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Beyond the Rules

There are many views about what is important for you to know to become a better screenwriter. Before we explain our versions of what you need to know, we'll 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 theater and film. David Hare (*Strapless*), William Goldman (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*), and John Sayles (*Baby, It's You*) write fiction and screenplays, as do many others. You, as the scriptwriter, are part of a broad storytelling tradition. To disregard other forms of writing or to view scriptwriting as an exclusive art form is to cut yourself off from a large cultural community with which you have more in common than you might realize.

Our second bias is that a screenplay should be more than merely structurally sound. How often has the screenwriter been 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 should you be. This book suggests ways to move beyond conventional structure.

Third, you have to know about structure in order to move beyond it. It isn't possible to reinvent the process without knowing it in detail. Consequently, much of what we say highlights the conventions of screenwriting developed to date.

Now that you know our biases, we can state our fairly simple approach. We outline conventions and then suggest practical ways to undermine or alter those conventions. We use specific examples, often to illustrate the points we're trying to make. Ultimately, we will help you develop better screenplays.

To help you reach this goal, we talk about form and content, character, and language, while pressing you to develop alternative narrative strategies that prompt you to write the best screenplay you can write. Melanie Griffith, recognizing that people aren't always what they appear to be, 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'll 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 other conventional storytelling devices. Surprise is important to all stories; without it, the story is flat and becomes a report of a 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, your choices are limited only by your willingness and 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: introduction of character and premise; Act Two: confrontation and struggle; Act Three: resolution of the crisis introduced in the premise. Operating in each act are various plot devices intended to intensify conflict, characterize, and propel the plot forward. Structure is discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Noteworthy, however, is the difference of scriptwriting structure from other structured forms of storytelling. Most plays have 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, it 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?

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, for the audience will be involved 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 sense of fellow feeling for that character is realized and our identification with the character is secured.

Generally, the main character is energetic and is 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 she undergoes a metamorphosis during the course of the story. On the other hand, the secondary characters not only don't change, they serve as a source of contrast to the main character. Through this interaction, 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 this question: 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. Each secondary character prods Brando to join his side. The screen story moves to its conclusion once Brando has made his choice.

Dialogue

Since 1927, films have had sound, comprised of dialogue, sound effects, and music. *Dialogue* in film fulfills three roles. First, it characterizes. How one speaks tells us whether or not the character is educated, as well as the character's origins, profession, approximate age, and emotional state. 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 en-

important for the audience.

Often, the action line, although more sensational, is more superficial in its meaning for the audience. For simplicity, the action line can be viewed as the exterior action of the story and is definitely conflict-oriented. The background story can be viewed as the interior (main character) action of the screen story. Background story is identification-oriented.

Rising Action

Rising action carries the action line from the beginning to the end and implies that the level of conflict that confronts the major character increases as we move through the screen story. The level of conflict is greatest in Act Three. There is a dip in the rising action at the beginning of Act Two and Act Three. The illustration indicates the levels of action during Acts One through Three in a screenplay.

Subtext

Subtext is the background story or the interior struggle of the main character to choose the most appropriate solution to his interior con-

Act Three

Act Two

Act One
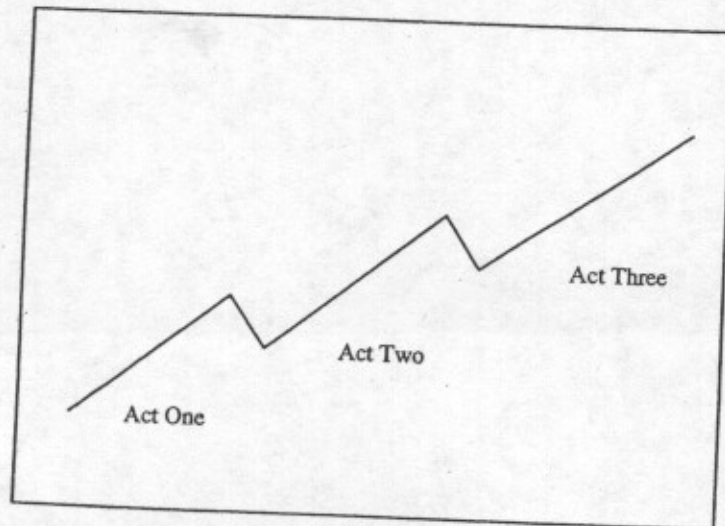
flict. Subtext is often expressed in terms of general human emotional states: love-hate or life-death. Not every screen story deals with such primal feelings, but the memorable films have these dimensions to their stories. At the deepest level, subtext can reach the audience in a more complex and gripping manner than action. The screen stories you most likely remember have a strong subtext.

Discovery

The presence of surprise is important in the screenplay. Whether it refers to plot or character, an unexpected revelation, no matter how trivial, maintains our interest. *Discoveries* made later in the screen story must be greater in scale than those found earlier in the screen story.

Reversal

Plot twists manifest a *reversal* of fortune for the main character. Such setbacks create tension and heightened concern for the fate of the character, but should be used more sparingly than other plot devices. Too many reversals in a screen story tend to depreciate their impact. Deploy them with care to create for maximum impact.

Turning Point

Turning points, sometimes referred to as plot points, yield surprise, anticipation, and tension, and help maintain our interest in the screen story. Turning points are classified as minor or major, while *reversals* tend to be major turning points. Minor turning points take place frequently throughout the screen story. Early major turning points open up the story and provide a broader spectrum of options for the main character. Late major turning points help to focus the story by pointing the main character toward the resolution of his crisis.

Going Against Structure

Structure is such an important characteristic of the screenplay that we devote Chapters 2 through 6 to discussing structure, counterstructure, genre, and working against genre. As previously mentioned, the structured approach uses three acts to tell your screen story, and, if you choose, the use of a particular genre to deliver your three acts.

The central question you face if you don't wish to use the conventional three-act structure is: What is available to you? Can you, for example, tell a story in one act? Probably not. Can you tell a story in two acts? Yes, as evidenced in *Full Metal Jacket*. In four acts? Yes, as shown in *Mo' Better Blues*.

Although the setup-confrontation-resolution approach to structure remains the predominant form, the absence of resolution in *Full Metal Jacket* and the addition of a second optional resolution in the fourth act of *Mo' Better Blues* adds a dimension to those films that is not present in the classic case. The potential benefit of the fresh addition of a second resolution is to alter the meaning of the film.

A limitation of scriptwriting is that a screen story must be set up and must have some level of conflict or confrontation. Consequently, a story that is all setup, or all confrontation with no setup (the one-act option), is too limiting and too similar to a fragment of a larger story, rather than a feature-length screen story.

One qualification to this argument about going against structure poses another question. When Julie Dash wrote *Daughters of the Dust*, was the circularity of the story going against conventional structure or was she opting to tell the story in a manner most sensible to her? Similarly, is she opting for a group of characters over a single goal-oriented main character and does that choice imply working against convention, or, is it a case of a woman telling a story in a manner most sensible to her? This issue of the manner in which men and women tell stories is not easily captured, but for those interested we refer you to a fascinating book that does imply gender difference. The title is *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Basic Books, 1986) and the authors (Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattock Tarule) make a persuasive argument that women are less interested in linear storytelling and are far more empathetic with the circular approach used by Julie Dash.

With genre, the scriptwriter's options increase. Genres, or particular types of films such as gangster or horror, have certain identifiable characteristics. For example, audiences identify the monster-antagonist with the horror film and the urban setting with the gangster film. You can use a particular genre as the envelope for your structural choice or you can challenge a particular genre motif. For example, in a Western, the protagonist is generally positive, moral, and faces his challenges alone. However, in *The Wild Bunch*, the scriptwriter challenged the genre motif of the positive protagonist by making the main character an outlaw and a murderer and surrounding him with people who were worse.

The violation of genre can relate to any motif, not just to character. A scriptwriter can vary the presentation of the antagonist, the nature of the confrontation, or the resolution. For example, the unseen enemy in the war film *Full Metal Jacket* robs the viewer of a classical view of the antagonist. In fact, the antagonist becomes a fellow American in the first half of the film.

Another challenge to genre is the use of mixed genres to alter meaning. This particular scriptwriting option became quite popular in the 1980s. Given

the number of genres, many options are available to the scriptwriter, and while not all genres mix with success, attempts to mix even the most unlikely have yielded interesting results. For example, by mixing the musical and *film noir* genres, *Diva* is fresher than it would have been as a straight musical or *film noir* screen story.

The ultimate challenge to conventions has been met by Woody Allen in his film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Not only does Allen alter structure (he presents two three-act stories in one film), he also mixes genres and challenges particular motifs in each of the genres. The result is a startling screen story during which the shifts in our expectations and moods are so rapid, that we are left dazed and dazzled by his audacity. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* suggests audiences will tolerate a good deal of experimentation and are sufficiently film-experienced to know what to expect from conventional structure and genres. Allen challenges these expectations on as many bases as he feels are manageable.

Character Alternatives

If the classic main character is active, likable, and central to the story, alternative approaches challenge each of these qualities. These character alternatives are explored in detail in Chapters 7 through 9.

What happens to your screen story when the main character is more passive, more voyeur than participant? What happens when your main character is not admirable or even likable? What happens when your main character is overshadowed by one or more secondary characters? Do these initiatives undermine the effectiveness of your screen story? The answers to these questions yield a new range of possibilities. They can weaken your story or they can alter the experience of your story in new and interesting ways. In all likelihood, you will have to adjust your treatment of all the characters and of the amount of narrative necessary to tell your story. This is especially true for the role of the antagonist.

Taking up the issue of the unconventional main character, we can find examples throughout the history of film.

Aiello (James Mason), the main character in Michael Wilson's *Five Fingers*, is a spy trying to sell secrets to the Nazis, including the time and place of the Allies' planned Normandy invasion of Europe. Hardly a person to admire, Aiello is, nevertheless, a fascinating and involving character. Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in Paul Schrader's *Taxi Driver* is an alienated, highly disturbed war veteran. He is sufficiently antisocial and prone to violence to have little appeal as a main character. Rupert Popkin (Robert De Niro) in Paul Zimmerman's *King of Comedy* is even less appealing. Delusional and desperate, Popkin wants to be a television celebrity.

In each of these cases, the scriptwriter presented characters and action in a way that allowed the viewer to identify with the main character. In *Taxi Driver*, the uncaring, callous nature of the majority of characters makes Travis Bickle seem more sensitive, and he becomes a victim rather than a perpetrator. The consequence is that, in spite of his neurotic behavior, we identify with Travis Bickle. This is the sort of adjustment the writer makes if she wants to move away from the classic presentation of the main character.

Another character alternative is the ironic character, who promotes distance between us and the character. This allows us not only to sympathize with the character's plight but also to wonder why events and people seem to conspire against him. Often, the ironic character is portrayed as an innocent victim of a person or system. This type of character is very useful when you feel that the ideas are more important than the people in your screen story.

Dialogue Alternatives

Dialogue in a screen story enhances the particular credibility of the character. Whether it's used to advance the plot or to characterize, audiences expect film dialogue to be believable, in keeping with film's illusion of realism. Film looks real, and when behavior and appearance of performers help support that illusion, it is easier for us to relate emotionally to the story we see and the people portrayed.

What if the screenwriter wants to use dialogue to undermine credibility or to supercede the sense of realism? Then, the quality and function of the dialogue in the screenplay broadens considerably and invites the influence of other storytelling forms—the play, the performance, the burlesque—all of which are dependent on dialogue in more elaborate ways.

Dialogue can be more highly charged and more emotional than conventional movie dialogue. Paddy Chayefsky uses this approach in his screenplay *Network*. The old-time producer (William Holden) and the new-style programming executive (Faye Dunaway) argue eloquently about their conflicting philosophies in dialogue that illustrates the conflict. Dialogue can also be stripped of feeling and abstracted so that the viewer relates to it as a metaphor for his state of mind rather than a sense of plausibility. David Hare uses this approach in his screenplays *Plenty* and *Strapless*.

A third option for dialogue is to use language ironically in order to destroy the most literal meaning of the language. This type of dialogue is often associated with the Marx Brothers; Groucho was constantly trying to undermine meaning. For example, Groucho plays Rufus T. Firefly in Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby's *Duck Soup* (1933). Firefly is the new leader of Freedonia, a fictional middle European state. Fanfare announces the arrival of the leader.

In the palace he is greeted by Mrs. Teasdale. The regal guests eagerly await his arrival. The exchange of dialogue follows.

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                    MRS. TEASDALE
          We've been expecting you.
                    (She gives him her hand; pompously.)
          As Chairwoman of the reception
          committee, I extend the good
          wishes of every man, woman and
          child of Freedonia.

                    FIREFLY
          Never mind that stuff. Take a
          card.
                    (he fans out a pack of cards)

                    MRS. TEASDALE
          A card? What'll I do with a
          card?
                    (she takes it)

                    FIREFLY
          You can keep it. I've got
          fifty-one left. Now, what were
          you saying?[1]
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Another dialogue alternative is used in screen stories that have very little action and thus may be subject to a loss of screen energy. This situation may be compensated for through the use of energized dialogue, which is sufficiently charged so that the dynamism of the story is brought out. This alternative necessitates a great deal more dialogue because it then becomes considerably more important than in the conventional screen story. Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* is a recent example of the use of this type of dialogue. Budget limitations can also promote the use of excessive, energized dialogue in order to avoid costly action sequences.

Atmosphere Alternatives

Atmosphere is created by visual detail and lends visual credibility to your screen story. If your goal is to challenge credibility or to add another level of meaning to your story, manipulation of environmental details becomes your most direct tool to alter atmosphere.

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[1] The Marx Brothers, *Monkey Business, Duck Soup, and A Day at the Races*. Faber and Faber, London, 1953.

In *Local Hero*, Bill Forsyth uses detail to subvert and alter the original direction of the narrative. *Local Hero* is the story of a Texas oilman's efforts to buy land in Scotland for the purpose of exploiting offshore oil. To underscore the corporate dimension of the story line, we would expect offices, oil rigs, and the material benefits of the exploiters and the exploited. Forsyth has little interest in this type of detail. Instead, we are presented with a sensual otherworldly presentation of the land and its hypnotic effect on the would-be exploiters. The result is that the oilmen, by the end of the narrative, don't get what they came for, but they don't seem to mind. The owner of the company, a mystic portrayed by Burt Lancaster, and his salesman, portrayed by Peter Riegert, have been changed by their exposure to this mystical landscape. They are sensually enriched, but materially worse off.

Francis Ford Coppola and Michael Herr use the atmosphere of *Apocalypse Now* to move that story from a realistic treatment of the Vietnam War to a metaphor of war and Vietnam as hell. In his screenplay for *The Untouchables*, David Mamet, moves his gangster film about Al Capone and Elliot Ness to a story about the struggle of good and evil. The metaphor moves us away from the events of the story toward the subtext of good and evil.

Finally, the scriptwriter has the option of altering atmosphere by using details that undermine the sense of place developed from preceding details. A good example is in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. A tranquil, pastoral town is presented—beautiful flowers, content inhabitants, and, of course, rosy-cheeked children. Then, suddenly, Lynch shows us the ants and insects that inhabit the ground under the grass. Soon after this shot, the surface impression of the town is shattered when the main character finds a severed ear. The tranquility is broken and we can't trust our expectations for the balance of the screen story.

Foreground and Background Story Alternatives

The scriptwriter has broad options in the area of foreground and background stories. Film stories have been long divided between personal interest stories and adventure (action) stories. Often, the personal interest story is more literary and the action story is linear. Today, the action story is called the high-concept premise and the personal interest story is called the low-concept premise. The high-concept film, particularly since *Star Wars*, has become the dominant type of screen story. Foreground stories are the prevalent form, and the resulting schism has screenwriters scurrying to maintain their positions in the marketplace. In spite of the market, screen stories benefit from having both strong foreground and background stories, as described in Chapter 10.

It should be noted that the current remarkable level of dominance of the American film internationally is attributable to the success of the foreground story, plot-oriented film. Films such as *The Terminator* series and the *Lethal Weapon* series, as well as the earlier *Indiana Jones* series and the *Star Wars* series, deploy stars, special effects, and production values but at heart all are linear stories with memorable set pieces of action. When European films such as *La Femme Nikita* or Australian films such as *The Road Warrior* deploy a similar narrative strategy they too are great international successes. This does not mean, however, that writers should now all devote themselves to the action genre. Indeed, the success of films such as *Sleepless in Seattle* and *Forrest Gump* demonstrates that audiences also want low concept or character-driven stories.

For the scriptwriter, alternatives begin to develop when you work with the balance of foreground and background. The key ingredient in creating that balance is the main character. If the scriptwriter positions her in a deeply personal dilemma, the outcome of the story is less predictable. Background stories, which dwell on the interior life of the main character, tend to be less predictable because interior life is not linear.

Although foreground stories are the current dominant form, much attention has been paid to background stories, as evidenced in *Moonstruck*. Background story-oriented screen plays tend to have particular characteristics beyond their character orientation. Often, dialogue moves away from realism toward a more literary quality and is distinctive and eccentric. Playwrights are accustomed to using dialogue—literary, charged dialogue—because there is less action on stage. Feeling levels intensify through language and dialogue. The dialogue in *Moonstruck* shouldn't come as a surprise since the scriptwriter, John Patrick Shanley, is a playwright. So, too, are Sam Shepard, Ted Talby, Steve Tesich, Hanif Kureishi, David Hare, and David Mamet, all interesting playwrights who also happen to write screenplays with strong background stories.

In spite of the commercial trend toward foreground stories, many options arise from the deployment of a strong background story or using a mix of foreground and background stories. Foreground stories may be sensational to watch, but they present the central character superficially. When the writer uses the background story, the main character becomes more personal to us and more open-ended. The result invites a deeper involvement from the viewer.

Rising Action Alternatives

When writers deploy a stronger background story, they open up possibilities in varying the convention of rising action. Generally, the action of the screen story gradually rises to a climax, except for a brief pause

at the beginnings of Act Two and Act Three, which allow the writer to set up the parameters for the acts that follow. When using a background story, the scriptwriter can devote more time to the characters, although this does not necessarily advance the plot or move the story toward the climax. A good example of this alternative approach to rising action is found in Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre*. Less extreme, but no less interesting, is Jean-Claude Carrière and Louis Malle's *May Fools*. In these films, the shift from rising action affords the audience a greater opportunity to know the characters.

As we mention in Chapter 4, moving away from three-act structure results in a more open-ended sense of character and structure. A similar result occurs when the scriptwriter moves away from rising action. In order to make this step effective, however, the screenwriter must make the visitation with the characters worthwhile. They must be interesting and the dialogue has to be as involving as new plot developments would be. This means charged, witty, and surprising dialogue. Without these characteristics, the viewer will experience a flatness that does not serve the interests of the screen story.

This idea of modulating rising action applies only to Act Two of the screenplay. The screen story still needs the rise in action during the setup in Act One and the continued rise in action to the resolution in Act Three, unless you choose not to use an Act Three.

Developing Narrative Strategies

There are more ways to tell a screen story than the conventions of screenwriting suggest. This message is the central theme of this book. In order to tell your story you need to develop a narrative strategy that is best suited to your idea. First, you need to answer these questions: Who is your main character? What is the premise of your story? What is the most exciting action line for this story? Does the action line best highlight your main character's dilemma? Is your main character's dilemma situational or is it deeply rooted in her personality?

The choices you make when answering these questions are inherently dramatic choices and will influence the effectiveness of your screen story. You, as a screenwriter, must make the best dramatic choice, bearing in mind that the most interesting choice is not necessarily the most obvious.

A central issue for all scriptwriters is the creation of a story that invites the viewer to identify with the main character or with that character's situ-

ation. If your narrative strategy employs characters who don't invite identification, you can't guarantee that the viewer will stay with you for the length of your story.

What narrative strategies are available to the writer? There are many, and you have options with every factor in the screenplay, including character, language, atmosphere, action line, background story, and structure. In regard to the main character, for example, you can opt for an active, energetic main character, a more passive one, or a less likable one. Your choice depends on the type of character that best elicits the dramatic results you seek. In dialogue, you need not be limited by character function, and in terms of structure, you can vary or mix genres, challenge the convention of three-act structure, or vary the foreground-background mix. In all cases, exploring alternative strategies to develop your narrative strategy yields a fresher approach to your story and more open-ended characters.

The scriptwriter must be flexible to ensure that what he takes away from one area of the screenplay is compensated for elsewhere. If we don't like your main character and the challenge is to create a situation in which we identify with that character (in spite of our reservations about him), there are certain steps you must take. You may have to shift your approach to the other characters, your dialogue may have to be more emotionally charged and more intense, and you'll need a more elaborate plot. Alfred Hitchcock, in his work with writers Ben Hecht and Raymond Chandler, exemplifies the ability to capture viewer identification in spite of the use of less-than-admirable main characters. In *Psycho, The Birds,* and *North by Northwest,* it's the situation, rather than the character, that brings us into the story. In *Notorious* and *Strangers on a Train,* the unsympathetic main characters are offset by extreme antagonists, people we like to hate.

A scriptwriter also has to concern herself with the issue of stimulation for the viewer. Audiences go to movies to enjoy themselves. Whether stimulation comes from the elaborations of the plot or the wit of the dialogue, the charm-stimulation element is necessary to link the screenwriter to the audience. What happens to this element when you begin to challenge screenwriting conventions? It begins to fade. Therefore, you have to include stimulation in some other form. Spike Lee challenges conventional structure in *She's Gotta Have It,* but his additional charm comes from the dialogue. Whatever narrative strategy you use, audience identification and stimulation are critical factors in determining the success of your screenplay. If you select an alternative strategy, these factors will still have to be present.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we discussed conventions and counter-conventions to scriptwriting. Conventions are critical building blocks to tell your story. Counter-conventions can make that story fresh and more exciting. In order to use new strategies, however, you have to know the conventions of scriptwriting. Throughout this book we highlight the creative opportunities that lie between those conventions and counter-conventions.