

Chapter One

What Is a Screenplay?

"Suppose you're in your office. . . . A pretty stenographer you've seen before comes into the room and you watch her. . . . She takes off her gloves, opens her purse and dumps it out on the table. . . . She has two dimes and a nickel—and a cardboard match box. She leaves the nickel on the desk, puts the two dimes back into her purse and takes her black gloves to the stove. . . . Just then your telephone rings. The girl picks it up, says hello—listens—and says deliberately into the phone, 'I've never owned a pair of black gloves in my life.' She hangs up . . . and you glance around very suddenly and see another man in the office, watching every move the girl makes. . . ."

"Go on," said Boxley smiling. "What happens?"

"I don't know," said Stahr. "I was just making pictures."

—The Last Tycoon

F. Scott Fitzgerald

In the summer of 1937, F. Scott Fitzgerald, drinking far too much, deeply in debt, and drowning in the suffocating well of despair, moved to Hollywood seeking new beginnings, hoping to reinvent himself by writing for the movies. The author of *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, *This Side of Paradise*, and the uncompleted *The Last Tycoon*, perhaps America's greatest novelist, was, as one friend put it, seeking redemption.

During the two and a half years he spent in Hollywood, he took the craft of screenwriting "very seriously," says one noted Fitzgerald authority: "It's heartbreaking to see how much effort he put into it." Fitzgerald approached every screenplay as if it were a novel and often wrote long backstories for each of the main characters before putting one word of dialogue down on paper.

Despite all the preparation he put into each assignment, he was obsessed with finding the answer to a question that haunted him continuously: What makes a good screenplay? Billy Wilder once compared Fitzgerald to "a great sculptor who is hired to do a plumbing job. He did not know how to connect the pipes so the water could flow."

Throughout his Hollywood years, he was always trying to find the "balance" between the words spoken and the pictures seen. During this time, he received only one screen credit, adapting the novel *Three Comrades* by Erich Maria Remarque (starring Robert Taylor and Margaret Sullavan), but Joseph L. Mankiewicz eventually rewrote his script. He worked on rewrites for several other movies, including a disastrous week on *Gone With the Wind* (he was forbidden to use any words that did not appear in Margaret Mitchell's novel), but after *Three Comrades*, all of his projects ended in failure. One, a script for Joan Crawford called *Infidelity*, was left uncompleted, canceled because it dealt with the theme of adultery. Fitzgerald died in

1941, working on his last, unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*.

He died believing himself to be a failure.

I've always been intrigued by the journey of F. Scott Fitzgerald. What resonates with me the most is that he was constantly searching for the answer to what made a good screenplay. His overwhelming external circumstances—his wife Zelda's institutionalization, his unmanageable debts and lifestyle, his excessive drinking—all fed into his insecurities about the craft of screenwriting. And make no mistake: Screenwriting is a craft, a craft that can be learned. Even though he worked excessively hard, and was disciplined and responsible, he failed to achieve the results he was so desperately striving for.

Why?

I don't think there's any one answer. But reading his books and writings and letters from this period, it seems clear that he was never exactly sure what a screenplay was; he always wondered whether he was "doing it right," whether there were certain rules he had to follow in order to write a successful screenplay.

When I was studying at the University of California, Berkeley, as an English lit major, I read the first and second editions of *Tender Is the Night* for one of my classes. It is the story of a psychiatrist who marries one of his patients, who, as she slowly recovers, exhausts his vitality until he is "a man used up." The book, the last one Fitzgerald completed, was considered technically faulty and was commercially unsuccessful.

In the first edition of the novel, Book I is written from the point of view of Rosemary Hoyt, a young actress who shares her observations about meeting the circle that surrounds Dick and Nicole Diver. Rosemary is on the beach at Cap d'Antibes on the French Riviera, watching the Divers enjoying an outing on the sand. As she watches, she sees them as a beautiful couple who appear, at least from her point of view, to have everything going for them. They are, she thinks, the ideal couple. Rich, beautiful, intelligent, they look to be the embodiment of what everyone wants for himself or herself. But the second book of the novel focuses on the life of Dick and Nicole, and we learn that what we saw through Rosemary's eyes was only the relationship they showed to the world; it was not really true. The Divers have major problems, which drain them emotionally and spiritually, and ultimately destroy them.

When the first edition of *Tender Is the Night* was published, sales were poor, and Fitzgerald thought he had probably been drinking too much and might have compromised his vision. But from his Hollywood experience, he came to believe he did not introduce his main characters early enough. "Its great fault," Fitzgerald wrote of *Tender Is the Night* to his editor, Maxwell Perkins, "is that the true beginning—the young psychiatrist in Switzerland—is tucked away in the middle of the book." He decided that when the second edition was printed, he would interchange the first section with the second and open the novel with Dick Diver in wartime Switzerland in order to explain the mystery about the Divers' courtship and marriage. So he opened the book focusing on the main character, Dick Diver. But that didn't work either, and Fitzgerald was crushed. The book was financially unsuccessful until many years later, when Fitzgerald's genius was finally acknowledged.

What strikes me so vividly is what Fitzgerald didn't see; his opening section focusing on how Rosemary saw the Divers was more cinematic than novelistic. It's a great cinematic opening, setting up the characters as others see them, like an establishing shot; in this first edition, Fitzgerald was showing us how this model couple looked to the world, beautiful and rich, seeming to have everything. How we look to the outside world, of course, is a lot different from who we really are behind closed doors. My personal feeling is that it was Fitzgerald's insecurity about the craft of screenwriting that drove him to change that great opening.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was an artist literally caught between two worlds, caught between his genius as a writer and his self-doubt and inability to express that genius in screenplay form.

Screenwriting is a definite craft, a definite art. Over the years, I've read thousands upon thousands of screenplays, and I always look for certain things. First, how does it look on the page? Is there plenty of white space, or are the paragraphs dense, too thick, the dialogue too long? Or is the reverse true: Is the scene description too thin, the dialogue too sparse? And this is before I read one word; this is just what it "looks" like on the page. You'd be surprised how many decisions are made in Hollywood by the way a screenplay looks—you can tell whether it's been written by a professional or by someone who's still aspiring to be a professional.

Everybody is writing screenplays, from the waiter at your favorite bar or restaurant to the limo driver, the doctor, the lawyer, or the barista serving up the White Chocolate Dream Latte at the local Coffee Bean. Last year, more than seventy-five thousand screenplays were registered at the Writers Guild of America, West and East, and out of that number maybe four or five hundred scripts were actually produced.

What makes one screenplay better than another? There are many answers, of course, because each screenplay is unique. But if you want to sit down and spend six months to a year writing a screenplay, you first have to know what a screenplay is—what its nature is.

What is a screenplay? Is it a guide, or an outline, for a movie? A blueprint, or a diagram? Or maybe it's a series of images, scenes, and sequences strung together with dialogue and description, like pearls on a strand? Perhaps it's simply the landscape of a dream?

Well, for one thing, a screenplay is not a novel, and it's most certainly not a play. If you look at a novel and try to define its fundamental nature, you'll see that the dramatic action, the story line, usually takes place inside the head of the main character. We see the story line unfold through the eyes of the character, through his/her point of view. We are privy to the character's thoughts, feelings, emotions, words, actions, memories, dreams, hopes, ambitions, opinions, and more. The character and reader go through the action together, sharing in the drama and emotion of the story. We know how they act, feel, react, and figure things out. If other characters appear and are brought into the narrative line of action, then the story embraces their point of view, but the main thrust of the story line always returns to the main character. The main character is who the story is about. In a novel the action takes place inside the character's head, within the mindscape of dramatic

action.

A play is different. The action, or story line, occurs onstage, under the proscenium arch, and the audience becomes the fourth wall, eavesdropping on the lives of the characters, what they think and feel and say. They talk about their hopes and dreams, past and future plans, discuss their needs and desires, fears and conflicts. In this case, the action of the play occurs within the language of dramatic action; it is spoken in words that describe feelings, actions, and emotions.

A screenplay is different. Movies are different. Film is a visual medium that dramatizes a basic story line; it deals in pictures, images, bits and pieces of film: We see a clock ticking, a window opening, a person in the distance leaning over a balcony, smoking; in the background we hear a phone ringing, a baby crying, a dog barking as we see two people laughing as their car pulls away from the curb. "Just making pictures." The nature of the screenplay deals in pictures, and if we wanted to define it, we could say that a screenplay is a story told with pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure.

That is its essential nature, just like a rock is hard and water's wet.

Because a screenplay is a story told with pictures, we can ask ourselves, what do all stories have in common? They have a beginning, middle, and an end, not necessarily in that order, as Jean-Luc Godard says. Screenplays have a basic linear structure that creates the form of the screenplay because it holds all the individual elements, or pieces, of the story line in place.

To understand the principle of structure, it's important to start with the word itself. The root of structure, struct, has two definitions that are relevant. The first definition means "to build" or "to put something together," like a building or car. The second definition is "the relationship between the parts and the whole."

The parts and the whole. This is an important distinction. What is the relationship between the parts and the whole? How do you separate one from the other? If you take the game of chess, for example, the game itself is a whole composed of four parts: (1) the pieces—the queen, king, bishop, pawns, knights, etc.; (2) the player(s), because someone has to play the game of chess, either against another person or a computer; (3) the board, because you can't play chess without a board, and (4) the rules, because you can't play a chess game unless you play by the rules. Those four parts—the pieces, the player(s), the board, and the rules—are integrated into the whole, and the result is a game of chess. It is the relationship between these parts and the whole that determines the game.

The same relationship holds true in a story. A story is the whole, and the elements that make up the story—the action, characters, conflicts, scenes, sequences, dialogue, action, Acts I, II, and III, incidents, episodes, events, music, locations, etc.—are the parts, and this relationship between the parts and the whole make up the story.

Good structure is like the relationship between an ice cube and water. An ice cube has a definite crystalline structure, and water has a definite molecular structure. But when the ice cube melts into water, how can you separate the molecules of ice from

the molecules of water? Structure is like gravity: It is the glue that holds the story in place; it is the base, the foundation, the spine, the skeleton of the story. And it is this relationship between the parts and the whole that holds the screenplay together. It's what makes it what it is.

It is the paradigm of dramatic structure.

A paradigm is a model, example, or conceptual scheme. The paradigm of a table, for example, is a top with four legs. Within the paradigm, we can have a low table, high table, narrow table, or wide table; we can have a round table, square table, rectangular table, or octagonal table; we can have a glass table, wood table, plastic table, wrought-iron table, or whatever, and the paradigm doesn't change—it remains what it is, a top with four legs. Just the way a suitcase remains a suitcase; it doesn't matter how big or small, or what the shape is; it is what it is.

If we wanted to take a screenplay and hang it on the wall like a painting, this is what it would look like:

This is the paradigm of a screenplay. Here's how it's broken down.

ACT I IS THE SET-UP

If a screenplay is a story told with pictures, then what do all stories have in common? A beginning, middle, and end, though not necessarily, as mentioned, in that order; it is a story told in pictures, in dialogue and description, and placed within the context of dramatic structure.

Aristotle talked about the three unities of dramatic action: time, place, and action. The normal Hollywood film is approximately two hours long, or 120 minutes; foreign films tend to be a little shorter, though that's changing as we bridge the language of international film. But in most cases, films are approximately two hours in length, give or take a few minutes. This is a standard length, and today, when a contract is written in Hollywood between the filmmaker and production company, it states that when the movie is delivered, it will be no longer than 2 hours and 8 minutes. That's approximately 128 pages of screenplay. Why? Because it's an economic decision that has evolved over the years. At this writing, it costs approximately \$10,000 to \$12,000 per minute (and getting higher and higher every year) to shoot a Hollywood studio film. Second, a two-hour movie has a definite advantage in the theaters simply because you can get in more viewings of the movie per day. More screenings mean more money; more theaters mean more screenings, which means more money will be made. Movies are show business, after all, and with the cost of moviemaking being so high, and getting higher as our technology evolves, today it's really more business than show.

The way it breaks down is this: One page of screenplay is approximately one minute of screen time. It doesn't matter whether the script is all action, all dialogue, or any combination of the two—generally speaking, a page of screenplay equals a minute of screen time. It's a good rule of thumb to follow. There are exceptions to this, of course. The script of *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* is only 118 pages, but the movie is more than three hours long.

Act I, the beginning, is a unit of dramatic action that is approximately twenty or thirty pages long and is held together with the dramatic context known as the Set-Up. Context is the space that holds something in place—in this case, the content. For example, the space inside a glass is the context; it holds the content in place—whether it's water, beer, milk, coffee, tea, or juice. If we want to get creative, a glass can also hold raisins, trail mix, nuts, grapes, etc.—but the space inside doesn't change. The context is what holds the content in place.

In this unit of dramatic action, Act I, the screenwriter sets up the story, establishes character, launches the dramatic premise (what the story is about), illustrates the situation (the circumstances surrounding the action), and creates the relationships between the main character and the other characters who inhabit the landscape of his or her world. As a writer you've only got about ten minutes to establish this, because the audience members can usually determine, either consciously or unconsciously, whether they do or don't like the movie by that time. If they don't know what's going on and the opening is vague or boring, their concentration and focus will falter and start wandering.

Check it out. The next time you go to a movie, do a little exercise: Find out how long it takes you to make a decision about whether you like the film or not. A good indication is if you start thinking about getting something from the refreshment stand or find yourself shifting in your seat; if that happens, the chances are the filmmaker has lost you as a viewer. Ten minutes is ten pages of screenplay. I cannot emphasize enough that this first ten-page unit of dramatic action is the most important part of the screenplay.

In *American Beauty* (Alan Ball), after the brief opening video scene of the daughter Jane (Thora Birch) and her boyfriend, Ricky (Wes Bentley), we see the street where Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) lives, and hear his first words in voice-over: "My name is Lester Burnham. I'm forty-two years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead. . . . In a way, I'm dead already." Then we see Lester as he begins his day. He wakes up and jerks off (the high point of his day, he adds), and then we see his relationship with his family. All this is set up and established within the first few pages, and we learn that: "My wife and daughter think I'm this gigantic loser, and they're right. . . . I have lost something. I don't know what it was, but I have lost something. . . . I feel sedated. . . . But you know, it's never too late to get it back." And that lets us know what the story is all about: Lester regaining the life he has lost or given up, and becoming whole and complete again as a person. Within the first few pages of the screenplay we know the main character, the dramatic premise, and the situation.

In *Chinatown* (Robert Towne), we learn on page one that Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson), the main character, is a sleazy private detective specializing in "discreet investigation." We see this when he shows Curly (Burt Young) pictures of his wife having sex in the park. We also see that Gittes has a certain flair for this type of investigation. A few pages later, we are introduced to a certain Mrs. Mulwray (Diane Ladd), who wants to hire Jake Gittes to find out "who my husband is having an affair with." That is the dramatic premise of the film, because the answer to that question is what leads us into the story. The dramatic premise is what the screenplay is about; it provides the dramatic thrust that drives the story to its conclusion.

In *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and

Peter Jackson, based on the book by J. R. R. Tolkien), we learn in the first six pages of the screenplay the history of the ring and its magnetic attraction. It's a beautiful opening that sets up all three stories. It also sets up the story as Gandalf arrives in the Shire. We meet Frodo (Elijah Wood), Bilbo Baggins (Ian Holm), Sam (Sean Astin), and the others, see how they live, and are introduced to the ring. We also get an overview of Middle Earth. This opening sets up the rest of the Fellowship, including the two sequels, *The Two Towers* and *Return of the King*.

In Witness (Earl Wallace and William Kelley), the first ten pages reveal the world of the Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The script opens with the funeral of Rachel's (Kelly McGillis's) husband, then we follow her to Philadelphia, where her child witnesses the murder of an undercover cop, and that in turn leads to her relationship with the main character, John Book (Harrison Ford), another cop. The entire first act is designed to reveal the dramatic premise and situation and to set up the relationship between an Amish woman and a tough Philadelphia cop.