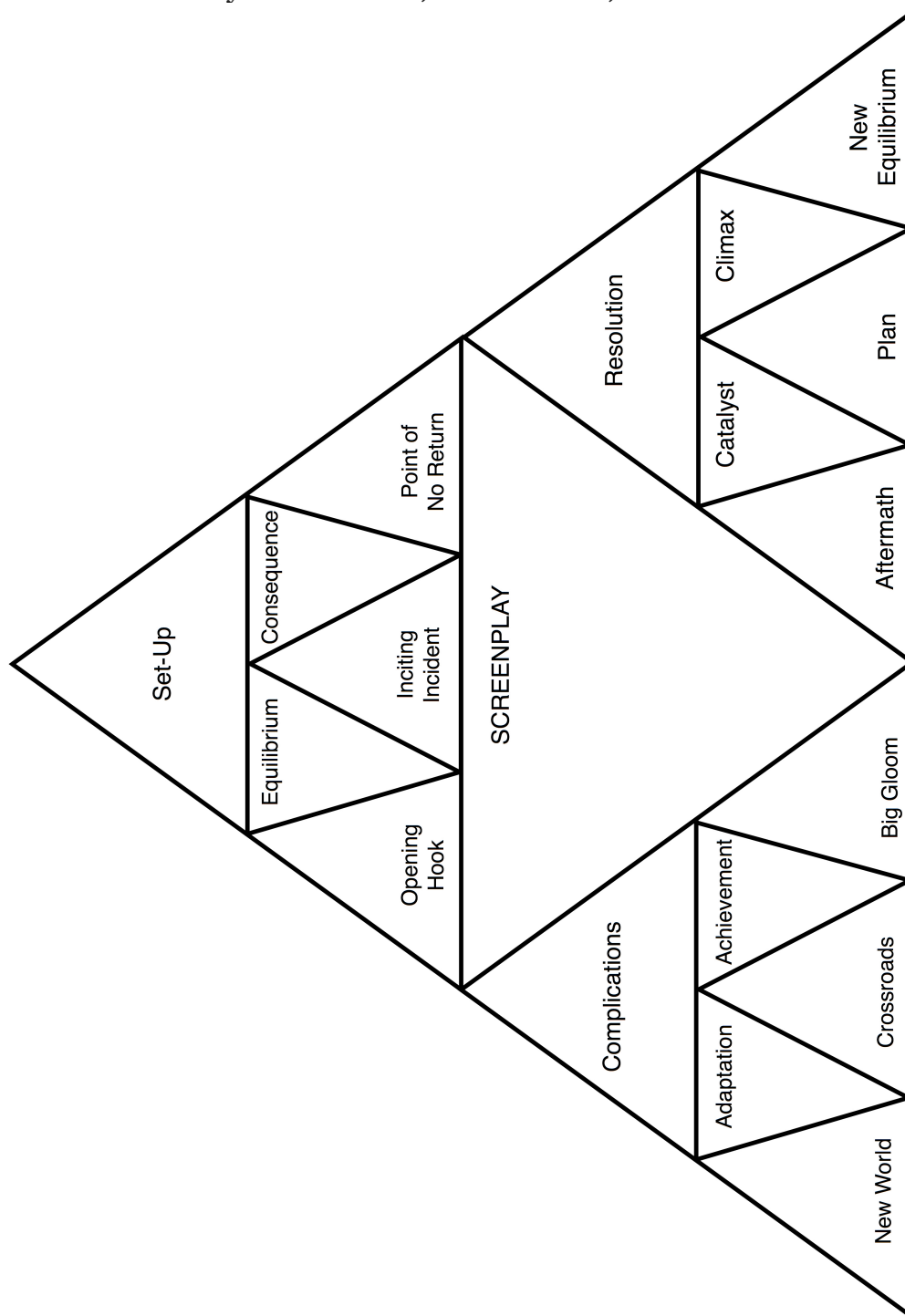
These four characteristics are:

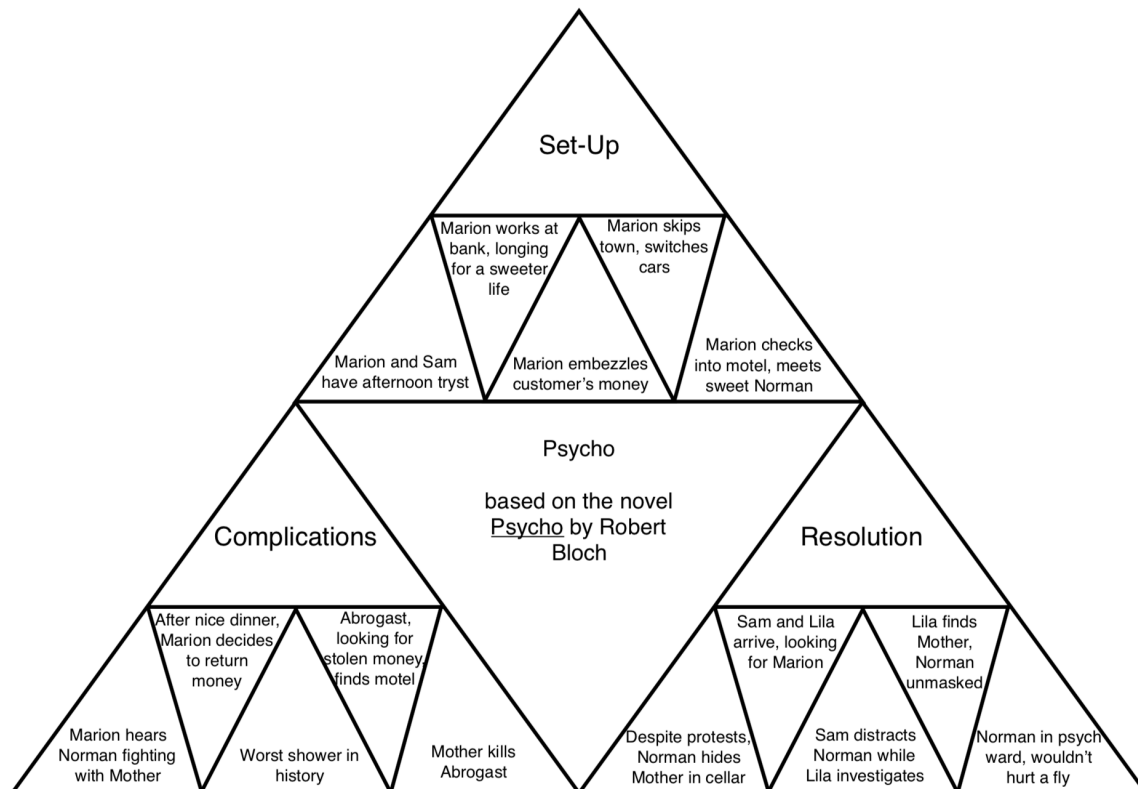
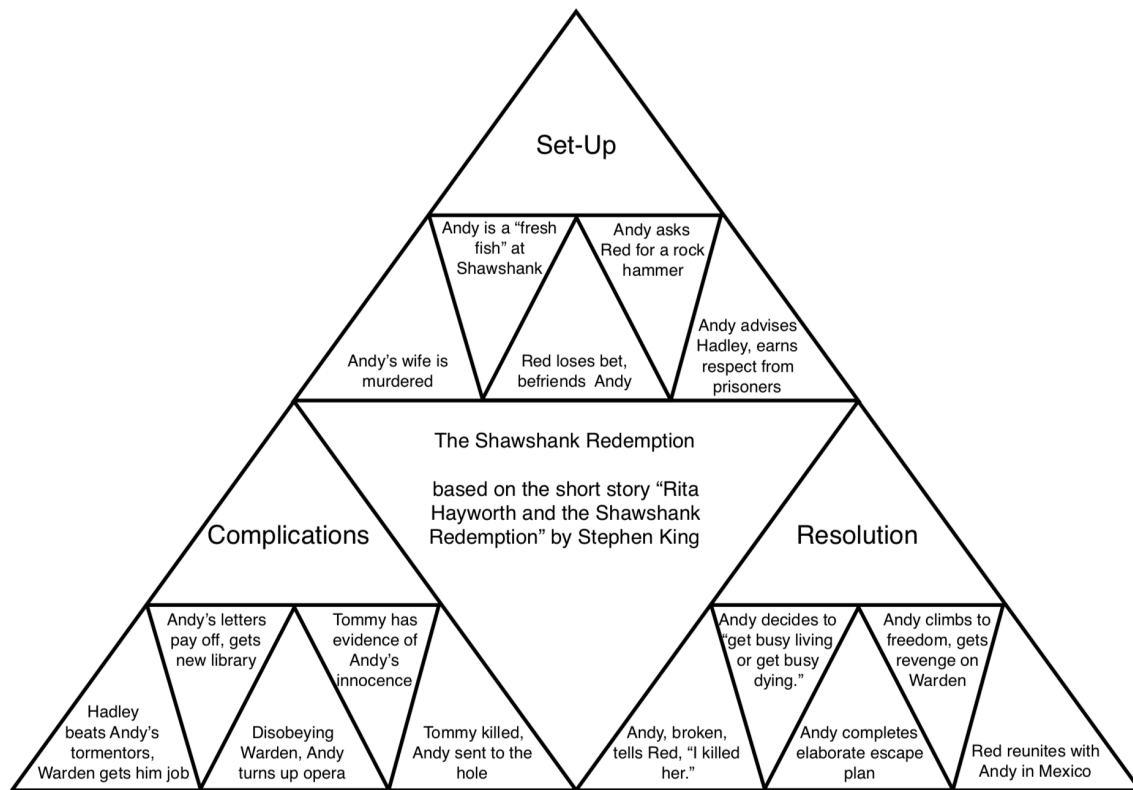
1. The film must communicate definite ideas concerning the integral meaning and value of the literary text, as the filmmakers interpret it.
2. The film must exhibit a collaboration of filmmaking skills (the details of which are provided in Chapter II).
3. The film must demonstrate an audacity to create a work that stands as a world apart, that exploits the literature in such a way that a self-reliant, but related, aesthetic offspring is born.
4. The film cannot be so self-governing as to be completely independent of or antithetical to the source material.

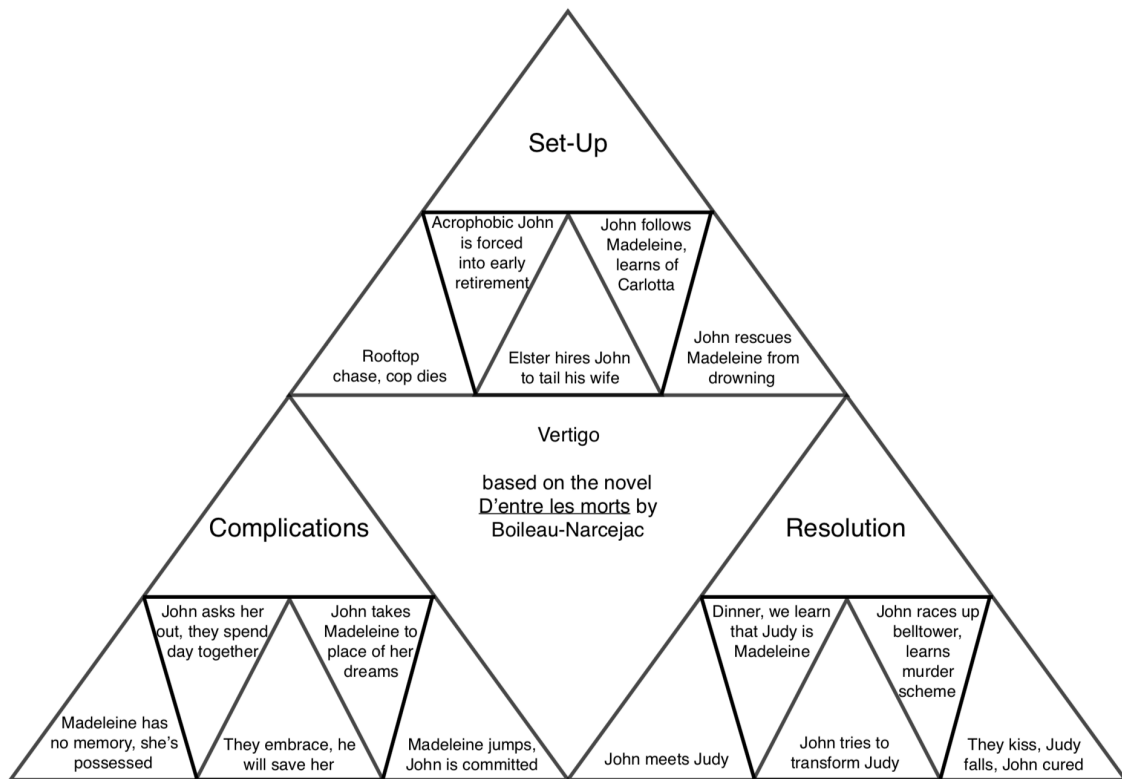
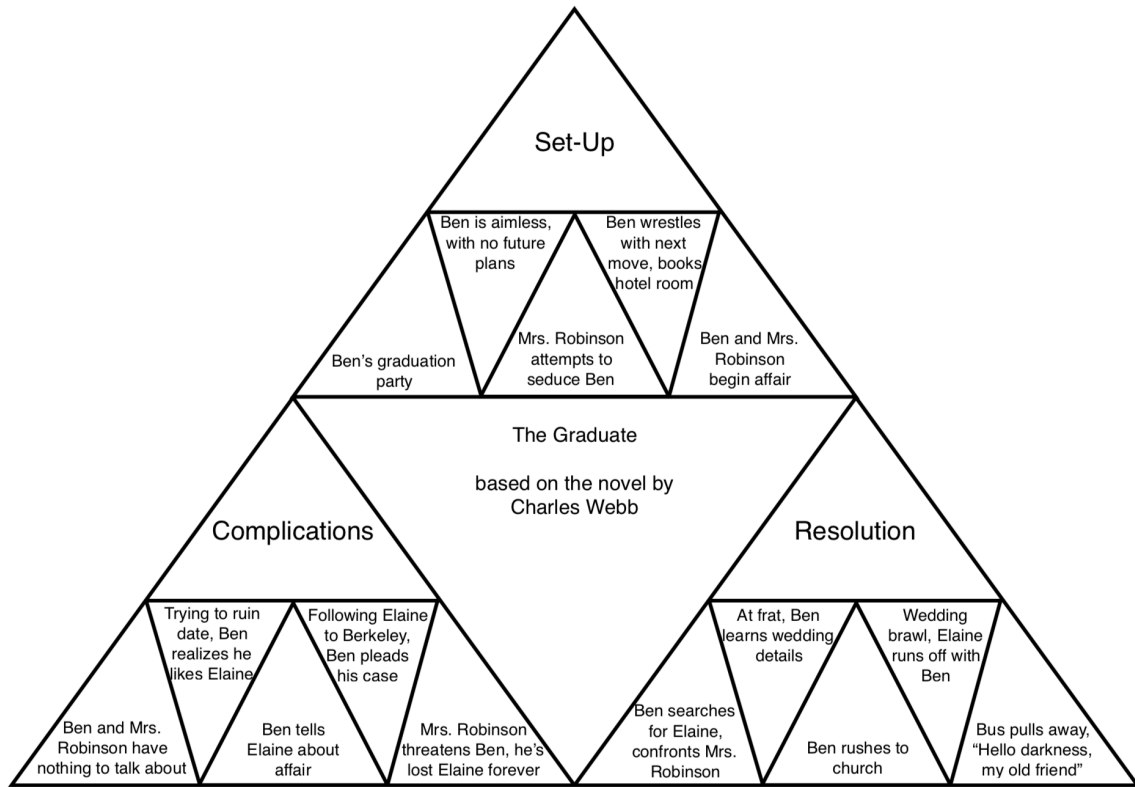
This four-point rubric forms the foundation—or, perhaps, the starting point—for an evaluation of the merits of film translations of all literary genres.

Cahir, Linda Costanzo. *Literature into Film*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers. Kindle Edition.

“Stepping Stones of Screenplay Structure”
from Classical Storytelling and Contemporary Screenwriting
by Brian Price, Focal Press, 2018.







CHAPTER TEN

LOGLINES: Putting It All Together (Part 1)

*"This is the essence of the story; the rest is episode."
(Poetics, Part XVII)*

So what have we learned so far, from Aristotle, with regards to what makes an effective story idea, one that will help lead us to a solid screenplay?

We've learned that a solid idea must strike a balance between personal truth and imagination, must be based upon an action that has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Must be rife with conflict. And must have at its heart, a unity of action, a dramatic question that is based upon a hero's dramatizable objective, one posed at the beginning and resolved at the end.

Distilling all of these vital qualities down to their essence, in a way that befits our modern screenwriting purposes, is what we call a LOGLINE.

And a LOGLINE is where every good screenplay starts.

To be clear, a logline is not a tag for a poster. It's not about a thematic or abstract idea. It's not a marketing tool, as in "In space, no one can hear you scream." That was a great TAGLINE for *Alien* that may have gotten us excited about buying a ticket, but it doesn't tell us anything about the story.

Rather, since story is what matters most, and story is based on an imitation of an action, we must think of a logline as a way to focus a story down to its barest essentials, down to that singular action that defines the complete, whole, unified story.

The crew of the spaceship *Nostromo* accidentally brings on board a deadly alien life form that begins to pick off the crew one by one, until only one, science officer Ripley remains, and the fate of humanity rests on who makes it back to earth first.

What is the dramatic question here? Will the humans defeat the alien in time? What is the beginning, middle and end? An alien comes aboard. A bunch of people die. The alien is defeated (or isn't. No spoilers.) Is there conflict? Hell yes. A unity of action? Yep. And does it deal with universal truths though fiction? I'll say, not because we've all been stranded in space with an acid-bleeding monster, but because we all know what it is to be afraid, to be helpless, to find inner reserves of strength and determination we didn't know existed.

So, it makes a good idea for a story. And a great movie by the way.

Try these other logline/ideas on for size. While you do, think about how they demonstrate the critical elements of universality, conflict, wholeness, and unity.

While attempting to thwart a tragic prophecy, the King of Thebes tries to discover who's responsible for the plague upon his land, unaware he's brought it on himself.

After being visited by the ghost of his dead father, the Prince of Denmark sets out to get revenge on his murderous uncle, now the king, but is beset by doubt and hesitancy.

Michael Dorsey, an unemployed actor with a reputation for being difficult, disguises himself as a woman, Dorothy Michaels, in order to land a role on a soap opera, but complications arise when he falls for his leading lady and her father falls for him.

Allen Bauer falls in love with the woman of his dreams, unaware that she is in actuality, a mermaid.

Private Eye Jack Gittes is tasked with a simple case of adultery, but stumbles onto a vast criminal conspiracy to control the Los Angeles' water supply.

A young boy, Elliot, discovers a stranded alien in his backyard, and enlists the help of his friends and family to help the creature return home before government forces capture him.

Rick Blaine, an apolitical nightclub owner in Morocco, has his world turned upside down when his lost love, Ilsa, returns and asks him to help her husband escape the Nazis.

Marion Crane, having just embezzled a small fortune from her employer, hides out at the Bates Motel, unaware that it's proprietor is a psychopathic serial killer.

Father Karras, a priest who has lost his faith, is tasked with determining if a 12 year old girl is actually possessed by the devil.

Dorothy, forever wishing for adventure "somewhere over the rainbow," rides a twister all the way to the magical land of Oz, where her only hope of returning home to Kansas is to steal a Wicked Witch's broomstick with the help of some unlikely allies.

Did you notice any patterns here?

First, these loglines are not dissimilar from what you might find in your cable guide, simple descriptions of the STORY IDEA.

They include a protagonist, a dramatic premise, and any other relevant dramatic circumstances that are essential to understanding the basic story.

And they all answer, implicitly or explicitly, the following three questions:

WHOSE STORY IS IT?

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

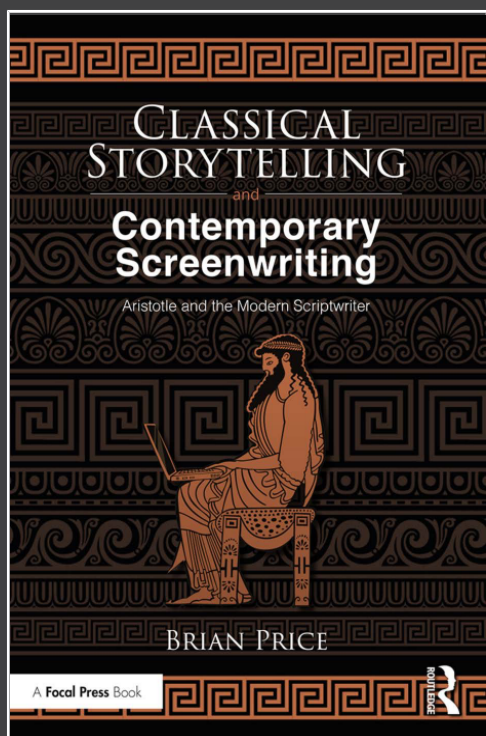
WHAT IS STANDING IN THEIR WAY?

The answers to these essential questions provide the premise of any good movie since they

describe the elements necessary for a story that's based upon an imitation of an action, that has a unity arising from a singular objective, that is told through conflict, and that contains a clear beginning, middle, and end.

And as we can see, these answers can be encapsulated into one or two sentences.

That is a logline. And crafting one is the first step in developing a screenplay.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Brian Price is an award-winning screenwriter who has worked with major studios, television networks, and independent film producers from around the world. As an instructor, he has taught screenwriting at Yale University, Johns Hopkins University, and the Brooks Institute, among others, and is a proud member of the prestigious UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television screenwriting faculty.

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By **Brian Price**

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— **Brian Nelson**, Screenwriter, *Hard Candy* (2005), *30 Days of Night* (2007), *Devil* (2010), *Altered Carbon* (2018)

In *Classical Storytelling and Contemporary Screenwriting*, Brian Price examines Aristotle's conclusions in an entertaining and accessible way and then applies those guiding principles to the most modern of storytelling mediums, going from idea to story to structure to outline to final pages and beyond, covering every relevant screenwriting topic along the way. The result is a fresh new approach to the craft of screenwriting—one that's only been around a scant 2,500 years or so—ideal for students and aspiring screenwriters who want a comprehensive step-by-step guide to writing a successful screenplay the way the pros do it.

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From THE ART OF ADAPTATION FOR SCREENWRITERS

Instructor Cheryl Eagan-Donovan

In Hollywood today, adaptations are hot properties. Films based on books, comics, television shows, historical events, video games and theme park rides are among the top-grossing global box office successes, and dominate the list of Oscar-nominated projects. One reason for the popularity of adaptations is that works that are bestsellers in other mediums are known quantities, minimizing risk for the studios and producers by bringing built-in audiences to theaters. As writers, we are poised to take advantage of this trend.

The following are some of the films I use as case studies:


A Single Man (2009) directed by Tom Ford, based on the novella by Christopher Isherwood, screenplay by David Scearce and Tom Ford. This was Scearce's first screenplay, so well-written that he obtained the rights to the novella from Isherwood's partner Don Bacardi, and brought to life on the screen beautifully through Tom Ford's vision and design. It's a great example of collaboration and the challenges of adaptation. The book is written entirely in the first person, reflecting the main character's inner thoughts, which is very difficult to portray effectively on screen. However, because it takes place in one day, it lends itself very well to screenplay structure.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower (2012) directed by Stephen Chbosky, based on the book by Chbosky, screenplay by Chbosky. This rarely happens: a writer adapts and directs his own book successfully. Chbosky had several things working in his favor: the structure of the novel is a first-person diary, the time frame of the story is one year in high school, and he had extensive experience as a screenwriter and producer for television.

The Social Network (2010) directed by David Fincher, based on the book *The Accidental Billionaires* by Ben Mezrich, screenplay by Aaron Sorkin. Only Sorkin could transform the story of a lawsuit into the brilliant character study that launched Jesse Eisenberg's career, forever typecasting him, and infuriating Mark Zuckerberg. This adaptation speaks to the power of character-driven screenplays.

Brokeback Mountain (2005) directed by Ang Lee, based on the short story by Annie Proulx, screenplay by Larry McMurty & Diana Ossana. Here instead of compressing time, the writers expanded the story to create a screenplay that transformed a poignant story into an Oscar-nominated, groundbreaking film. Personally, I think Ang Lee was the perfect director to bring the story to the big screen: he develops the landscape itself as a harsh and beautiful character, the existing social structure as an indomitable antagonist, and imbues the film with fierce emotional intensity, portrayed fearlessly by Heath Ledger.

Adapting a Novel or Non-Fiction Work to Film

 newenglandfilm.com/magazine/2008/12/adapting-a-novel-or-non-fiction-work-to-film



Coast to Coast
Industry Payroll Professionals

1 Dec , 2008

Written by Kate Fitzgerald I

Posted by: [erin](#)

In the first of a two-part series on adaptation, Kate Fitzgerald offers advice on how to shape a screenplay based on a book. Next month she'll describe how to secure the rights.

You've found a great story. You've optioned the rights, (which we will explore in Part II of this article next month), and now you're wondering how to transform a 350 page novel, or non-fiction story, into a 120 page screenplay. You stare blankly at the screen on your laptop. What comes next?

The task now is to find the visual story hiding among all those words. To do that, you must first fix in your mind the difference between a film story and a written story. Film comes at us with sound and color and movement. We discover the story as the images go by. We are swept up in an intense, two-hour experience, enhanced by the theater's cloak of darkness. A novel, by contrast, plays out entirely in our mind, where our inner eyes transform the words into mental pictures. Our sense of discovery, those little 'ah ha' moments, may be less intense with the written word, but it's still satisfying, and often in a more personal way. And where a novel can go on for page after page inside the hero's head, a film must show continuous action that moves the story forward. There can be no meandering digressions in a film like there is in a novel. Films and novels are, simply put, not the same thing.

All film stories are about a sympathetic hero who wants something, and who must overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to get it. Kitty, in *The Painted Veil*, wants to marry for love, and not social convenience as dictated by society. In *Erin Brockovich*, Erin wants to win the lawsuit against utility giant PG&E. The hero must elicit our emotions with her determination and courage. Her goal must be worthy, so we can understand why she is willing to go up against the obstacles that stand in her way. Along this path, the hero must undergo personal change. We must see a maturing of the character flaw that got her in this situation in the first place. This is important because our satisfaction comes in learning, by the hero's example, how to solve the thorny problems of life. Did I mention the ticking clock? On top of everything else, your hero's up against a deadline that's coming at her like a buzz saw.

A novel, or work of non-fiction, does not have to follow these rules. It can introduce the hero with a bit of action on page one, and then it can spend the next 30 pages inside the hero's head. How do you film that? You can't. But you can find the visual story hiding within the novel's structure. Novels do have three acts, an inciting incident, plot-points, confrontations with the antagonist, and all the whistles and bells of film structure. They just do it within our minds, and not in front of our eyes.

Where's a good place to start your deconstruction? Begin by taking a look at a few successful adaptations. In the writing classes I teach, I use *The Painted Veil*, by Ron Nyswaner (2006), as an example, because it is a masterful adaptation. Watch this film, starring Edward Norton and Naomi Watts. Then read the novella by Somerset Maugham. Seeing the film first will reinforce the story as seen through Nyswaner's eyes. In this way, the visual impact of the film will stay with you during the reading. The contrast between what Nyswaner kept, and what he left out, will jump out at you.

Next, make a list of those things that jump out at you. Study the list. Think about the scenes and dialogue Nyswaner kept, and why. Now, look at the time and place. What was going on then? *The Painted Veil* is set in the 1920s and focuses on the damage done by the strict social mores that regulated marriage back then. Infidelity is an accident waiting to happen in that milieu, and Maugham opens with it.

Nyswaner begins with the lead characters and enlarges the relationship between them. For a film story, you must have two strong leading characters, and at least two strong supporting characters. In the novella, Maugham puts Kitty's husband, Walter Fane, on stage only as he needs him to advance Kitty's story. When Kitty and Walter are in China, in the midst of the cholera epidemic, we don't get to see Walter slaving away to save the villagers. We only see him in this setting when he's dying.

But Nyswaner changes all of that. He brings on the cholera. He shows the villagers lying on cots, some dying, others writhing in pain. He shows Walter entering the hospital ward for the first time, and gagging at the smell. And yet, Walter plunges on in. How powerful is that for defining character and engaging our sympathy? Nyswaner opens up the story further by adding the redemptive elements of love and forgiveness to Kitty's infidelity. He then has Kitty and Walter come to terms with who they really are, and then has them fall passionately in love. And he has them do it right in the middle of this wretched cholera epidemic, set inside a strange land that's roiling in political turmoil. Now that's a movie.

Study *The Painted Veil* as an example to follow. Compare the film's narrative arc with the structure in the novella. When examined this way, the sharp contrast between what works in the film, and what works in the novel, soon becomes apparent. This will help you to begin to think in a cinematic way, and you will start to see film possibilities in every story you read.

If the book you've optioned is a bestseller, try to remain as true to the idea of the original story as possible, in order to satisfy the readers. Presumably, the book's fans will be the first ticket buyers crowding the box office on opening day, as witness those long lines of *Twilight*

groupies. Remaining true to the work while crafting a good film story can be a challenge. But many bestsellers like *Twilight* already have a structure that is more suitable to adaptation because more and more novelists, like Stephenie Meyer, visualize their scenes in vivid detail before they write the first word.

Kate Rockland, a writer, whose first novel, *Falling is Like This*, (due Winter 2009), is about a young woman in New York City named Harper, who moves out on her boyfriend just days after moving in, told me in an email exchange, “When I was writing I was very aware of a specific visual aesthetic I was trying to create in the reader’s mind. The coffee shop in the East Village where Harper meets Nick was a place I sat and drank ten million cups of brew while I was writing, so I was a character in my own scene, I suppose. Also, to be able to write Harper’s trip to Coney Island, I took the B train there and walked around for a whole day. Doing so helped me write sounds, smells, etc. All things important if the book becomes a movie.”

And how would it feel for Rockland to see her novel up on the big screen? “I literally feel like it would be as painful as catching your parents in the sack,” Rockland said. “Gut-wrenching embarrassment. It’s one thing for my readers to read my book and know my version of a love affair. It’s another to see it visually! At the same time, I’d feel honored and proud and bowled over if someone makes a film out of this little book I love so dearly. Look, if a novelist complains they don’t like the movie version of their book, they’re being big babies, if you ask me.”

When adapting a biography, follow the same arc as you would with a fictional story. But because you are dealing with a story about a larger-than-life personality, which probably follows it’s subject from cradle to grave, you must reduce the scope of the work. The key, in this instance, is to find the most logical place to start a film story. Usually that will be right at the point when the person’s life changed 180 degrees. What put him on his path? What brought him to his moment in the sun?

Susannah Grant’s script for *Erin Brockovich* is a great example of keeping the focus on the hero and her goal. Grant narrowed the story to just what we need to know about Erin before she sets off to win the lawsuit. When Grant’s script opens, we know Erin needs a job, that she is smart, she has young children, she is divorced, and she’s broke. But we never find out about her parents, or where she went to school, or even about her ex-husbands. We don’t need to know any of that to understand who Erin is, and why she’s willing to make personal sacrifices in order to help the residents of Hinckley.

Cheryl Eagan-Donovan, a filmmaker, and founder of Controversy Films in Boston, had to reign in an entire life story in *Nothing is Truer than Truth*, her soon to be released documentary based on scholar Mark Anderson’s book, *Shakespeare by Another Name: the life of Edward de Vere*.

Anderson’s book covers de Vere’s life from cradle to grave. While de Vere’s life story is fascinating because it has all the elements of good drama, including the loss of both parents

when he was a child, it's too much for a two-hour film.

In getting at the truth of whether or not de Vere was the real Shakespeare, Eagan-Donovan decided to begin her screenplay with what it means to be a writer. Which, when you think about it, is the most logical place to start. After all, if Edward de Vere and Shakespeare are the same man, something had to shape his aesthetic and inform his craft. "I started when Edward arrives in Venice," Eagan-Donovan said. "It was the New York City of its day. It was the center of the art and literary and music worlds." It was here, Eagan-Donovan believes, "Where life experience, imitation of the masters, and relentless revision came together to create genius," in de Vere. Opening with the young Edward arriving in Venice is not only a logical choice, it's also a visually dynamic one.

Whether your source material is a work of fiction or non-fiction, begin by looking for the visual story hidden within the words. Think cinematically. Remember, all film stories are about a sympathetic hero who wants something, and to achieve it, he must overcome seemingly insurmountable odds to get it. Think about the needs of the characters. Enlarge the relationship between the lead characters. Add supporting characters to add tension and depth to your narrative. Remember, a written work will have a readership that expects to recognize the story you put up on the screen. But don't be afraid to add or subtract from it to make it more visually satisfying. If you meet the demands of the medium, you'll succeed brilliantly.

Cheryl Eagan-Donovan, Controversy Films

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<https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/2019/02/13/will-sammy-roller-skates-skateboards-swamp/GlauyVpdthLkSrZWJ2Y1fO/story.html>

“Nothing Is Truer than Truth: An Interview with Cheryl Eagan-Donovan” by Suzy Cosgrove

<https://newenglandfilm.com/magazine/2018/04/nothing-truer-truth>

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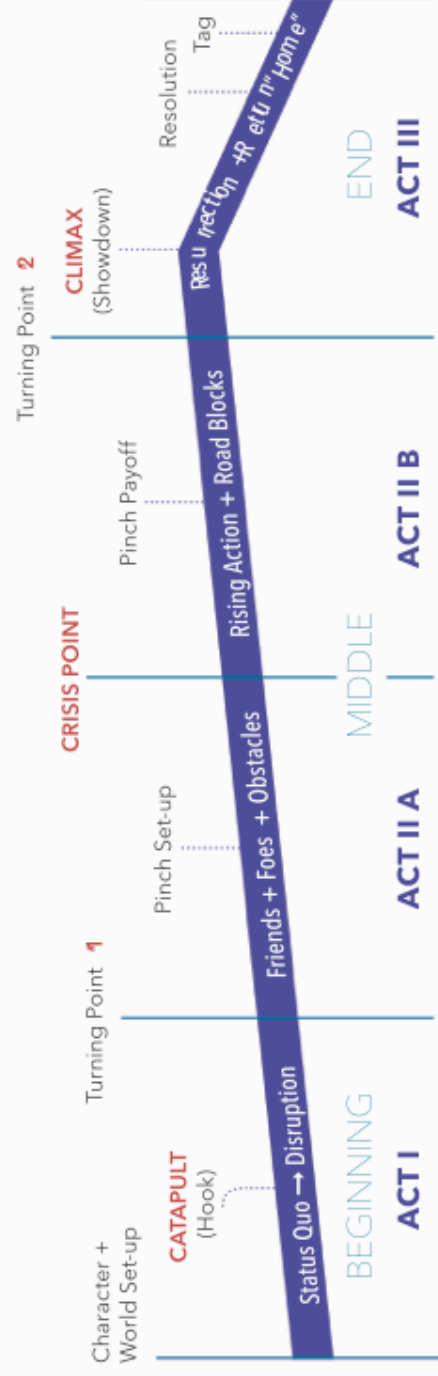
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