

EMBEDDING STORY IDEAS IN ACTION

By Bill Johnson

Every storyteller begins a story with a particular issue to deal with: what to reveal, when, and how, to set a story into motion. The trap is that to be obscure is to have a dramatically weak opening; an obscure opening risks failing to offer a reason to enter or stay in a story's world. Worse, it can communicate the storyteller is unclear about what a story is about, or how to express that in an engaging way. To be too obvious about a story's purpose also undermines an opening. It can come across as a kind of lecture about the purpose of the story; unfortunately, nothing is set into motion until the lecture is over. The idea is to be dramatically suggestive in a way that draws an audience into a story's world and continues to offer reasons to stay. This often means embedding a story's dramatic ideas inside action.

An example of what this process looks like when done well is the opening of *Chinatown*. Jake Gittes is introduced as being detached from a man's reaction to pictures of his wife having sex in the woods with another man. This introduces the core issue for this story, Jake trying to be moral in an amoral world through detachment. This sets up the outcome of this story's plot, the tragedy that ensues when Jake tries to maintain his moral code through detachment and someone is killed.

The core story idea of this story is carefully embedded in the action of this opening scene.

To help writers make a distinction between being dramatically suggestive, obvious (also called 'on the nose' in screenwriting), and obscure, I have them start an opening scene by plainly stating its dramatic purpose, then how that purpose is suggested in the action of the scene. Then, how they could write the scene in a way that completely obscures what the scene is about. Lastly, how they could take what is obvious and make it dramatically suggestive. Not stated directly, but clearly infusing the action. Embedded in the action.

I've found that once writers are guided away from this initial tendency toward obscurity to avoid being obvious, they can put more passion, more feeling, more sense of purpose in opening scenes with the same number of words. It liberates them to write to a point, instead of away from the dramatic point of a scene.

Examples of a deeper story issue being embedded in character actions and plot events in a story's opening scenes can be found in any well-told film story. One of my personal film favorites, *Toto le Hero*, begins with an old man being shot, then his voice over that mocks the police investigating the crime. His taunts speak to the issue of identity and reality, and set in motion a powerful story about one man's quest to gain an identity he felt was taken from him as a child.

The Limey, a great film directed by Steven Soderbergh, begins with a black screen and a man speaking urgently, "Tell me, tell me about Jenny." This sets in motion a father's journey to discover the cause of his daughter's death. Ultimately, he discovers his role in that death. A haunting film that suggests the main character's mental fragmentation via how the action of scenes are staged. Dialogue from one scene overplays the action of a different scene in a way that heightens the effect of the overall scene. It's a kind of filmmaking that requires the storyteller understand the different levels of each scene, and how combining elements can create a deeper understanding for the audience about a character.

To help writers understand this process of embedding story ideas in action, I take them on a journey that begins with watching films that are quite transparent.

Sleepless in Seattle begins with a man in grief over the death of his wife, who, when told he'll meet someone new and fall in love, replies forcefully that he'll never fall in love again. This sets in motion a story about his recovering from grief and regaining the ability to love again.

One Fine Day begins with a single mother obviously struggling to pay the bills and deal with a young son who wants a father. Beginning the story with one lousy, lousy night sets in motion this story about why she could use one fine day that includes a loving, generous man. But she meets George Clooney instead, and he seems to be anything but what she needs or wants in her life. Ultimately, through sharing an increasingly disastrous day, they find true love together. This is a nicely told story that goes over familiar ground while evoking a journey of feelings for a receptive audience--those who enjoy romantic films.

In the movie *Pitch Black*, characters crash onto a planet where it seems the sun never sets. They are forced to find water and escape the heat. The very environment of the planet attacks them. Then, when the three suns set and darkness sets in, the dark unleashes ravenous, nightmarish creatures who attack with no mercy. The story puts its characters and its audience into a world where what's out there in the dark is just as fearsome as we might imagine. This is a story built around a very basic idea, fear of the night, fear of an unending day with no night.

Die Hard is about a man trying to reconcile with the wife he loves, and how defeating the terrorists who threaten her life both shows him how much he truly loves her and helps him find a way to reconcile with her. Through risking his life to save her, she comes to appreciate the depth of his love for her.

Lethal Weapon is about a man who's died inside who comes back to life. Mel Gibson's character is introduced with a gun barrel in his mouth as he contemplates suicide because of his loss of his wife, and ends with him at his wife's graveside, his character ready to let go and move forward in life.

Both *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* also have a high quota of explosions, general mayhem, and heroes vanquishing evil bad guys. They also have something deeper embedded in that action. Ideas about grief, loss, and renewal. The most painful scripts I read are action scripts that are just an on-going series of mayhem. Characters die by the dozens and no one in the story cares. Unfortunately, if no one in a script cares about a character's death, why should I? Or any reader?

This isn't a suggestion that an action film read like an art film. I teach that action films provides the emotional/physical thrills of a roller coaster ride. An art film asks, why do people enjoy roller coaster rides? Both types of stories are enjoyable when well-told.

An art film can be action-oriented and expressive. *A Room with a View* opens with two narrow minded, repressed women fussing about finding themselves in a room without a promised view. They quickly meet two expressive men who have a room with a view, who offer to trade. This sets in motion a story about how everything in life can change depending on the inner view one has of events. It is a quickly-paced, engaging story.

I've been told that suggesting someone begin a story with action that speaks to the human condition sounds pretentious. The deeper issue for me is to show the great divide that separates a storyteller from a struggling writer. On one side, the storyteller uses words that are lively, vibrant, that resonate because they DO speak to story ideas that resonate with an audience. On the other side, struggling writers who go in circles trying to find some way to make a passive description of things create the effect of a story.

Because there's such a premium on an economy of words with screenwriting, understanding how to easily and naturally embed story ideas into action is part of the foundation of writing well-told stories as screenplays.

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(Originally from www.screentalk.biz/art030.htm)