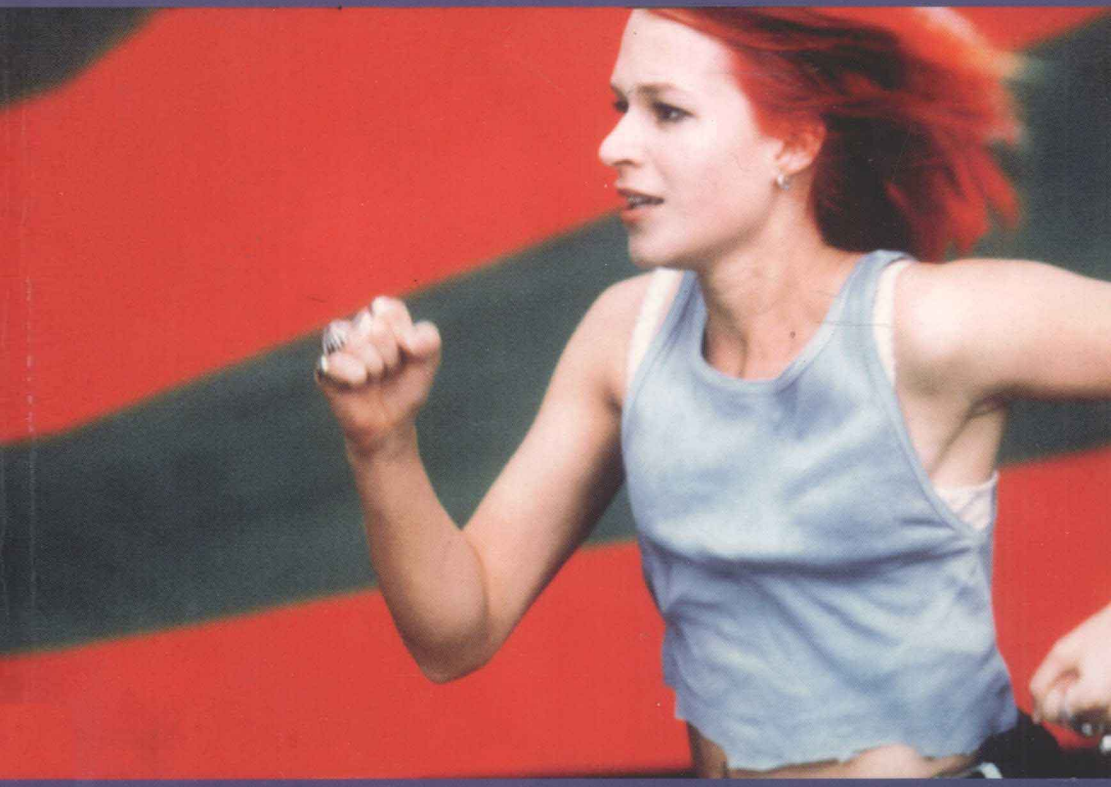
Alternative Scriptwriting

Successfully Breaking the Rules



Ken Dancyger
Jeff Rush

FOURTH EDITION

Focal Press

Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules

Fourth Edition

Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush

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Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier

Focal Press

Acquisitions Editor: Elinor Actipis
Project Manager: Paul Gottehrer
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Marketing Manager: Christine Degon Veroulis
Cover Design: Eric DeCicco
Book Production: Borrego Publishing (www.borregopublishing.com)

Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA
Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP, UK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Application submitted

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 13: 978-0-240-80849-9
ISBN 10: 0-240-80849-5

For information on all Focal Press publications visit our website at www.books.elsevier.com

07 08 09 10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules

Fourth Edition

For Ida *For Ilene*

Preface

Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules celebrates a multitude of approaches to screenwriting and filmmaking. Beginning with a reevaluation of the much-discussed issue of three-act structure, this book proceeds to encourage the writer to consider alternative approaches to both conventional and offbeat film stories.

Alternative Scriptwriting takes a mixed-genre approach not only to its content, but also to its form. Theory and practice are intentionally intermingled to suggest the mixture of intellectual context and inchoate intuition with which the writer works. Key issues, exceptions, case studies, and exercises are included and are designed to encourage the writer to experiment with the broad range of narrative and dramatic practices that make up our long history of storytelling.

Finally, because this is a book about differences in writing, the co-authors have not smoothed over the occasional, minor divergences between their perspectives and writing styles. Rather than detract from the text, these differences serve to reinforce their beliefs that there can be no single, right approach to an art form that, like all art forms, thrives on exception rather than rule.

Introduction to the Fourth Edition

In the first edition of *Alternative Scriptwriting* we introduced ideas about genre scriptwriting—the motifs and how to challenge those motifs, or working against genre. Through the next two editions those ideas were amplified and added to. In this edition we add chapters on genres that highlight the voice of the author and the non-linear story, the most open-architecture version of a genre that pushes voice over the more traditional uses of narrative tools. These chapters explore one of the most significant phenomena of filmic storytelling of the past 15 years.

The film industry has become increasingly polarized these past 15 years. At one extreme, there is the tent-pole film, or conservative storytelling, which does not always represent filmmaking at its best. At the other extreme there is the small independent production. Writers such as Sofia Coppola, Charlie Feldman, Paul Haggis, and Alan Ball represent the latter impulse. Add to this

the global impact of Sweden's Lukas Moodysson, Denmark's Mogens Rukov, Belgium's Dardenne brothers, France's Catherine Breillat, Germany's Tom Tykwer, and Hong Kong's Wong Kar-Wai, and one has a remarkably broad writing palate for today's screenwriters. It is in this spirit that we have written the fourth edition of this book.

In this edition, we look back at the discussion of three-act structure that we initiated in the first edition. At that time, we noted a range of alternative structures that had emerged in independent production. However, in line with the subsequent absorption of much independent production into the studios, we have found that many alternative films in the past 10 years have returned to some form of the three-act story. Because of this, we have looked again at act structure, focusing instead in the chapter "More Thoughts on Three Acts" on the difference between an aggressive and a relaxed approach to three acts.

Post 9/11, the country has entered a period where the distinction between *us* and *them* has grown particularly strong. This distinction is visible in scripts that represent *the other* as characters without agency. In the chapter "Agency and the Other," we focus on particular writing examples that seek to overcome this distinction by exploring means of giving originally voiceless characters both reflective and action agency.

—Ken Dancyger
—Jeff Rush

Acknowledgments for the Fourth Edition

In support of the fourth edition of this book, we'd like to thank Becky Golden-Harrell at Focal Press. Ken would also like to thank Maura Nolan for helping prepare the manuscript. We'd especially like to express our appreciation to students in different parts of the world who, in their curiosity and in their work, keep making us feel that our own work on story is an ongoing creative investigation into what makes story work. Thank you all.

Acknowledgments

By Ken Dancyger:

I have taught screenwriting for years and would like to thank all of my students at York University, who, in their questions and screenplays, helped me to refine my ideas about writing for film.

I'd also like to thank Harvey Markowitz, Bill Peters, Stu Robinson, Richard Curtis, and Andre Stein, whose professional support at crucial points in my career helped me to continue to write.

At Focal Press, I would like to thank Karen Speerstra, for accepting our concept of *Alternative Scriptwriting*, and Marie Lee and Sharon Falter, for working carefully with two authors to create one book.

I'd like to thank my colleagues—a unique group of screenwriting teachers—who have come together twice to share ideas and approaches to teaching screenwriting. This group catalyzed the idea that there is much to learn from one another about the art and craft of screenwriting. I'm sure all of us will hear a great deal from these twenty creative teachers and their students.

At York University, I would like to thank Michael Stokes and George Robinson for their help in preparing the manuscript. A second thanks is extended to George for helping me make that first screenwriting conference at New York such a success that I had no choice but to write a book about the issues raised at that conference!

Above all, I'd like to thank my colleague and collaborator, Jeff Rush. Our association has been a pleasurable, stimulating experience. Jeff's persistent intelligence and high standards have pushed me to expect more of myself and to produce a standard of work commensurate with his own.

Reprinted with permission of the University of California Press and MCA are script excerpts from *The Lady Eve* and *Sullivan's Travels* from *Five Screenplays by Preston Sturges*, edited by B. Henderson, 1985.

By Jeff Rush:

I would like to thank all of those who have joined us in helping to broaden the discussion of screenwriting over the last few years. The organizations with which we've had productive exchanges include the Symposium

for Screenwriting and the Academy, SCRIPT, the University Film and Video Association, the Florida State Conference on Literature and Film, the Ohio University Film Conference, and the Society for Film Studies.

I am particularly indebted to Bill Miller, Director of SCRIPT; Yvette Buro of NYU; Milena Jelinek of Columbia; Mary Gage and Dorn Hetzel of Penn State; Erin Preis of Purdue; Michael Jacot of York; Jim Ambandos and Warren Bass of Temple; Andrew Horton of Loyola; Marilyn Becker of Loyola Marymount; Paul Licey of USC; and Richard Walter of UCLA. I thank you all for your support, interest, and passionate argument. In addition, I would like to thank my critical colleagues Lisa Henderson, Roberta Pearson, Bill Urrichio, and Brian Wilson of Penn State, and Jeanne Allen and Paul Swann of Temple for countless discussions on theory and practice.

Of course, I want to mention my students at Iowa, Penn State, and Temple, who have put up with me over the past ten years and whose questions have taught me so much. From what I've learned over that time, I worry what my first students had to suffer.

I echo Ken's thanks to Karen Speerstra, Marie Lee, and Sharon Falter at Focal Press. A more supportive set of editors would be hard to imagine.

More importantly, I would like to thank my colleague and collaborator, Ken Dancyger, whose steadiness, vast film knowledge, and insight always brought me down to earth. Our work has been the beginning of a collaboration that will extend far beyond this one document.

Most profoundly, I would like to thank my wife, Ilene Raymond, whose love and support has helped me to understand just how subtle and precious are those moments that most define and sustain us. It is to express such nuances that I undertook the explorations in this book.

And finally, I would like to thank my parents, Frank and Renee Rush, whose never-ending curiosity and openness to the world have been such an inspiration to me. And who, along with my grandfather, Max Carol, so deeply instilled the notion that there is music in everything if you only listen for it.

With some modifications, Chapter 14 first appeared as the article, "Internalizing History: The Limits of Transforming Documentary into Fiction," in the Fall 1990 Special Screenwriting Issue of the *Journal of Film and Video* (42:3).

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1

Beyond the Rules

There are many different schools of thought with regard to becoming a better screenwriter. Some value convention, while others stress experimentation. Some focus on character, while others rely on plot. Because there are so many different opinions, we feel it's best to state our biases at the outset.

First, we think of the screenwriter as a storyteller who happens to write for film. Many screenwriters write for more than one medium. Steve Tesich (*Breaking Away*) and Harold Pinter (*The Handmaid's Tale*) write for both theater and film. David Hare (*Strapless*), William Goldman (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*), and John Sayles (*Baby It's You*) write both fiction and screenplays, as have many others throughout the short history of screenwriting. Our point is that you, as the scriptwriter, are part of a broad storytelling tradition. To cut yourself off from other forms of writing or to view scriptwriting as an exclusive art form is to cut yourself off from a large cultural community of different types of writing that have more in common than you might realize.

Second, a screenplay should be more than structurally sound. The screenwriter is often referred to as a technician—the equivalent to the draftsman in architecture. Although there are screenwriters who are content to be technicians, many are not. Nor do we feel you should be a technician. One of our goals in this book is to suggest ways to move beyond structure.

Third, you have to know everything about structure in order to move beyond it. It isn't possible to reinvent the process without knowing it in detail. Consequently, we illustrate the conventions of screenwriting so that you will be able to break from them.

Now that you know our biases, we can state our simple approach. We outline conventions and then proceed to suggest practical ways to undermine or alter those conventions. We use specific examples to illustrate the points we're trying to make. Our ultimate goal is to help you develop better screenplays. To do this, we talk about form, content, character, and language, while pressing you to develop alternative narrative strategies that prompt you to write the best screenplay you can write. As Melanie Griffith says to the conventional Jeff Daniels in Max Frye's *Something Wild*, "I know you, you're a closet rebel." Just as she sees beyond his superficial characteristics, we want you to look beyond the surface of scriptwriting, beyond form. You'll be surprised at what you find.

Conventions

There are some fundamental story devices that remain constant regardless of your scriptwriting approach. All screen stories use plots in which the premise is expressed in terms of conflict. The focus on conflict is so central to storytelling that its use can be traced from the original Ten Commandments to the two film versions of the story. Discovery and reversal are two more conventional storytelling devices because surprise is important to all stories; without it, the story is flat and tends to become a mundane series of events, rather than a story that invites the viewer to get involved and stay involved. A turning point is another device that is typically used in storytelling. The number of turning points varies from screen story to screen story; but their usefulness is critical. All of these elements—conflict, discovery, reversal, and turning point—are the technical devices you use to involve the reader in your story. Beyond these devices, however, the choices are limited only by your willingness to explore your imagination.

Structure

In the past 10 years, structure as applied to film has come to mean Act One, Act Two, Act Three. Each act has its own characteristics: Act One introduces character and premise; Act Two focuses on confrontation and struggle; Act Three resolves the crisis introduced in the premise. Operating in each act are various plot devices intended to intensify conflict, develop characters, and propel the plot forward. We discuss structure in more detail in Chapter 2.

Noteworthy, however, is how the scriptwriting structure differs from other structured forms of storytelling. Most plays have only two acts, and most books have more than three chapters. Although many operas do have three acts, the unfolding of the narrative to suggest the greater importance of subtext over text indicates how far removed opera is from film (but here, too, the screenwriter can learn something from another medium).

Premise

The premise, sometimes referred to as the concept, central concept, or central idea, is what the screenplay is about. Usually, the premise is presented in terms of the central character's dilemma at a particular point in her life (the point at which the screen story begins). For example, the premise in *All About Eve* is: What happens to a great actress (Bette Davis) when age threatens her physical beauty and her career? In *Inside Moves*, a story about a young man, played by John Savage, the premise is: What happens when this young man decides to kill himself and fails?

Premise is usually presented in terms of conflict. *In All About Eve*, the conflict offers two options: to accept ageing regardless of the emotional and professional consequences that option suggests, or to struggle for intimate relationships and roles beyond natural reason. This struggle and its outcome form the basis of the script. When Bette Davis makes her decision, the screen story is over.

In *Inside Moves*, Rory, John Savage's character, attempts suicide, but lives. Consequently, he has two options: to try again, or to find a way to make a life he can live with, even enjoy. Life or death is the basis of this screen story. Once Rory makes his decision and commits to one option, the screen story is over. The premise, then, is central to the screen story and is best posited in terms of the central conflict for the main character.

A variation worth mentioning is the existence of two particular types of premises. We mention them because they have become part of industry parlance. The two variations are high concept and low (or soft) concept. High concept refers to a plot-oriented premise and implies excitement. Low concept refers to a premise that is softer on the plot and consequently relies more on the strength of the characters. A simple way to discern the two is to view a high-concept premise as a plot-intensive story and a low-concept premise as a character-intensive story. During the 1980s, the desirability of high-concept premises had considerable economic value, and they were more likely to be produced.

The Role of Conflict

Conflict is the central feature of the screen story. Man against man, man against environment, and man against himself portray the classic versions of conflict found in the screen story. Variations of sex, age, religion, and culture provide variety to the conflict. Polarities (i.e., extreme opposites) make conflict operational in screen stories. In the Western genre, the most obvious polarity was the hero's white horse and white clothing, and the villain's black horse and black clothing. Policeman/criminal, lawyer/accused, rich/poor, hero/villain—all are polarities that exemplify the character conflicts featured in different screen stories.

All screen characters are developed using polarities—opposites in physical appearance as well as in behavioral characteristics. In *On the Waterfront*, the main character is the only character who is physically fit. His brother, a criminal, looks older, dresses differently, and speaks differently. The main character is dark; the young woman he falls in love with is a blonde. It should come as no surprise that she speaks better and behaves more intensely than the main character does. When she is committed to a decision, the main character hedges. The polarities go on and on. When we look at all the other characters' physical variations (slim and heavy), age variations (young and old), and aggression variations (violent and meek), we see that they permeate

the screen story. Polarities are the most obvious, useful devices for instilling conflict in your story.

Character

The main character of the screen story is the primary means for the audience to experience the story. The audience will be involved in the story to the extent that it identifies with the character and his dilemma. On the surface, the character may be recognizable via a dominant physical or behavioral characteristic. However, during a moment of private revelation or a moment when the character allows himself to appear foolish or vulnerable, our empathy for that character is realized and our identification with the character is secured.

Generally, the main character is energetic and exposed to sufficient conflict to propel her through the story. The main character differs from secondary characters in a variety of ways. The primary difference is that the main character undergoes a metamorphosis during the course of the story. On the other hand, the secondary characters do not change and, in fact, necessarily serve as a source of contrast to the main character. Through interaction with the main character, secondary characters help to move the story along.

All the characters (main and secondary) have distinct goals in the screen story. Generally, these goals parallel the premise. Secondary characters take each side of the issue and the main character is faced with the conflict. In *On the Waterfront*, Marlon Brando's character is faced with these questions: Can he, a washed-up boxer, be a more moral person than his brother, the criminal? Should he be a criminal or a saint? Actors Lee J. Cobb and Rod Steiger, who play gangsters in the film, are important secondary characters, along with Eva Marie Saint and Karl Malden, who play the roles of saints. The secondary characters prod Brando to join their respective side. The screen story draws to its conclusion once Brando has made his choice.

Dialogue

Since 1927, films have had sound, comprising dialogue, sound effects, and music. When dialogue is used in film, it fulfills three roles. First, dialogue characterizes. Speech patterns tells us whether the character is educated, from where the character originates, the profession of the character, the approximate age of the character, and the emotional state of the character. Second, dialogue helps define the plot. What the character says depends on the role of the character in the story. Louis, in *Four Friends*, is a dying man who loves life, as opposed to the central character's tentative approach to life. Louis's function is to highlight, through dialogue, his joy of living, his enthusiasm for science and for sex, and all of those elements absent from the main

character's life. The third function of dialogue is to relieve tension, through humor, when it occurs in a script (an inevitable state given the writer's attention to conflict). Humor serves to put us at ease with the characters; we like people more readily after we've shared a laugh with them.

In a more general sense, dialogue has an additional overarching purpose—to make the characters more believable. The writer's first objective is to make the audience believe the story, or, more specifically, believe the characters in the story. If the dialogue is working, the audience will be more inclined to believe in the characters. When dialogue does not work, the characters tend to be less believable. Consequently, dialogue plays an important role in the creation of character credibility.

Atmosphere

When a reader reads a screenplay, she is confronted with a good deal of description and then dialogue. So how can the writer create atmosphere? Doesn't atmosphere come from visualization when the screenplay is filmed? Not entirely. Atmosphere, in a screenplay, is the accumulation of details that creates the illusion of a single, coherent world on the page.

The writer creates a spatial, or three-dimensional, sense of believability when the dialogue is credible and when the depictions of time and place are so convincing that the reader can say "I know that person, I've been in that place or situation." Detail is the key. When there is enough detail, the atmosphere of the screenplay moves from generic to particular, from mechanical to meaningful.

Action Line

Action line is frequently referred to as the story line or the plot. The term *action line*, however, is most appropriate for film, because the visual nature of the medium suggests visual action as the preferred form of characterization. Also, action line is occasionally referred to as the foreground story, or the major story line, as opposed to the background story, or the secondary story line.

The term *foreground story* implies the more important aspects of the story, which isn't always true. Indeed, in many stories the more subtle background (or minor story line) involves the deeper elements of the story, the characters' relationships as opposed to the larger events that drive the story. For an audience, these relationship elements are frequently the most meaningful, emotional link to the screen story. Consequently, the background story can be just as, if not more, important for the audience.

Often, the action line, although more sensational, is more superficial in its meaning. For simplicity, the action line can be viewed as the exterior