

INVESTIGATING THE SCENE

Plot Incidents/Story Events

A good scene - one worthy of our attention - is far richer than you might imagine. Even with two people sitting at a breakfast table something must be happening, something important, something with emotional stakes. That “happening” is what we call the “emotional event” of the scene, and that event is the object of our investigation. It’s the brass ring, the prize we are reaching for.

Only scenes that have an emotional event are worth including in a dramatic narrative. They are the only ones worth staging and shooting.

The emotional event is woven into the fabric of a script, but it isn’t specified. We investigate the text to identify the event and unlock its power to trigger change in a character.

Questioning the Text

Through scene study and scene work we address the questions we must ask of every scene:

How did this scene come about?

Why does it continue?

And finally:

What happens? What is it that happens that bring the encounter to an end?

Director David Fincher's *The Social Network* provides a good example. The film begins with a five-minute scene worth our attention. Writer Aaron Sorkin puts Harvard undergrad Mark Zuckerberg in a student pub across a table from his girlfriend Erica, a Boston University coed. In a blizzard of words, spoken with dazzling speed, actor Jesse Eisenberg instructs Erica in the sociology of Harvard final clubs and the vagaries of their "punch process." Three minutes into the scene Erica, feeling patronized, breaks up with Mark. When that happens, from a plot point of view, the scene is over. But from the point of view of story it has just begun.



Plot versus Story

We mustn't confuse plot with story. Plot is the catalogue of incidents that occur in a narrative. In story we take possession of incidents to give them meaning. E. M. Forster explained the distinction this way:

“A plot is: The King died and then the Queen died.

A story is: the King died, and then the Queen died of a broken heart.”



A death is an incident. Incidents are factual. They are things that occur; they don't have meaning in and of themselves. A death doesn't become a meaningful event until it finds a human context.

Incidents are plot points. They occur on the surface of a scene and are observable. Story events happen below the surface where an incident takes on meaning for a character - where it is felt.

A scene is an encounter that culminates in an emotional event, causing a change that propels a character into the next scene. That's what makes a story - and not merely a plot - move forward.

Loss of her beloved King "killed" the Queen. I doubt that science could prove that causality, but people seek meaning in the succession of these incidents. We work to make sense out of life's incidents; we give them meaning through the stories we tell.



Returning to *The Social Network*, the breakup is the plot point of our scene. Once that's announced, why does the scene go on for another two minutes? The answer is that the emotional event hasn't yet happened. It's in the event that a meaningful change occurs in the central character – in Mark Zuckerberg.

Having informed Mark, "we're not dating," Erica attempts to leave the table. Mark apologizes for his behavior; Erica insists she has to study.

Mark dismisses that explanation. “Why do you keep saying I don’t have to study?” she asks in exasperation. Mark, the Ivy League snob, responds, “Because you go to B.U.”

That hurtful exchange occurs four minutes into the scene. It’s another point of sharp conflict, which, like the break up moment, might well be its conclusion. And yet the scene continues for another minute. What keeps it going, and what finally brings it to an end?

Those questions are not easy to answer in words. Or, rather, it would require a lot of words, many sentences and paragraphs, to articulate a satisfying explanation - the kind you might find in a short story or novel. The beauty of a dramatic scene is that we answer those questions, not in words, but in the flickering of a moment. A look, a pause, a sip of a drink, the setting of a jaw, the myriad “tells” we read in behavior that provide a glimpse into the covert reaches of another’s mind or heart.

Why does someone stay in a marriage that should have ended long ago? Why does she suddenly, one day, leave? The reasons, pro and con, have long ago become entrenched across a no man’s land of inaction. And then, in a moment, something snaps, something gives, something changes.

In order to keep their scene alive from moment to moment Fincher and his actors needed to address the questions:

What did the characters come for?

Are they getting it?

Why do they stay?

Sorkin's words, if taken at face value and acted upon, might have ended the encounter in at least four places. Erica says she has to study but does not go; the actor and director must ask and answer, "why?" What keeps her there? What hope is still alive? The script does not specify, but the actor and director must decide. Though her reason won't be explained, the audience must feel that she has one. As long as our characters' hope is alive the scene is alive. Once that hope dies the audience loses interest. We have scant patience for argument in a case that's closed.

The scene must stay alive long enough to realize its emotional event. It must reach the point where Mark cannot escape the wound his behavior has inflicted on Erica. Mark's dismissive B.U. crack brings Erica to a full stop. Mark sees the hurt in her eyes. He sees what he has done and quickly deflects. He offers to order food.



In life we work hard to avoid irrevocable moments. Erica tries to evade theirs by suggesting they remain friends. Mark snaps “I don’t want friends,” to which Erica responds, “I was just being polite, I have no intention of being friends with you.” Mark begins a lame apology; he says he’s been under pressure from a class. Erica interrupts him with quiet force:

“You are probably going to be a very successful computer person and you’re going to go through life thinking that girls don’t like you because you’re a nerd, but I want you to know, from the bottom of my

heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole."

That assessment, that insult when it comes, is so commonplace and unspecific that it alone could never have the power to breach Zuckerberg's formidable verbal shield. It's not in the words, but in Erica's face that Mark sees a verdict he must either accept or take action to destroy. She doesn't like him. He is not liked. He is, in fact, unlikeable. Finally it isn't the words Erica speaks but the way that Mark hears them. The way her rejection connects to all rejections, even to his rejection of himself. It is that judgment, as Mark receives it, that is the emotional moment, the event of the scene.



Aaron Sorkin is lauded for his words, and rightly so. But it is in the

power of his design, in the way Fincher probes the structure of this scene, and how he and his actors unearth the moments, that the power of the encounter is realized.

Words are given in the text; moments must be made in the playing. Saying can be scripted, hearing cannot. Hearing must happen. The hearing – the receiving - is the event.

Something has happened. At last, Mark has seen and heard. Deep inside he has been hit. What will he do?

A scene ends with an unspoken question that must be answered in the next scene. What will he do?

The event of this scene changes Mark Zuckerberg from an eager and ambitious freshman into a wounded animal ready to strike back at Erica and the women she says won't like him. In the next scene he boots up his computer and takes revenge. Mark invents "The Face Book" and, while doing so, he invents "the like", the tool that gives him preemptive power to judge before being judged wanting.

Events are happenings that are difficult to put into words. We can't always name them, but in performance we can, and must, mark them, acknowledge them, and play them. That is how we imbue a scene with moment-to-moment life. That's how we trigger the event. Through scene study and scene work we explore scenes to make this happen.

One final note: It's important to acknowledge that stories are just that, stories. The film, *The Social Network*, is a fictional telling of real life incidents. It has been pointed out that the real Mark Zuckerberg had the same girlfriend before and after the creation of The Face Book. A breakup was not the inciting incident, in fact, that it is made to be in *The Social Network*. Real life does not come with meaning attached. That's why we make stories – to provide meaning to life.

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