

Moving Away From the Monoplot:  
Conventional Narrative Structure in the  
Screenplay and the Unconventional  
Alternatives

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## **Abstract**

Through a combination of creative and critical practice, this project seeks to explore the conventionalisation effect that popular screenwriting handbooks have had on screenwriting practice, the unconventional structural models that are available to the screenwriter once they move away from the conventional model, and the meanings which conventional and unconventional structural approaches create. By examining the most influential screenwriting handbooks, and tracing the historical development of screenwriting conventions, a model for quantifying and understanding conventional narrative structure will be proposed: Conventional Monoplot. An exploration of the cinematic canon, box office statistics and Academy Awards success will attempt to show that the conventionalisation of structural practice within the screenplay has led to an increased homogeneity of form and meaning in mainstream cinema and a concurrent reduction in narrative sophistication and critical esteem. By applying the Conventional Monoplot model in their practice, this project will argue that the screenwriter can quantify and understand divergence from conventional structural practice by negative correlation to the model, and through such practice the homogeneity of film form might be challenged. Through an examination of a wide body of film texts a taxonomy of alternative structural models will be proposed, and the meanings which these models create will be explored. The creative element, a feature screenplay, will demonstrate practical application of one of these models, and a critical reflection will explore the meanings created by use of this unconventional structural model, locating a methodology for unconventional practice in the screenplay. The project will propose that the influence of screenwriting handbooks has led to homogeneity and conventionalisation in the

culture of the screenplay, and that by consciously focusing on unconventional structural practices the screenwriter can access a greater diversity of meaning at the structural level.

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## Introduction

Screenwriting discourse has since at least 1909 been replete with normative ideas of standard practice: what a good structure is and how it should work. (Maras, 2009: 4)

We have been bombarded with manuals outlining formulas and structures for screenwriting for so long that there is now general understanding that there is no magic formula for good scriptwriting. There is recognition that every project is challenging in its own way, involving a rethinking of the rules. (Maras, 2009: 9)

This research project seeks to explore, through a combination of critical and creative practice, the impact screenwriting manuals have had on screenwriting practice and the broader film culture, and the meanings that can be created if the screenwriter moves away from the conventional story model propagated by the handbooks toward more unconventional story structures. In doing so, it seeks to locate a practical framework for unconventional practice in the screenplay, and to answer the central research question: what unconventional narrative structures are available to the screenwriter, and what meanings do they offer?

As Maras and others note (Thompson, 1999; Macdonald, 2013; Conor, 2014), screenwriting handbooks have been a feature of the film industry almost as long as there has been a film industry, however the impact and influence of the modern handbooks, beginning with Syd Field's *Screenplay* (1979) and its story paradigm, and continuing through Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (1992), Robert

McKee's *Story* (1999), and to a lesser extent John Yorke's *Into the Woods* (2013), is a particular phenomenon, and part of the focus of this project. Through their adoption as key texts for development professionals and higher education courses on the screenplay, these texts became regulatory devices used to guide screenwriting practice but also to police its perimeters, establishing and reinforcing 'the accepted and commonsense rules that screenplays "must" abide by' (Conor, 2012: 129), serving to construct, facilitate and regulate screenwriting labour (Conor, 2014: 81). To the extent that the modern handbooks enable and support creativity they also revoke and restrict (Conor, 2014; Ross, 2011), creating a broadly homogenous story model (Conor; Macdonald) which tends to be framed not as one potential model available to the screenwriter, calibrated to create a particular meaning or meanings, but as the ideal model, with deviations or alternatives framed as inferior, and as this project will explore, the model which they disseminate can be seen as upholding a particular and dominant ideology, and, in its dominance, pushing story shapes which embody alternative ideologies or worldviews to the cultural fringe.

My experiences both as a working screenwriter on the edges of the film and television industries and as a student of screenwriting reflect Maras's observations regarding 'normative ideas' and the predominance of formulas and structures, and Conor's observation about the role the handbooks play in establishing and upholding rules. As an emerging writer in my early twenties I often found myself in development meetings straining for the right language to justify, even simply to quantify, what might best be described as a desire to deviate from conventional storytelling norms. Faced with experienced producers and developmental notes that sought to mould my ideas into the familiar shapes described in the handbooks, and



desperate for commissions, the end result was often the same: grudging concessions, leading to half-hearted rewrites which failed to satisfy both myself and the producer. I knew, even if I lacked the craft skills to achieve my aims, that replicating conventional story patterns was not what I wanted to do. I knew, implicitly, that the familiar story shape did not reflect the external world as I saw it nor my internal world as I felt it. I knew that I wanted to emulate those filmic texts which pushed formal and structural boundaries—those by Kubrick, Kieslowski, Altman, PT Anderson, Jarmusch, Takeshi Kitano—but I didn't know how to go about it, nor how to generate support from within industry to help bring such visions to fruition. I didn't yet know that Linda Aronson had created a language to define such texts, and when I studied for an MA in Screenwriting that scholarship was absent. In-class discussions of unconventionality tended to go nowhere. The syllabus was underpinned by the conventional story model propagated by the handbooks, particularly Field, Vogler and McKee. There were never any discussions of tandem narratives, of untimely protagonist deaths, of two-act or one-act structures, nor, perhaps more profoundly, any discussion of the inherent meaning underpinning the conventional story shape we were being taught to replicate. Discussions of passive protagonists occurred now and again but tended to be dismissive and vague, reflecting the discourses within the manuals. I left with a greater understanding of how to write a conventionally structured screenplay, and greatly intensified certainty that that was not what I wanted to do.

The manuals themselves seemed to embody conformity, classicism, commercialisation, homogeneity—and although they are undoubtedly of great use in a variety of creative-industrial and pedagogical contexts, and have been of great use to me personally in my development as a creative practitioner and, subsequently, as

a teacher of creative writing, that initial distrust has always remained, and indeed is widely shared not just by practicing writers and filmmakers but within the academy, where criticism of the manuals and the discourses contained within is long-standing. Conor (2012) describes the manuals as 'omnipresent' (83) and 'pivotal' to the 'standardization' (122) of screenwriting labour whilst acting to 'severely delimit the possibilities for professional agency' (134). Macdonald (2013) notes that the manuals 'direct writers toward the "right" way to do things'" (37) but warns that 'as direct sources of information on practice, the accuracy of the manuals is questionable' (38). Kristin Thompson notes that despite the ubiquity of the three-act story model, most film texts, according to her study, seemed to be formed not of three but of four large parts, with each part defined by a separate dramatic goal (1999). Lee (2013) observes that popular narratives 'function to restrict collective responsibility' and in doing so provide a soothing, comforting effect to the viewer, reassuring us that 'there is no reason to change the way we live, collectively, in any core way' (28), hinting at an ideological disposition underpinning the conventional story model which is further elucidated by Dancyger and Rush in their work on the 'restorative' (2002: 22) nature of the classical story shape. Dancyger and Rush view the conventional story form, that which has come to dominate anglophone cinema, and probably cinema and series drama more broadly, as 'particularly horizontal in design' (31), rooted in a 'pattern of transgression, recognition and redemption' which makes for 'a very comforting form', allowing the viewer 'to identify with characters who have gone beyond acceptable behaviour, while at the same time remaining aware that they will be forced to confront their behaviour', noting that 'to create a different feel, to find a way to respond to the arbitrariness and indifference of the contemporary world, we have to look elsewhere'(38). Lee notes, giving voice to the

feeling that had underscored my postgraduate study of screenwriting practice and my early experiences in professional scriptwriting, that ‘some of the best screenplays break all the “rules”, and if we want a rule this should be it—break the rules’ (128). Screenwriter Steven De Souza agrees: ‘With a few exceptions, the most successful films are the ones that break the mould’ (De Souza, cited in Iglesias 2001: 127). The mould then, which those producers in my early industry experiences had been trying to fit my ideas into, and against which my work at postgraduate level had been measured and assessed, was delimiting; it prevented what De Souza and Lee both identified as the highest form of success in the screenplay. Not only that, but it enforced a particular meaning, underpinning whatever content filled that mould, a meaning which Lee describes as restricting collective responsibility, what Dancyger & Rush characterize as restorative, soothing, pacifying.

Since my Masters was completed in 2010 the field of screenwriting studies has grown exponentially, corresponding with the formation of the Screenwriting Research Network and the *Journal of Screenwriting* (Batty and Waldeback, 2019), and the assiduous work of figures such as Craig Batty and Bridgit Conor, both of whose scholarship has been invaluable to this project. The practice and history of screenwriting as industrial labour and creative art, as a result, has been subject to far greater interrogation over the past decade, and the long-standing suspicion of the how-to manuals as both undoubtedly useful, even essential guides to screenwriting practice (based partly on their ubiquity and influence within industry) and dubious sites of knowledge littered with Barnum statements and half-truths has received greater attention. Conor describes the how-to discourse as ‘both omnipresent and unstable’ and ‘repudiated within and outside screenwriting practices, classrooms and production spaces as much as it is used to entrance and recruit’ (2014: 83).

Macdonald notes that the manuals 'direct writers toward the "right" way to do things' and that 'writers are expected to absorb the information on offer, rather than question its basis' (2013: 37). He argues that the purpose of the manuals is to solidify orthodoxy, what he calls the 'doxa' (42), to make conventional practice 'coherent and consistent' (42). As a result 'they all—in various ways—say similar things' (42), and although there are 'many ways of constructing screen narratives... we almost always hear of just one' (59). For him, the culture of the manuals is a 'monoculture' that is 'very rarely challenged' (59). Conor agrees, noting that the 'screenwriting schemas' located in the handbooks 'map onto each other in strikingly homogenous ways... foreground[ing] the most basic elements of a scripted story and revel[ling] in its inherent simplicity' (128), and as a result 'standardized story structure... is constructed as paramount' (129).

Perhaps the homogeneity and orthodoxy both noticed and concretized by the manuals might not be too significant were it not for the great influence they have cast over screenwriting culture from the late twentieth century to the present. As Maras, Thompson (1999) and others note, screenwriting handbooks have been a feature of the film industry since its earliest days. The modern handbooks however, beginning with Syd Field's *Screenplay*, developed a far greater influence than their predecessors, largely attributable, this project will argue, to the profound corporatization that was occurring in the wider American film industry at the time and the value offered by standardized story models to that corporatization process. As the New Hollywood era gave way to an increasingly horizontally-integrated and differentiated business model based on largely pre-sold franchise films (King, 2002; Schatz, 1993), the film product itself became an increasingly smaller part of a film property's overall profits, and film properties which offered the greatest potential for

product differentiation (through video game and soundtrack tie-ins, theme park rides, toys and consumer goods) became more central to the major studios' production slates (King). By providing a framework for typically effective practice in storytelling, the handbooks, particularly Field's and, subsequently, Vogler's, offered a method by which to further conventionalize the creative product at the heart of the differentiated business model, and hence to limit potential box office disaster. Field and Vogler's assertions that the models they noticed and outlined could be applied not just to fantastical, mythic stories but to all film stories all of the time, which will be explored in further detail in chapter two, can perhaps explain in part how the handbook models came to be applied so widely both within the film industry and within higher education in the screenplay, and how unconventionally shaped films moved from a central role in the iconoclastic American cinema of the 1960s and 70s to a fringe position from the 1980s onwards.

The impulse to question homogeneity within the cinematic form lies at the heart of this project. This project will argue not that the standardized story structure which the handbooks concretize and disseminate is in any way faulty or undesirable, but rather that it is suitable only for creating one particular kind of meaning at the structural level, and that if the screenwriter wishes to divert from this meaning then other structures must be explored. Ultimately, creative choices of all kinds must be made by the screenwriter, consciously or intuitively, in order to create meaning, and the structure of a screenplay, both at the macrostructural plot level and the microstructural level (acts, sequences, scenes, beats), is arguably the dominant method of meaning creation within the form. Batty states: 'it is the creation of meaning that gives a film its longevity, where an audience takes away themes and feelings that may be applied to real life: morals, attitudes, points of view' (2009: 140).

In an effective screenplay, every element is harmonised in the service of meaning creation: 'Characters, plot, dialogue and visual imagery are tools deployed to create thematic meaning... the invisible hand of the screenwriter thus physically guides an audience through its emotional journey, where action is used to manipulate feeling' (Batty: 142).

### **Aims and Methodology**

Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush, in *Alternative Screenwriting*, deconstruct the conventional, restorative three act model, and offer alternatives, including one- and two-act narratives, and an ironic re-envisioning of the three-act model, however their work on these alternative forms is quite brief and covers only a small proportion of alternative forms available. Linda Aronson's authoritative work on alternative structures is much more extensive, offering a detailed commentary on the various sub-types of multiple protagonist narratives, but there are significant alternative models with single protagonists which require further exploration. In his book *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach* (2004), Paul Gulino offers a detailed and convincing method of understanding how both conventional and unconventional feature film narratives are shaped, but as with Dancyger and Rush he does not devote much space to noticing and surveying alternative models. This project then seeks to build on the work of Dancyger and Rush, Aronson and Gulino in identifying and quantifying unconventional structural practice in the screenplay, focusing on creative writing practice, and locating, through the creation of an original feature-length screenplay and a subsequent exegesis, a methodology for unconventional practice.

In order to limit the scope of the inquiry the project will focus particularly on crime films—films which depict some aspect of crime and its consequences (Leitch, 2002; Rafter, 2006; Neale, 2000). The project's interest, however, lies not in genre convention but in the restrictive conventions of narrative structure imposed upon the screenwriter by the discourses of screenwriting handbooks—the genre limitation has been applied only to create a manageable scale for the project. Films that break the restrictive structural conventions espoused by the handbooks tend to be tonally quite far from more generic crime cinema, employing the kind of 'recurrent violations' (Bordwell, 1979: 59) and 'foreground[ed] deviations from the classical form' (60) that tends to define art cinema, and certainly for this project it is the application of such art film techniques in a crime context, specifically unconventional narrative structures, which is of principal interest.

This choice is largely owing to my previous experience working in an arthouse crime context and my aims for the creative portion of this project, however it also serves the purposes of the study more broadly. Crime texts continue to function at either end of the commercial film-art film spectrum, accounting for big budget mainstream cineplex fare and low budget festival award-winners, and provide therefore a rich area of study for a project focused on unconventionality and its relation to conventionality. The crime film is also uniquely placed to directly tackle issues of personal morality and the position of these issues within a broader social framework (Elliot, 2021; Chibnall and Murphy, 1999; Clay, 1999; Chibnall, 1999), and so the implications of the narrative shapes underpinning their stories are appropriate for the aims of this project.

The project follows Rafter's definition of crime films as 'films that focus primarily on crime and its consequences', encompassing what she terms genres within a

broader category but which might equally be viewed as sub-genres: 'caper films, detective films, gangster films, cop and prison movies, court-room dramas, and the many offerings for which there may be no better generic label than, simply, *crime stories*' (2006: 6) (emphasis original). Neale (2000) describes the crime film as centred around 'criminals, crime, victims of crime, and official and unofficial agents of law, order and justice' (Neale, 2000: 71), noting, similarly to Rafter, what he calls three principal genres under the broader crime category: the detective film, the gangster film and the suspense thriller, accepting that some texts adopt elements of more than one of these types (72).

Unconventionality for this project is limited to conventions of narrative structure, within the creative remit of the screenwriter, solidified and disseminated by screenwriting handbooks. Bordwell's definitions of convention within classical cinema and the manner in which art cinema breaks these conventions (1979), as well as subsequent work on the defining features of art cinema (Galt and Schoonover, 2010; Lev, 1993; Andrews, 2013), is a useful guide, however existing work on art cinema is focused not on *screenwriting* conventions but on *filmmaking* conventions more broadly, with screenwriting one facet—a result, perhaps, of the newness of screenwriting studies within academia (Batty and McAulay, 2016). Work on screenwriting practice in an art film context is extremely rare, largely limited to brief mentions in texts focused on other topics, and to the work of Dancyger and Rush (2002), Gulino (2004) and Aronson (2010) which forms the core theoretical framework for this project and onto which this project seeks to build. For this project then the focus is on texts with crime elements which diverge from screenwriting convention, specifically conventions of narrative structure—although, more broadly,



the project seeks to examine the impact of conventionalisation in screenwriting practice and the potential of unconventional practice beyond boundaries of genre.

The project will argue that these screenwriting conventions have largely been solidified and disseminated over the past four decades since the emergence of Syd Field's *Screenplay* in 1979 and certain subsequent modern handbooks, particularly those by Vogler (2007), McKee (1999) and Yorke (2013). The project, therefore, whilst guided by Bordwell's definition of art cinema as working counter to various stylistic practices of the classical cinema, will establish over its first three chapters what the dominant narrative conventions in contemporary screenwriting practice are, and will examine in chapter four a range of unconventional crime texts which are defined as unconventional specifically in their divergence from those conventions as laid out in the previous chapters. Importantly, the project's focus is specifically on screenwriting in a creative practice context, and is largely underpinned, therefore, by scholarship on screenwriting practice from the field of creative writing (primarily Dancyger and Rush, Aronson and Gulino), and from screenwriting studies secondarily. Scholarship, such as Bordwell's, from a film studies discipline, which views and examines films as complete artworks incorporating areas of responsibility which play little or no part in the screenwriter's creative labour, will be used where necessary.

Films with art film elements alongside a commercial aspect such as *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Heat* (1995) have been examined, as have films which focus on crime and criminality through a stylistic and tonal lens more closely affiliated with the international art film, such as *A Short Film About Killing* (1988) and *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996). Films with certain features of other genres, such as the family drama or the social issue film, but which nonetheless include a significant focus on

criminal characters and the impact of criminality, such as *La Haine* (1995) and *The Place Beyond The Pines* (2012) have also been examined. In very limited cases in which important unconventional structures are not well represented by crime texts, such as the case of the extremely rare two-act narrative, additional non-crime texts will be used as exemplars—specifically *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and, arguably, *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2011), which is centred on the lead up to and aftermath of a crime but which fits more into the psychological drama genre or, arguably, the art film genre. The principle aim of the project is to examine the full extent of unconventional models available to the screenwriter and the meanings they create, with a focus on unconventional screenwriting practice and its potential, and in doing so locate a practical framework for unconventional screenwriting. The limitation of study to films with crime elements is a practical decision related to scope of inquiry, and therefore it is deemed appropriate to incorporate limited examples of useful texts which illuminate the core research question but which do not fit so neatly into the crime film definition.

The project incorporates an interpretivist aim, and therefore a qualitative reading of film texts is necessary, however the data gathering has a quantitative element: categorising similar texts by their structural diversions from convention. In the original conception of the project a broad survey of convention within crime cinema was proposed, incorporating a far more quantitative focus, and although much of this work was carried out in the first year of study the project was eventually reframed to focus much more directly on unconventional practice, with the survey of the structural models contained in the literature review representing the assessment of conventional practice. A great number of crime films have been broken down scene-by-scene, and whilst this data does not appear in the project directly the knowledge

gained through this process underpins the conclusions that have been reached.

Craig Batty argues that 'a practice-based [writing] PhD does not speculate on the intentions of the writer, nor does it look back at a creative artefact from an outsider's perspective. Rather, it *is* the intentions of the writer, and looks *into* the artefact from a creator's perspective' (Batty, 2012, in Berry & Batty, 2019: 249). This 'looking into' the artefact is central—ultimately, this project's scope is limited to understanding, quantifying and demonstrating the actual work done by the practicing screenwriter. Research is carried out partly through practice, from a practitioner's perspective, and the knowledge produced is intended to be of practical use to the screenwriter. Like Berkeley (2018) I am interested in uncovering knowledge that illuminates the creative process, for the benefit of practitioners, and knowledge that has no direct impact on the creative process of the screenwriter is outside my remit. Therefore I am only concerned with theoretical perspectives which 'reflect the practical nature of the process, where knowledge emerges in the doing and the making of the creative work' (32).

Whilst this project could be described as practice-led, I believe better terms are available. Bell (2018) likes the term artistic research rather than practice-based or practice-led, as do I: 'the notion of artistic research seems to acknowledge art activity as a fusion of creative and critical elements' (47-48). The 'fusion' of the critical and creative elements of this project is central—the analysis of Conventional Monoplot, the term which I use to describe the conventional story model, leads directly to an understanding of unconventional texts, leads to the creation of an unconventional screenplay, leads to a consideration of the practice of the screenwriter and the implications for future practice. 'Above all [artistic research] seeks to foreground and understand the research that practising artists actually do,

not what the academy would like them to do in conformity with the bureaucratic metrics of bureaucratic accountability' (48). Bell argues that the creative arts are concerned with *invention* (48), as is this project—any aspect which does not affect the screenwriter's inventive process is not relevant.

Lee describes screenwriting as 'a discipline to be: a growing and diverse body of knowledge that can be studied as an entity in and of itself; plus a practice, a craft, that hopefully produces new and original screenplays' (1), and claims that 'practice can be a form of theorizing just as theorizing can be a practice' (4). Batty and Baker state that 'research can be *gathered* by creative means and/or *expressed* through creative artefacts and, as such, the research can be focused, in the first instance, on gaining new knowledge about creative *processes and practices* and, in the second instance, on gaining new knowledge about creative *products*' (9). This project is focused on the second instance—gaining knowledge about creative processes and practices through analysis of the way the screenplay is understood, the way the screenplay has been performed in practice, and the way the screenwriter and screenwriting student can respond in their own practice. The intention is to unearth new knowledge about the screenwriter's creative process; to offer a new way of thinking to the screenwriter, focused on meaning creation rather than the recitation of convention. The subjective, qualitative conclusions are demonstrated partially through creative practice, employing my creative practice as a research methodology.

This thesis takes the following structure:

Chapter one begins with analysis of a highly unconventional structural choice within a highly successful (critically lauded, major award winning, profitable) film text (*No Country for Old Men* [2007]), an exploration of the meaning this choice creates,

and how that meaning contrasts with the implicit meaning created by adherence to structural conventions. The aim is to show that discourse around the screenplay, particularly within industry and education, has normalised and conventionalised the screenplay, and that this discourse discourages unconventional approaches to narrative. It will be argued that conventional narrative structure propagates a comforting, deterministic worldview, and that if the screenwriter wishes to divert from this worldview and create alternative meanings they must consciously approach their narrative design from the position of the convention-sceptic, focusing on meaning creation rather than convention adherence. It will further be argued that a focus on the relationship between convention and meaning is called for.

The second chapter reviews and analyses the most influential screenwriting manuals, both in academia and within the industry, in detail, beginning with a brief discussion of the text which underpins all modern screenwriting theory, Aristotle's *Poetics*, and progressing through the work of Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, to Robert McKee's *Story*, Syd Field's *Screenplay*, Paul Gulino's *The Sequence Approach*, Chris Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*, with reference to Lajos Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing* and work on unconventional structures by Linda Aronson and Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush. The project aims to show that the discourse around the screenplay has normalised and conventionalised the screenplay. A composite model of conventional narrative shape will then be proposed, compiled from the overlapping theories of the handbooks: Conventional Monoplot.

The third chapter correlates critical consensus, located in *Sight and Sound's* long-running critic and filmmaker polls, with box office data and Academy Award data to make the case that the conventionalisation of the screenplay has led to a profound

homogeneity in film culture. By demonstrating that mainstream cinema has moved away from unconventionality and towards a profound homogeneity of story form in the decades following the New Hollywood era, a period concomitant with the emergence of the modern handbooks, this project aims to demonstrate that widely seen cinema in the post-handbook era is of a quite different kind to that of previous eras. It will be shown that unconventional texts, in contradiction to the discourse found within the handbooks, are not peripheral by necessity—that in fact they have historically been not only amongst the most critically esteemed films of their eras but also amongst the highest grossing. An examination of Academy Award data will show that, concurrent with a shift towards homogeneity and conventionality, there has been an eradication of the link between widely seen films and Best Picture award recognition, suggesting a decrease in critical esteem for high-grossing films.

The fourth chapter focuses on a small number of strikingly unconventional crime texts, building on the analysis in chapter one of the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men*, employing the Conventional Monoplot model to reveal unconventional practice by negative correlation. By focusing on the ways in which these texts divert from convention, and understanding the effect which those diversions create, this project aims to illuminate to a greater degree the true extent of the structuring options available to today's screenwriters and screenwriting students, and the meanings that can be created by unconventional story shapes.

The fifth chapter consists of an original screenplay, *A Reverie*, specifically designed to blend conventional practice with unconventional, and in doing so to demonstrate how the models outlined in chapter four might be applied by the working screenwriter. The aim is to show that unconventional practice in screenwriting relies on the careful deployment of unconventional technique within a

largely conventional framework, and that by addressing the screenplay in this manner the screenwriter and screenwriting student can be empowered to create more dynamic and inventive screenplays.

The sixth chapter will consist of an analysis of the techniques used in the creative element, and how they relate to the critical element. By demonstrating how close readings of two key unconventional texts (*Following* [1998] and *We Need To Talk About Kevin* [2011]) shaped the genesis and development of *A Reverie*, and reflecting upon the meanings which those texts create and which are intended within *A Reverie*, this chapter aims to shed light on how a shift away from the recitation of conventional practice and toward intentional unconventionality might be executed in practice, and how divergence from the conventional model can allow for the creation of meaning not allowed for by the conventional restorative model. In doing so a methodology for unconventional practice in the screenplay will be located.

A note on terminology: in this project, “conventional structure” refers to the conventions as outlined in those screenwriting texts introduced in chapter one and examined in chapter two. “Unconventional” structures are defined against this model. Whilst it is true that, for example, arthouse films have their own sets of conventions (as do avant garde films, slow cinema, etc), this project views those structural choices as unconventional, since they contravene the “rules” laid out in screenwriting literature, and, therefore, the rules that tend to be followed in the development process. Unconventionality, for this project, is defined specifically against the Conventional Monoplot.

# 1. The Problem with Conventionality

## 1.1 Narrative Schism in *No Country For Old Men* (2007)

Llewelyn has been locked in a life-and-death pursuit with an enigmatic killer since stumbling across a case of cash left behind after a drug deal-gone-wrong. His flight has taken him across Western Texas, to a small town called Eagle Pass, where a violent conflagration and chase with the killer Chigurh results in serious injuries to both men—the conflict-locked counterparts demonstrating their equal quality and skill across opposite sides of a moral divide, in an extended confrontation sequence which marks one of the key features of the conventional three-act narrative: the midpoint. Various screenwriting theorists identify the midpoint in varying terms: John Yorke describes it as ‘a massive escalation in jeopardy’ (2013: 37), and ‘the moment the protagonists start to really understand the nature of the forces ranged against them’ (63), a moment of ‘truth’ and dawning enlightenment; for Linda Aronson it is ‘a major event in the middle of the film that turns the protagonist’s life around’ (2010: 52); for Joseph Campbell it is an encounter with death, a crisis ‘at the nadir, the zenith, or at the uttermost edge of the earth, at the central point of the cosmos, in the tabernacle of the temple, or within the darkness of the deepest chamber of the heart’ (1993: 109); for Christopher Vogler, whose work famously repackages Campbell’s, the midpoint is an Ordeal, ‘the central event of the story, or the main event of the second act’ (2007: 156), a death and rebirth, representing the death of the Hero’s old way of life and birth of the new. In other notable films in the crime genre (the example above comes from Joel and Ethan Coen’s *No Country for Old Men*) similar midpoints can be seen, in which protagonist and antagonist confront each other for the first and only time before the climactic third act confrontation: Neil McCauley



(Robert De Niro) and Vincent Hanna's (Al Pacino) diner duologue in *Heat* (1995); Somerset (Morgan Freeman) and Mills' (Brad Pitt) pursuit of the killer John Doe (Kevin Spacey) outside his apartment in *Seven* (1995); Patrick Bateman's (Christian Bale) interview with Detective Kimball (Willem Dafoe) in *American Psycho* (2000). In Fincher's *Zodiac* (2007), a key ally of the protagonist (Inspector Dave Toschi [Mark Ruffalo]) interviews the lead suspect Arthur Leigh Allen (John Carroll Lynch) at the film's midpoint, and Allen will not be seen again, barring a brief, wordless appearance shortly after the midpoint interview, until the final scene—the only moment in the film when protagonist, Robert Graysmith (Jake Gyllenhaal), and Allen, the suspected Zodiac killer, appear together.

Whilst the killer, Chigurh, destroys a pharmacy and treats his own wounds, Llewelyn convalesces in hospital, the case of money left stashed in riverside weeds. Moments after dispatching Carson Wells (Woody Harrelson), a hired-hand rival who Chigurh's untrusting employer had sent to complete the job, Chigurh answers a phone call and finds himself talking with Llewelyn. It's the first and only time the protagonist/antagonist pair at the heart of this screen story share words:

CHIGURH

You know how this is going to turn  
out, don't you?

MOSS

No. Do you?

CHIGURH

Yes, I do. I think you do too. So this is what I'll offer. You bring me the money and I'll let her go. Otherwise she's accountable. The same as you. That's the best deal you're going to get. I won't tell you you can save yourself because you can't.

MOSS

Yeah I'm goin' to bring you somethin' all right. I've decided to make you a special project of mine. You ain't goin' to have to look for me at all.

(Coen and Coen, 2006: 86)

Found 84 minutes into the film, this scene represents another significant point of development in the narrative: for Syd Field (1979: 12), this is the second act plot point; for McKee, the second act turning point (1999: 217); for John Yorke, the 'crisis point' that 'signposts [the protagonist's] return' (2013: 89) from the unfamiliar zone of conflict, the 'woods', which they were called into at the end of the first act. For McKee, a turning point is a 'major reversal' (1999: 217) in which 'the values at stake swing from the positive to the negative or the negative to the positive', a necessary 'turn' (218) coming at the climax of each act. For Linda Aronson, turning points are 'turns in the story's direction that cause turning points in the main characters' lives'

(52), identifying, in accord with Field and McKee, a first-act turning point, second-act turning point and third-act climax (though for McKee this is a minimum rather than an ideal). McKee frames turning points as necessary points of audience engagement that 'hook our interest, hold our uninterrupted concentration, then *carry us through time without an awareness of the passage of time*' (210) (emphasis original). The penultimate turning point—that which leads into the narrative's final act, turning the protagonist (and viewer) toward the climactic confrontation of the dramatic climax—is often dealt with as a crisis point, or the lowest point in the protagonist's journey, when they hit rock bottom and seem furthest from achieving their goal. For Yorke, this crisis point 'embodies the worst possible consequence' (81) of whatever the inciting incident may be. For McKee, it is the protagonist's 'ultimate decision', occurring when 'he's exhausted all actions to achieve his desire, save one' (304). With his wife being overtly targeted due to his actions, this moment can certainly be read as a crisis point for Llewelyn, and his response the first moment in the narrative in which he actively chooses to stop running and face Chigurh, an 'ultimate decision' to confront the main antagonist, setting up the inevitable dramatic climax, the 'crowning Major Reversal... not necessarily full of noise and violence... [but] full of meaning' (309).

Except, in this multiple Oscar-winning narrative (Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Director), that climax never materialises. In what can be understood, using Paul Gulino's sequence model (2004), as a short sequence opening the narrative's third act, the hero, Llewelyn, having found the strength of will necessary to confront the main antagonist, paving the way for a dramatic climax, encounters a flirtatious woman by the pool of his motel. The woman offers Llewelyn a beer, and although he shows her his wedding ring and refuses, his flirtatious smile

and an incongruous fade to black suggest temptation, perhaps a subsequent scene in which he must resist the urge to transgress in order to maintain the moral high-ground and successfully face down the amoral killer who awaits him. Instead, the sound of distant gunshots heralds a cut to Ed Tom Bell, the peripheral cop who has been on Llewelyn's tail, driving in his cruiser. Until this point, Ed Tom has been a secondary character: a partial ally to Llewelyn, his subplot offering comic relief and the opportunity for rumination on the meaning of the main plot. Now, Ed Tom becomes central, watching a vehicle peel away from the motel, containing what we assume to be the Mexican dealers, secondary antagonists who have also been chasing Llewelyn. Heading to the motel, where concerned civilians have gathered, Ed Tom discovers Llewelyn, our hero, dead—killed off-screen. At this point, 10 minutes into the third act, the main antagonist is not present, and there remain 20 minutes in the film's runtime. Ed Tom, the peripheral ruminator, has, we may already be aware, replaced Llewelyn as our protagonist.

## **1.2. Impact of Unconventional Structures**

It may be most common when thinking of unconventional, rule-breaking cinema to think of the more avant garde, the more obtuse end of the narrative-film spectrum: Jean-Luc Godard, and his 'anti-plot' narratives (McKee, 1999: 46), Derek Jarman, Michelangelo Antonioni, David Lynch, Lav Diaz's sprawling four-hour *Norte, The End of History* (2013), Bi Gan's obscure and Lynchian *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (2019). But perhaps the most impactful schisms from film convention come at the level of the screenplay (as opposed to cinematography, music, casting, performance, mise en scène, editing, and other elements of film form), particularly at the level of narrative structure, in otherwise conventionally structured narratives, shocking or

wrong-footing an unsuspecting audience: *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), for instance, and its protagonist-butchered midpoint—perhaps the most deeply analysed scene in American cinematic history. Whilst the scene is undeniably powerful from a stylistic point of view (music, framing, editing, pacing), arguably the key aspect of its shock (and subsequent reputation) is found in its previously unheard-of narrative placement. Fernando Canet calls the scene a ‘cultural artifact that has become a part of the collective memory, either as a recurring nightmare or as a source of countless cinematic allusions’ (2018: 20). The audience, ‘which has been made to identify (or at least sympathise)’ with Marion ‘shares in [her] shock at the eruption of violence’ (Schneider, 1999: 70). It has been called ‘the most horrifying coup de theatre ever filmed’ (Naremore, in Schneider: 71) and ‘the most horrific moment in any fiction film’ (Wood, in Schneider: 71). Its ‘power to horrify audiences has never been surpassed’ (Schneider: 71).

Conventions of narrative structure create familiarity and meaning; severing those conventions at a specific moment shunts the viewer into an unfamiliar realm of alternative meaning, ‘imped[ing] audiences’ efforts to establish causal, spatial and temporal relations within the story’ (Cameron, 2008: 4). As Aronson notes, different story forms have ‘very different effects on the audience’ (2000: 177), and where the conventional form comforts, ‘disrupted structures’ (Yorke, 2014: 148) have the power to unsettle, shock and discomfort. Key to the impact of such schisms, as with Marion Crane’s murder scene, is the screenplay’s adherence to a great many conventions, conventions which work to establish dramatic conflict, sympathy and/or empathy with the protagonist, and story expectation. More wholesale aversion from the conventions of cinematic storytelling, those that underpin David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson’s classical Hollywood narrative, outlined in *The*

*Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985), as often occurs in avant garde film, foregoes this impact. It is the viewer's connection to Marion Crane as a character (empathy, sympathy), their familiarity with her function as a protagonist and with the classical Hollywood story shape, that creates such a powerful shock at her murder halfway through a feature-length narrative. The viewer is aware that roughly half the film must remain, and yet the protagonist, the prism through which they see and experience the story, has been removed. As Lee states, 'some of the best screenplays seemingly break all the rules but if we look under the surface they are simultaneously keeping many of them' (2013: 128-129).

William Friedkin's *The French Connection* (1971), long lauded for its iconoclasm, is conventionally structured and orchestrated in all but two key aspects: the 'dual protagonists' (Thompson, 1999: 46) at the film's core, loose cannon detectives Popeye Doyle (Gene Hackman) and Buddy Russo (Roy Scheider), are morally dubious and largely unsympathetic; and, more jarringly, the dramatic climax ends without resolution, with Popeye leaving frame through a distant door in pursuit of the villain, a gunshot echoing, shooter (and shootee) undefined, eliding the kind of closure which Kristin Thompson asserts can be found in 'virtually all Hollywood films' (1999: 12). As with *Psycho*, unconventionality in *The French Connection* is impactful but limited, occurring in a largely conventional framework, providing its viewer much of the familiar pleasure derived from conventional screen storytelling but subverting that conventional model at key points, creating uncertainty, unfamiliarity. Takeshi Kitano's meditative gangster film *Sonatine* has been described as 'unique' and 'very odd' (Mackie, 2009: 1<sup>st</sup> para), yet its oddness can largely be explained by one key diversion from conventional narrative orchestration: its protagonist is passive, again something which Thompson notes goes against 'virtually all cases' (14). Jia

Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013), winner of Cannes' Best Screenplay award, is also largely conventional aside from one key, narrative-defining diversion: it has four protagonists, in largely separate, thematically linked, but otherwise discrete stories (what Linda Aronson would call a 'consecutive stories' narrative [2010: 328]).

Friedkin is notable for his prominent role in the New Hollywood era, what Geoff King calls the 'Hollywood Renaissance' (2002: 55), when a handful of American filmmakers, inspired by European arthouse cinema and enabled by a greenlighting system yet to undergo the fundamental corporatization of the 1980s, found the freedom to structure screen stories in ways that diverged significantly from the classical Hollywood model (passive protagonists; goal de-emphasis; de-emphasis of causality; unresolved endings; morally ambiguous protagonists), and, as shall be examined in chapter three, succeeded in bringing unconventionally structured stories to wide, mainstream audiences.

Dancyger and Rush term the typical, conventional three-act narrative film model 'restorative three act structure' (2002: 22), because it restores parity to a disordered world. The protagonist's life, disrupted by an inciting incident, sent 'into the woods' (Yorke, 2013) by the first act turning point, brought face-to-face with death or some form of it in the midpoint (Vogler, 2007), sent plummeting to a crisis (Yorke: 30) at the second act turning point, brought to confrontation with a powerful antagonist and the source of all the narrative conflict at the dramatic climax, is restored to some form of balance by the point of resolution. Redemption has been offered, tragedy has been shown to be rooted within their own character, and all significant questions have been answered. Order and knowledge have been restored. When Ed Tom Bell, *No Country's* replacement protagonist, finds himself at the centre of the third act, his lack of a goal (Llewelyn is dead, and Ed Tom shows

little interest in continuing to pursue Chigurh) sees him pondering the meaning of the narrative's previous events, and his life in general, with a succession of characters (a colleague, an ex-colleague, his wife) in relatively lengthy dialogue scenes. In the filthy home of his disabled ex-colleague, in a scene which gives the clearest clue yet to the meaning of the film's oblique title (originally stemming from the opening line of W.B. Yeats' 'Sailing to Byzantium'), he says:

ED TOM

I feel overmatched. I always figured when I got older, God would sort of come into my life. But he didn't.

(Coen and Coen, 2006: 111)

The godlessness of Ed Tom's world is highlighted by his comments, but embodied far more viscerally in the narrative's structure. Llewelyn's journey ends without a sense of almighty design, killed by secondary antagonists, off-screen, before his journey could reach a climactic moment. Ed Tom Bell, a God-fearing man, is left to ponder God's absence, in the absence of the protagonist, and the audience, with the disappearance of the screen embodiment of themselves, experiences a feeling of emptiness, akin to Ed Tom's, or to any troubled character seeking answers to unanswered questions.

It is common for central characters such as Llewelyn to die—thus creating a tragedy, as in *The American* (2010), both the original and the remade *Scarface* (1932; 1984), *Carlito's Way* (1993)—but only at the dramatic climax. When Llewelyn dies in the opening movement of the third act, the story's spine is jellied, the



audience well aware that significant screen time remains and suddenly robbed of the narrative's main driver. The suddenness of this removal is emphasised by the Coens' execution: Llewelyn sees no danger coming, we are given no cues of forthcoming antagonists within the scene; even the sound is muddled by overhead planes. A more typical sequence might reduce irrelevant background sound, heighten significant sound, home in on significant details in close-up, mirroring the way the human body responds to threat. Instead, a fade to black is followed by a cut to a secondary character (Ed Tom Bell), distant gunfire, and the discovery of Llewelyn's body. Even this discovery is brief, again muddled by background noise, confirmation of his death found in a single shot lasting four seconds, subsequently repeated for five seconds. As if to muddy the confirmation even further, Ed Tom Bell's verbal response is only partially in English. The central character, the most sympathetic and heroic in the story, upon whom the whole narrative rests, is gone—the audience is given little clue to this narrative shock, barely given time to react. In a brief moment we see Ed Tom Bell looking over what must be Llewelyn's body in the morgue, but again we don't see Llewelyn clearly—just some feet under a surgical sheet, and Ed Tom Bell's reaction. Yorke calls the protagonist the viewer's 'avatar', the vessel through which the audience vicariously experiences the story (3). The killing of the protagonist at this unconventional point destroys the audience's avatar, severing the most primal and familiar bond between viewer and story world—a profound schism from conventional narrative design.

Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995) is a more conventionally structured crime film, although Mann (both screenwriter and director) also veers from the conventional single protagonist model, building his narrative around what Thompson calls a 'parallel protagonist' (1999: 46) structure, what Aronson terms a 'double journey

narrative' (2010: 246). As in *No Country*, the two central characters meet in an extended midpoint sequence—a shoot-out in *No Country*, a tension-laden conversation in *Heat*. But in *Heat* the narrative rises toward a traditional climactic confrontation between the two characters: a pursuit across the city ending in a chiaroscuro chase through LAX's landing zone. The audience understands that one of these men will die, that the other will live. When Pacino's cop kills De Niro's thief, our identification with and sympathy for the principled, expert criminal, coupled with the lachrymose soundtrack, creates tragedy, tempered by the survival and victory of the equally sympathetic second protagonist. But there is a closedness to this ending, a reassurance: '[restorative three-act structure is about] the intersection of a particular action and a particular character so that the working out of the action is a simultaneous working out of the character' (Dancyger & Rush: 21). Mann's climax brings the narrative's protagonists together, producing narrative unity, narrative wholeness: a midpoint meeting, a climactic battle, producing 'character realization... redemption and restoration' (23). Inherently closed, inherently comforting. 'A character may not escape the law in a restorative three-act story, but he will have opportunity to redeem himself before he is arrested, to show that the real punishment came from within himself' (23). De Niro's thief tells Pacino (and the audience) in their midpoint meeting that the core discipline to his line of work is the ability to walk out on loved ones when 'the heat' is on. Ultimately, his demise comes because, for what we can read as the first time, he chooses not to do that—going back for his lover, Eady (Amy Brenneman), when he could have fled. The character's death is in fact a form of triumph: he chooses fidelity and death over flight and life. As Dancyger and Rush have suggested, narrative shape is fundamental to meaning: 'is there such a thing as neutral form, one into which we can pour any

story? The answer is No... nothing is neutral; form is inextricably linked to content' (2002: 31). Even in tragic death, the neatness of the narrative's structure provides comfort.

### 1.3 Alternative Meanings

The key to narrative structures, conventional or unconventional, and their relation to the screenwriter's creative process is the meaning created by the structure, and how it corresponds to the meaning desired by the screenwriter. Replication of restorative three act structure is a replication of comfort, a confirmation of the closed neatness of life. It invites the viewer to trust in the meaning of life's events: each event contributing to the unification, redemption and resolution experienced at the end of things (*Heat's* thief, for example, predicting his own demise by stating a rule at the midpoint which he breaks at the climax). Unconventional structures invite the viewer to alternative considerations of the world beyond the movie theatre; in breaking the traditional pattern 'a moment of chaos [is] allowed to enter, a moment of madness... Nathaniel West remarked, "your order is meaningless, my chaos is significant.'" (Lee: 26-27)

In Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (2018), the protagonist's mercurial love interest Hae-mi (Jun Jong-seo) disappears, prompting suspicion of foul-play by her rich, suggestive, greenhouse-burning boyfriend Ben (Steven Yuen). Hae-mi, once disappeared, never returns to the narrative, and her disappearance is never explained. Like protagonist Jong-su (Yoo Ah-in), we will never know what became of her. Instead we are left with a sense of longing, underpinning Jong-su's climactic murder of Ben with a resonant openness quite different to the kind of typical, closed tragedy that might be inculcated by a more conventional ending, one in which, say,

Ben is revealed to be innocent. Ultimately, whether or not Ben murdered Hae-mi isn't the point. Rather we are led to experience Jong-su's lostness, his waywardness, the impotence of the pain he feels, this unemployed son of an abusive farmer, toward the rich westernised playboy who stole from him the one source of love in his life—a love, itself, corrupted by Hae-mi's emotional scarring and her revelation that the only time Jong-su spoke to her in school was to call her ugly. Jong-su's possessive, wounded "love" of the equally wounded Hae-mi is not so much about Hae-mi as his own inherent woundedness, highlighted by his contrast with the wealthy, carefree, amoral Ben—an example of Lajos Egri's 'unity of opposites' (Egri, 2004: 123). Jong-su cannot be "saved" by Hae-mi, Lee and Oh Jung-mi's screenplay tells us, in the way that conventional love stories tend to suggest. His very pursuit of Hae-mi, revealed as corrupted and unhealthy from the start, leads to unknowing, dissolution, murder.

In William Friedkin and Gerald Petievich's *To Live And Die In LA* (1985), bereaved detective Chance (William Petersen) pursues the big time currency forger (Willem Dafoe) responsible for his partner's murder, using whatever methods, legal or otherwise, might aid his quest for vengeance. A violent world is portrayed, slick and brutal, in which our hero, charismatic and jock-ish, is gradually shown to be little better than the criminals he's pursuing. As in *No Country For Old Men*, the protagonist is killed, suddenly, shockingly, in the first movement of the third act, before the dramatic climax, leaving secondary character and ally of the protagonist, Vukovich (John Pankow), to face the antagonist. In this schema, playing a part in this world of criminality means submitting to the wantonness, the unswerving finality of its violence—even for the heroes. The sense that every choice the protagonist made had been leading inevitably to their end, so familiar to restorative three-act

stories, remains, but the shifting of the tragic pay-off forward serves to depict a world more brutal, less knowable, less controllable than the typical.

David Foster Wallace, in an extended piece on David Lynch and his *Lost Highway* (1997), wrote of the different intentions of what he described as the 'art' film and the 'commercial' film:

Art film is essentially teleological; it tries in various ways to 'wake the audience up' or render us more 'conscious.' (This kind of agenda can easily degenerate into pretentiousness and self-righteousness and condescending horsetwaddle, but the agenda itself is large-hearted and fine). Commercial film doesn't seem like it cares much about the audience's instruction or enlightenment. Commercial film's goal is to "entertain," which usually means enabling various fantasies that allow the moviegoer to pretend he's somebody else and that life is somehow bigger and more coherent and more compelling and attractive and in general just way more entertaining than a moviegoer's life really is. You could say that a commercial movie doesn't try to wake people up but rather to make their sleep so comfortable and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it—the fantasy-for-money transaction is a commercial movie's basic point. An art film's point is usually more intellectual or aesthetic, and you usually have to do some interpretative work to get it, so that when you pay to see an art film you're actually paying to work (Foster Wallace, 1996).

The current era's iteration of commercial film would seem to fit Wallace's description, but this is not by necessity: in the 1960s and 1970s, the line between commercial

film—if we define commercial films by the root fundament of box office gross—and art film was significantly blurrier. The classical Hollywood narrative, defined by a ‘distinct and homogenous style’ had ‘dominated American studio filmmaking’ from ‘1917 to 1960’ (Bordwell, Stagier & Thompson, 1985: 3), but from 1960 onwards ‘other styles began to challenge the dominance of classicism’, informed by international auteurs such as Kurosawa, Bergman and those of the French New Wave (10). The result was ‘a more influential and widely disseminated alternative to Hollywood than had ever existed before’ (10), and a striking number of highly unusual film narratives which were able to reach substantial audiences—indeed, some of the largest audiences of the era. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), for example, was the eighth highest grossing film not of its year but of its entire decade (FilmSite.org, n.d.), and, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter three, is by no means the only enormously profitable and structurally unconventional feature of its era. The shift towards conservatism that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, a period dominated by blockbusters, sequels and comic book franchises, reinforced the classicist notion that unconventional choices and large audiences are anathema—a notion which, as we shall see, was upheld and solidified by the how-to manuals and prominent screenwriting gurus like Syd Field, Christopher Vogler and Robert McKee. *No Country for Old Men* offers a striking counter-argument: with its recognisable stars, name directors, kinetic chase narrative and mid-size budget (\$25m [The Numbers.com, n.d.]), it certainly has elements of the commercial, alongside one of the most startlingly unconventional structural schisms in mainstream Hollywood film—and Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, and a worldwide box office of \$164m.

Too often, however, the film industry, particularly its development arm (where Field, Vogler and McKee all plied their trade), takes on the polarised discourse that Wallace voices, separating the 'art film' from the commercial, relegating it to a subsidiary product with limited appeal—a discourse if not originating in the handbooks then certainly propagated by them. In this manner, the choices available to the screenwriter are restricted—commercial films, it is implied, require conventional choices. Established, profitable, mainstream auteurs like the Coens and Christopher Nolan may find they have earned the right to experiment in front of mass audiences (and, as with Nolan's *Inception* [2010] and *Tenet* [2020], occasionally make big budget art films profitable), but the dominant view remains that the most profitable path is the conventional. McKee claims, using his own terms for classical narratives, minimalist narratives and avant garde narratives: 'as story design moves away from the Archplot and down the triangle toward the far reaches of Miniplot, Antiplot and Nonplot, the audience shrinks' (62) and advises writers to avoid all but the classical narrative, or 'archplot', unless '[you] are happy with relatively little money for yourself' (63). It is perfectly possible however, as Kubrick, the Coens, Scorsese (*Raging Bull* [1980]), Mike Nicholls (*The Graduate* [1967]), Robert Altman (*M\*A\*S\*H* [1972]) and Nolan have demonstrated, for 'commercial' films (those with sizeable budgets that attract big audiences) to incorporate those 'teleological' elements of the art film, and to draw big audiences to a more wakeful/awakening cinematic experience; to meanings that undercut the soothing message of restorative three-act stories. The idea that the conventional form is demanded by mainstream audiences is described by Comolli and Narboni, in their classic *Cahiers du Cinema* article 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' (1971), as a justification invented by the system that profits from this form in order to solidify its

dominance: 'the notion of a public and its tastes was created by the ideology to justify and perpetuate itself. And this public can only express itself via the thought-patterns of the ideology. The whole thing is a closed circuit, endlessly repeating the same illusion' (31).

Comolli and Narboni identify seven different categories of film, defined according to their relation to the dominant ideology, including their category A films, which are 'imbued through and through with the dominant ideology... and give no indication that their makers were even aware of the fact' (31), and their category B films, which 'attack their ideological assimilation... by direct political action', meaning that they deal 'with a directly political subject' and partner this content-level opposition with 'a breaking down of the traditional way of depicting reality' (32). Their category C films are essentially the same as category B except that 'the content is not explicitly political', and perhaps it is this category into which *No Country for Old Men* would most comfortably fit, along with *Psycho* and other texts which sever the conventional plot so dramatically but contain no obviously political content. Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), with its clear anti-war content and its highly unconventional two-act structure, would fit into their category B, whilst Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), with a clear anti-war story subsumed within a classical restorative shape, would fit into category D: 'those films... which have an explicitly political content... but which do not effectively criticise the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestioningly adopt its language and imagery' (32). According to Comolli and Narboni, category B and C films 'constitute the essential in the cinema, and should be the chief subject of the magazine' (32). For them, questioning the dominant ideology at the formal level is central.



The greenlighting of unconventionally structured projects, such as those mentioned above, requires a certain disposition at the executive level, something which Alexander Ross argues no longer exists, at least not within the larger American studios. Identifying the 'corporatization of studios' (2011: 9) as the key factor in the standardisation of movie products post-1970s, he outlines a system dominated by business-oriented executives lacking in-depth knowledge of film products, contrasted with the 'five guys' who ran United Artists in the 1970s, who 'bet on talent' and greenlit projects because they believed in the artistic merits of those projects. 'The cinephiles whose tastes dictated the making of a body of Academy Award-winning and commercially successful movies were eventually replaced by a vast cadre of executives with backgrounds steeped more in disciplines of finance, law and marketing than in the cultural arts' (9). What Field, Vogler, McKee *et al* provided this new 'cadre' of executives was a set of rules for the standardisation of their product—and significantly, as Ross notes, none of these screenwriting gurus had ever had a theatrical feature screenplay of their own produced. The adoption and dissemination of these rules provided this newer brand of executive with a steady supply of the kind of film product they desired, 'driven by value judgements based not on aesthetics but on marketability' (15). Ross lists a series of artistically successful, critically successful and culturally influential features from the late 1960s and 1970s (the period directly preceding the release of Syd Field's *Screenplay* in 1979 and its subsequent domination of the development industry), including *The Godfather* (1972), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), which he asserts would not be greenlit today. Cinephiles can only wonder how many films of quality and cultural influence comparable to those listed by Ross

have been denied to cinema audiences since this corporatization of the studios and the emergence of the associated how-to rubric of the gurus.

Schatz (1993) gives a detailed overview of the move toward what might reasonably be termed 'blockbusterism' in the 1980s following the enormous commercial success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), and the increasing product differentiation and horizontal integration that came to define that period (and which extends into the twenty-first century and current American film culture), as the major studios' profit models began to shift from a focus on domestic box office toward pay-cable, home video, video games, theme park rides, soundtrack albums, and a broad portfolio of diversified media forms, noting that the narratives of the films at the centre of such product portfolios are often led by 'one-dimensional characters' in 'mechanical plots... reduced and stylized to a point where, for some observers, it scarcely even qualifies as a narrative' (1993: 32-33), noting that by the early 90s these 'calculated blockbusters utterly dominate[d] the movie industry' (34). The extent to which the modern handbooks have enabled and contributed to a cultural shift and the extent to which they merely reflect that shift is difficult to definitively parse—certainly they reflect conventions as well as shaping and redefining them, and should be understood as a single element in a broader cultural shift encompassing technological developments (home video, DVD, VOD) and changing demographics, and indeed the handbooks and their models are not designed purely for big-budget franchise films, particularly McKee's *Story*. However their role in restricting and revoking practice within the screenplay has long been identified (see: Macdonald, 2013; Conor, 2014; Maras, 2009; Dancyger & Rush, 2002; Thompson, 1999), and this project will argue that in codifying conventional storytelling methods and the restorative three-act story model as ideal, and in delegitimizing and

undermining unconventional approaches as inferior or ignoring them altogether, their role has been significant.

Jeff Menne describes the period preceding the emergence of the modern handbooks and its non-conformist key texts (*The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde* [1967], *MASH*, *Five Easy Pieces* [1970], *The Panic in Needle Park* [1971], *Nashville* [1975] etc) as 'postclassical' (2019: 80), defined by drifting protagonists and goal de-emphasis amongst other pattern-breaking deviations from the classical Hollywood form, emerging in response to and as a feature of the rise of counterculture and the post-Fordist decentralization of the major studios as corporate bodies. He identifies what he calls the 'defection' (75) movie as a genre in its own right, characterized by aimless heroes whose lack of the typical active goal (and the associated drama-powering wilful pursuit of that goal) reflected a perceived meaninglessness in the broader (consumerist, corporatist) world, rooted in a rejection of corporate power structures and their associated values. Bordwell notes of such characters that they 'wander' through events which 'may lead to nothing', and that if they had a clearer goal 'life would no longer seem so meaningless' (1979: 58), highlighting the role of dramatic orchestration in meaning creation. The de-emphasis of the active goal, for Menne, reflects an ideological departure from the corporate power structure which underpinned the major studio systems as well as American society more broadly, but it can equally be seen in broader terms as a shift from a deterministic schema to existentialist—the incorporation of European arthouse tropes, where there has been more of an intellectual tradition of existentialism, allowing for narrative models which represent the world not as knowable and ultimately meaning-laden, as the Classical Hollywood Narrative tends to do, but as unknowable and contingent. Either way, it marks a fundamental change in the meaning created by film texts at the structural

level. When the modern handbooks began to emerge, as will be explored in more detail in chapter two, the wilful pursuit of an active goal became ingrained as a fundamental tenet of effective dramatic structure, with more aimless protagonists and their associated dramatic models tending to be either ignored or delegitimized as dramatically defective. This focus on the wilful protagonist and the primacy of the dramatic goal is presented in the handbooks as indigenous to the form, but in fact is ideological: as Menne suggests, a reformulated, less goal-oriented protagonist, such as Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate* or Robert Dupea in *Five Easy Pieces*, provides the dramatist the opportunity to question the top-down corporate structure through which most film products are produced, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. The postclassical era Menne outlines was developing into the blockbuster-driven cinema of the 1980s, and by prioritizing the wilful protagonist as the cornerstone of effective drama the modern handbooks offered a method of solidifying a storytelling practice rooted in conformity, encoding dramatic schemas which we might reasonably call dissenting as inferior.

It can be argued then that broader cultural changes and a restructuring of the major studios in the 1960s and 1970s allowed for a shift in film culture towards a greater diversity of storytelling methods and story models in American cinema, inspired by the 'looser' (Bordwell, 1985: 373) European and international art cinemas, resulting in unconventionally-shaped stories (passive protagonists, multiple protagonists, segmented stories, goal de-emphasis, reduced or elided resolution), defined as unconventional against the solidifying conventions of the Classical Hollywood Narrative, occupying a position at the centre of film culture and reaching large audiences (this centrality will be explored in chapter three). It can further be argued that the subsequent 'corporatization' of the major studios beginning in the

late 70s and solidifying in the 80s and 90s, occurring alongside a broader move towards conservatism at the societal level (Needham, 2016; Quart, 1993), empowered a shift in film culture towards a homogenised, highly-leveraged, franchise-oriented approach to film storytelling, resulting in unconventionally-shaped stories being moved to the cultural fringe. If the modern handbooks and their storytelling models are seen to concretize and enable that shift in film culture whilst revoking and restricting artistic practice, particularly unconventional approaches, in the screenplay, as is argued by many within the academy, then the restrictive impact the handbooks have on screenwriting practice can certainly be argued to be significant not only to individual screenwriters and filmmakers at the level of artistic expression, but also on a broader cultural and political level.

What possibilities, then, is the screenwriter (and their audience) denied if, in the pursuit of a greenlight, they follow the conventional diktat? Dancyger and Rush identify within restorative structure a 'pattern of transgression, recognition and redemption', that 'allows us to identify with characters who have gone beyond acceptable behaviour, while at the same time remaining aware that they will be forced to confront their behaviour' (38). If the writer wishes to subvert this worldview, restorative structure is counter-productive:

[S]uppose this simple morality is foreign to us? Suppose the world we know is more likely to be marked by small missteps, unexpected tenderness, and, most of all, a lack of overriding predetermined purpose or clarity? Suppose we realize that the corruption of money and power is much subtler than that portrayed in *Wall Street*? Suppose we know that situations are rarely as unambiguously unjust as the one faced by Galvin in *The Verdict*, and that

good deeds are frequently tainted with blurred motivations? (Dancyger and Rush: 30)

What Dancyger & Rush describe here is a less individual-oriented, less deterministic worldview, in which meaning is more ambiguous, less reassuring, more 'disjointed' (39). This is the world presented by *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with its episodic structure, de-emphasised protagonist and iconoclastic final movement; the world presented by *Psycho* (1960), with its protagonist-butchered midpoint and its succession of replacement protagonists; by *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), with its two-act structure and sudden ending; by *The Place Beyond The Pines* (2012), with its cannon protagonists and consecutive stories; by *No Country for Old Men*, and its Godless third act. The dominance of the restorative form within the industry, within higher education, within development, coerces the screenwriter into the uncritical representation of a neat, reassuring world which may or may not reflect their worldview. If the writer wishes to subvert this worldview, 'changing content is not enough; structure, too, must function in more ambiguous ways' (39).

#### **1.4 Hostility to Unconventionality**

Conventional narrative structure, the dominant three-act single protagonist model defined by rising action and split by turning points, is based upon the replication of the familiar and the comforting. By purposely designing unconventional structures at the level of the screenplay, schisms can emerge, and alternative (less familiar, less comforting) meanings can be produced. However, the discourse around the screenplay is rooted in convention, both in industry and education, and those

screenwriters who seek to challenge structural convention may do so at the cost of their career.

Busy development executives need little encouragement to expedite their screening process, and face far more pressure to deliver profitable screen product than artistically dynamic product. The emergence of the modern handbook models, beginning with Field's paradigm in 1979, promised a shorthand tool for script analysis, a user-friendly model for streamlining the production of profitable screen stories—and for ruling out screenplays whose narratives veer from the model: 'In her discussion of quality control in the Hollywood studios Kristin Thompson describes a situation whereby overburdened readers check the script against Syd Field's formula, skimming "pages 25-30 and 85-90 to check whether something resembling a Plot Point occurs. If it does not, the script may receive no further attention"' (Maras, 2009: 64). Thompson focuses on Field and his defining text, *Screenplay*, rightly calling him 'enormously influential among screenwriters, studio heads, and employees-alike—so much so that the book is sometimes referred to as the "Bible" of screenwriters,' (1999: 22) going on to note how screenwriter Anna Hamilton Phelan, in an interview with William Froug, 'suggests that she has virtually memorized *Screenplay*' (1999: 23).

The handbook models undoubtedly offer effective routes toward impactful storytelling practice, however by presenting conformist practice as superior they also carry substantial problems. Their parameters tend to be framed as categorical imperatives, and as Thompson suggests their industry application all too often underscores this. Nascent screenwriters pursuing higher education in their craft encounter syllabi underscored by the handbook models. The reading list for the MA in Screenwriting at the National Film and Television School, for example, contains

canonical texts on story structure and dramatic theory (Propp, Aristotle), but their key texts on the specific craft of the screenplay come from, in their own words, 'The American Story Structure Gurus': Field, Vogler, McKee, Truby and Seger (L Farugia 2017, personal communication, 20 September). Students find their screenplays judged, as they will be when they enter the industry, on their adherence to the structural conventions identified and propagated by these gurus. They are taught, essentially, to replicate the restorative structure noted by Dancyger and Rush, the structure of comfort; to move away from the dissenting structure of defection noted by Menne, amongst many other alternative story models with alternative meanings. As Lee notes:

It would be so easy to write a screenplay by numbers. What makes the work of certain directors and screenwriters far more interesting is that they challenge the usual assumptions and break out of the model. Obviously there will be fewer films made in this mode, as they worry studio executives who want movies made in the same manner (Lee, 2013: 11).

The problem though is not just that executives desire standardised and therefore reliable products, but that discourse around the screenplay is skewed toward the conventional mode in both industry and education. Unconventionality is undercut, undermined and dissuaded: not just less spoken of, but less valuable. If 'cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself' (30), as Comolli and Narboni suggest, then the conversation has been severely delimited. Yorke (xi) speaks of the conventional three-act structure's 'sturdy resistance to iconoclasm and [the] joy with which it continues to reinvent itself', and claims that



'one either tells all stories according to a pattern, or not at all' (xiii). McKee calls writers who break rules 'rebellious, unschooled' (3), charges 'minimalists' with 'overestim[ing] the appetite of even the most self-absorbed minds for a diet of nothing but inner conflict' (60), and claims that 'a wise artist never does anything merely because it breaks convention' (9) but makes little attempt to account for the meaning produced by the conventions he identifies or the correlative unconventional choices. Dadaists, punk musicians, Dogme 95 filmmakers, and a wide substrata of artists across disciplines make a convincing argument, through their work, for the inherent value of deliberate convention-smashing, whilst Comolli and Narboni note the inability of films executed in the conventional mode to 'criticize the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestioningly adopt its language and its imagery' (32). Most BA Filmmaking programs include units on experimental filmmaking, in which students consciously study the possibilities that arise when narrative conventions are deliberately eschewed; tuition in experimental screenwriting is largely unheard of. Macdonald describes a tendency on the part of the manuals' discourse to express their orthodoxy 'as something pre-ordained, the way it is, a natural order which needs exploring, rather than questioning', noting that McKee in particular 'demands disciples who must accept what he calls principles' (2013: 41) whilst condemning those 'who transgress by, for example, trying to be recognized as an artist' (42).

McKee consistently uses pejorative language to describe unconventional choices: 'the *Art Film* favours the intellect by smothering strong emotion under a blanket of mood' (88). His attitude is decidedly establishmentarian, using terms such as 'wise' and 'mature' to describe ideal screenwriting practice, and when he uses a musical analogy he invokes the classical: 'the writer must study the elements of story

as if they were the instruments of an orchestra' (29). The unconventional choices of upstart filmmakers, say those made by Ben Wheatley and Robin Hill in the self-funded *Down Terrace* (2009), by Christopher Nolan in the distinctly punk-ish self-funded *Following* (1998), by young poet Bernardo Bertolucci in his early features *The Grim Reaper* (1962) and *Before the Revolution* (1964), by Lars Von Trier and the Dogme 95 set, or by comedian-turned-auteur Takeshi Kitano in his early works are implicitly devalued. Vogler (xvii) warns that iconoclastic artists 'run the risk of reaching a limited audience', judges film texts in monetary terms (hits and flops), and states that the construction of his Campbellian story model originated to help him understand 'the phenomenal repeat business of movies such as *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*' (xxviii). As he outlines his model however, he begins to apply it to 'every story ever told' (4), implicitly marking those less mass-market oriented, less conventional stories, which fail to adhere to the shape he notices, as inferior.

Both Vogler and McKee's structural schemas, it is important to note, emerged in the context of a post-New Hollywood industry which had moved dramatically, and lastingly, towards a corporatized development model focused on blockbusters, sequels, pre-sold franchises and the associated product differentiation that goes with such film products—a model flourishing today in the form of box office-dominating comic book and superhero franchises. Geoff King describes a reduction by the major studios in active production during the 1970s 'in order to concentrate on a smaller number of more expensive would-be blockbusters' (2002: 52), influenced by the success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), ushering in an era of entrenched product differentiation in the form of video games, toys and theme park rides, with such secondary sources of income becoming 'more important, in the longer term, than initial box-office returns' (52). Thomas Schatz notes a 'legendary interoffice

memo' from Jeffrey Katzenberg, written in January 1991 when Katzenberg was serving as Disney production chief, describing the “blockbuster mentality” that has gripped our industry’ (Schatz, 1992: 28). According to King: ‘Cinema exhibition accounts for a relatively small proportion of the revenues earned by Hollywood features, a total of about 26 per cent in the late 1990s and early 2000s’ (73), with product differentiation accounting for the rest. As Batty notes, the high concept, high stakes blockbuster, the type of film which lends itself to theme park ride and video game spin-offs, and which the American industry moved so concertedly towards in the wake of the New Hollywood era, tends toward some form of quest narrative—and Vogler’s Hero’s Journey, in particular, offers ‘a very useful model for this type of structure’ (Batty, 2014: online).

Vogler, on his *Writer’s Journey* website, describes how his discovery of Campbell’s monomyth model and his initial summary of it caught the imagination of his post-New Hollywood development peers:

It was written in the mid-1980s when I was working as a story consultant for Walt Disney Pictures, but I had discovered the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell a few years earlier while studying cinema at the University of Southern California. I was sure I saw Campbell’s ideas being put to work in the first of the Star Wars movies and wrote a term paper for a class in which I attempted to identify the mythic patterns that made that film such a huge success. The research and writing for that paper inflamed my imagination and later, when I started working as a story analyst at Fox and other Hollywood studios, I showed the paper to a few colleagues, writers and executives to stimulate some discussion of Campbell’s ideas which I found to be of

unlimited value for creating mass entertainment. I was certainly making profitable use of them, applying them to every script and novel I considered in my job. (Vogler, no date: online)

Tellingly, Vogler saw the Hero's Journey not as one potential story model (quest narrative) of more use to certain screen stories (big budget fantasy and science fiction adventures) than others, but as a model of 'unlimited value' to be applied 'to every script and novel' he considered. Arguably, this demeanour foreshadowed, and indeed influenced, the development of mainstream Hollywood cinema: of the top 20 highest grossing features of the 2010s at the American box office, three are *Star Wars* sequels or spin-offs, seven are superhero movies (four from the *Avengers* franchise), six are animated children's adventures which follow similar storytelling models to superhero movies, and two are *Jurassic Park* sequels (FilmSite.Org, n.d.)—a franchise deeply knitted to Universal's theme park portfolio, with related rides currently open to the public at Universal resorts in Orlando, Los Angeles, Osaka and Singapore (JurassicWorld.com, n.d.). By contrast, the top 20 highest grossing list of the 1970s includes *The Godfather*, *The Exorcist* (1973), *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, *Kramer vs Kramer* (1979) and *American Graffiti* (1973), all of which feature narratives to which Vogler's model is significantly less relevant, and which lend themselves far less, if at all, to theme park and video game tie-ins.

In such a cinematic climate, unconventional narrative structures become counter-cultural: they function in distinct opposition to an oppressively dominant norm. More so, certain approaches, like the approach employed in *No Country for Old Men*, take on the appearance of the dominant norm in order to then subvert it. In this way, certain unconventional structural choices can be viewed as a form of

culture jamming, in which the 'brand' (narrative shape) of the 'corporation' (Hollywood) is appropriated with the deliberate intention of subverting that 'brand' and wrong-footing the consumer/viewer, forcing them to reassess their engagement with that 'brand', to see it in a new light. 'Culture jamming endeavours to achieve transparency, that is, to mitigate the asymmetrical effects of power and other distortions in the communications apparatus, cutting through the clutter as it were to clarify otherwise obscured meaning' (Carducci, 2006: 118). Similarly, unconventional narrative structures address 'distortions' in the communications apparatus of the film industry, the fundamental shapes underpinning film stories and the way that their ubiquity 'distorts' the shape of the reality it represents. The 'obscured meaning' contained within the conventional restorative plot, so unconsciously familiar to any consumer of screen stories, is revealed by diversion from unconscious expectation. The shock, Nathaniel West's 'chaos', inculcated by the schism from convention, is similar to the impact sought by the culture jammer who appropriates a petroleum company logo in order to comment on that company's immoral practices.

Comolli and Narboni explored the idea that all art has ideology deeply ingrained, and that film 'as a result of being a material product of the system' that produces it 'is also an ideological product of the system' (1978: 29). They identified a certain group of films which, they argue, function as a tool of the dominant ideology, and cannot 'effectively criticize the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestioningly adopt its language and its imagery' (32). 'Nothing in these films jars against the ideology, or the audience's mystification by it', they claim, calling such films 'very reassuring for audiences for there is no difference between the ideology they meet every day and the ideology on the screen' (31). Narrative schisms, such as the previously analysed protagonist death in *No Country*

*for Old Men* and its influential ancestor in *Psycho*, have the power not only to affect an audience in a different way, not only to create a different story meaning, but to draw attention, in the very shock of their schism, to the conventional model and our unconscious consumption of it. Carducci describes culture jamming as ‘a way of advocating for change in mindset and behavior’ (119). The ‘change in mindset’ can be seen as a key aim of the unconventional screenwriter, a key product of the ‘teleological’ elements identified by David Foster Wallace, and a central aspect of the challenge to McKee’s claims that unconventional choices do not contain their own inherent value. Quite contrarily, this project argues that unconventional structural choices in the screenplay can play a key role in rehabilitating a screenwriting culture which shifted inexorably toward standardisation and conventionalisation in the post-New Hollywood era, towards a restorative model of inherent comfort, a move which sacrificed diversity of story form and created a homogeneity of meaning in American mainstream cinema.

The following chapter will trace the development of the modern handbooks, examining the broadly homogenous story model which they notice, create and uphold, before examining alternative structural theory from Dancyger and Rush, Gulino and Aronson—the theory upon which this project seeks to build. A conglomerated model of the conventional structure which the handbooks disseminate will be outlined: Conventional Monoplot. It will be argued that this model accounts for the majority of contemporary mainstream anglophone cinema, and that by quantifying this model and consciously designing deviations the screenwriter can avoid rote replication of the restorative model and its implied meanings. The subsequent chapter will present a taxonomy of alternative structures that this project has been able to identify in a broad examination of films with crime elements, which

the screenwriter might apply in their working practice. The screenplay which follows will demonstrate application of one of those models.

## 2. Conventional Monoplot

### 2.1 A History of the Handbooks

Screenwriting handbooks play a particularly prominent role in contemporary Western film industries, and in Western higher education around the screenplay, with marked prominence traceable back to the publication of Syd Field's *Screenplay* in 1979 and its adoption by the development arm of the American film industry. Kristen Thompson (1999) traces the roots of the handbook to the 1910s, 'when burgeoning studios still depended heavily upon freelance submissions of scripts and stories' (11), linking their rise in the latter half of the twentieth century to 'package productions' that inculcated 'a flood of manuals [...] to cater to aspiring authors' (11), and noting that the three-act model had been highlighted earlier than Field, in Constance Nash and Virginia Oakley's *The Screenwriter's Handbook* (1978). Bridget Conor notes that 'screenwriting manuals are now key elements of the curricula in a wide range of pedagogical frameworks for screenwriting in higher education; and they serve as educational tools, offering both friction-free paths to success and a ready alternative to higher education courses' (2014:83).

Despite their influence, the handbooks have been widely criticised: within academia, by practicing screenwriters, and even within film texts themselves, most notably with the depiction of Robert McKee in the Charlie Kaufman-scripted *Adaptation* (2003), a thread of conflict further developed by John Yorke in *Into the Woods* (2013) in which he attempts to show that Kaufman, in contradiction to his anti-conventional demeanour, produces work that perfectly fits the kind of models propagated both by Yorke and McKee. Conor (2014) notes that the handbooks 'were described as "weird" and lamented for fostering "normitization" in the British



and Hollywood screen production industries' (97), whilst Thompson notes that the 'formulaic advice' (11) found within the manuals has negatively impacted Hollywood filmmaking. The majority of these guides also have 'a one-voice approach, where scholarship is limited and the author tends to advocate their methods of working only' (Batty, 2016: 60). Beyond a scholarship-lite, one-voice approach, this project argues that the handbooks also present an anti-iconoclastic discourse, implicitly marking unconventional approaches as less valuable.

The manuals have played a significant role in shaping the way the screenplay is written, particularly in the West but also worldwide; have impacted significantly on film culture; and play a pivotal role in teaching nascent screenwriters how to write the screenplay. The problems therein, then—the normitization noted by Conor, the formulaic quality noted by Thompson, the one-voice approach noted by Batty, the anti-iconoclastic discourse noted in this project—are also significant. As Conor notes, the handbooks are 'routinely read and used by gatekeepers within mainstream screen production industries, who are looking for easily graspable tools that will orient them to industry standards and expectations' (98). If development executives like Christopher Vogler apply the conventional shape to 'every script and novel' they consider, screenplays that eschew the conventional shape, those which do not match the normitized formulae, are clearly less likely to be produced (unless they are rewritten in the conventional mode).

This chapter will provide an overview of several important texts and the structural models they propose, from the two key canonical texts, Aristotle's *Poetics* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, to more recent texts from Field through to Yorke, tracing the development of common aspects of the structural models in an effort to further understanding of how and why the structural

conventions underpinning the handbooks have come to be, and to refocus attention on the meaning created by those conventions. The common elements will then be collated into a composite model for conventional structure: Conventional Monoplot. The texts have been selected based on their ubiquity and influence within both the film industry and higher education.

## **2.2 Aristotle's Four Key Aspects**

Aristotle's *Poetics* continues to provide the theoretical foundation from which all contemporary screenwriting theory flows, though how accurately contemporary screenwriting theory actually reflects Aristotle's work is questionable. Several modern texts, such as Lance Lee's *A Poetics for Screenwriters*, Michael Tierno's *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters* (2001) and Ari Hiltunen's *Aristotle in Hollywood* (2002), attempt to translate Aristotle's theories for the screen as their primary focus, whilst the majority of others make significant reference to Aristotle, couching their arguments in what are often framed as Aristotelian terms—even if, as with Lee, that can sometimes be reduced to a reflection on what it means to structure stories into a three-part beginning-middle-end model.

Secondary work on Aristotle is, of course, extensive, and whilst it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel here a brief reflection on the content of *Poetics* which directly relates to narrative structure as it pertains to the screenplay is useful, particularly since many of the handbooks are rather vague and general on how Aristotle's work relates to screenwriting practice. Farquhar (2016) argues, correctly, that the dramatic model described by Aristotle is not, in fact, divided into three-acts, but simply into three parts (beginning, middle, end), and that his model could potentially be reshaped to fit a number of different 'act' formations. It can be argued

that the shaping of dramatic storytelling into three parts is ancient and fundamental, however the popularisation of the three-act model seems most strongly rooted in Eugene Scribe's theory of the well-made play (Economopoulou, 2009: 7), written in the 1820s, and popularized in the nineteenth century play and novel, and, subsequently, within Hollywood cinema, particularly after the advent of sync sound when Broadway playwrights were brought to California to handle the newly necessary dialogue, bringing theatrical structuring norms with them (Thompson, 1999; Gulino, 2004). Economopoulou argues that Aristotle's work has been distorted, mistranslated and misapplied in order to fit modern screenwriting schemas which, ultimately, often have little in common with the quite specific model which Aristotle described. In particular, she argues that the concept of *hamartia* (a tragic error of judgment) is fundamental to the Aristotelian protagonist, as is audience recognition of this error—the Aristotelian drama then, according to Economopoulou, is centred around the protagonist's tragic unravelling as all the implications of the *hamartia* play out, best evidenced by *Oedipus Rex*. The audience, aware of the character's error, is compelled by anticipation and dramatic irony as they witness the tragic trajectory. She includes *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Scarface* (1932; 1983) as cinematic examples of the Aristotelian model. More contemporary examples might include the Safdie brothers' *Good Time* (2017) and *Uncut Gems* (2019) and the Aaron Sorkin-scripted *The Social Network* (2010)—and indeed Sorkin is a vocal proponent of an Aristotelian approach to the screenplay.

Hiltunen makes a convincing and detailed argument for the primacy of Aristotelian 'pity, fear and *catharsis*' (7) as the cornerstone of what he terms 'successful' (6) films, those which produce 'the proper pleasure' (5), however, as with many of his peers, Hiltunen conflates popularity with quality, and resultingly his often

enlightening work tends to reinforce the idea that widely seen films are necessarily 'successful', focusing on how Aristotle's work can guide the recreation of such stories. Furthermore, his focus on the 'proper pleasure' (essentially: emotional engagement with a highly sympathetic protagonist, anguish at witnessing that protagonist's 'underserved suffering' [9], suspense as the protagonist pursues a single unifying goal, and *catharsis* when the goal is resolved) is rooted in storytelling examples from other media (Shakespearean drama, genre fiction) and seems to present an ideal 'successful' film as synonymous with a 'successful' plot, without considering film as a particular medium with, perhaps, a different storytelling language, different storytelling potential, and a different metric for ideal storytelling practice. Seymour Chatman, in *Story and Discourse*, argues that Vladimir Propp's structural study of Russian fairy tales 'emphasized simple narratives' and that 'the rigid homogeneity of plot and simplicity of characterization found in the Russian fairy tale are obviously not typical of many modern narratives' (1978: 15). A similar argument can be made regarding the application of Aristotle's model for proper pleasure as a metric for success within contemporary screen drama. Aristotelian proper pleasure may well be created by *The Fugitive* (1993), *The Firm* (1993) and *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* (1977), examples offered by Hiltunen to demonstrate the proper pleasure in action, but this does little to explain the narrative shapes and the correlative meanings underpinning, say, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Psycho*, or *The Graduate* (1967), and why those narratives were also, according to Hiltunen's metric, 'successful' (widely seen, high-grossing). Indeed, in addition to being widely seen and high-grossing, those particular unconventionally-shaped narratives tend to be held in considerably higher critical esteem than the

examples Hiltunen cites, calling into question the relative value of the 'success' offered by screen narratives which follow the proper pleasure model.

Certainly Hiltunen's work on the proper pleasure is valuable, however its value is arguable when extended beyond the type of suspense-laden, maximalist stories mentioned above. Nevertheless, this project agrees that *undeserved suffering*, a key part of Hiltunen's proper pleasure interpretation, should be seen as one of five fundamental aspects of narrative shape suggested within the *Poetics*, aspects which have come to underpin the development of the contemporary screenwriting handbooks, described in roughly overlapping terms by McKee, Yorke, Vogler et al: (i) the single action; (ii) three-part structure; (iii) simple & complex structures; (iv) causality; (v) undeserved suffering. This project uses the 2007 open-access publication of the *Poetics* by Filiquarian Publishing.

### **i. The Single Action**

Aristotle states that the subject of drama is, in its ideal form, 'a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, middle and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it.' (2007: 71). In modern terms, this is the *active goal*: the most fundamental aspect of the conventional dramatic macrostructure, from which all other dramatic elements flow. This idea of the single action underpinning and unifying successful dramatic narratives is mirrored by David Mamet, by far the most credible of all modern writers on the subject: 'That which the hero requires is the play. In the perfect play we find nothing extraneous to his or her single desire. Every incident either impedes or aids the hero/heroine in the quest for the single goal' (2001: 19). Robert McKee also describes the active goal as the cornerstone of the dramatic narrative: 'For better or

worse, an event throws a character's life out of balance, arousing in him the conscious and/or unconscious desire for that which he feels will restore balance, launching him on a Quest for his Object of Desire against forces of antagonism (inner, personal, extra-personal). He may or may not achieve it. This is story in a nutshell' (197).

If there is a single fundament necessary to define drama, of screen, stage, audio or any other medium, agreement points to Aristotle's single action, Mamet's single goal, McKee's object of desire. For this project, the *active goal*: active, because key to the concept is active pursuit of the goal by the protagonist, since it is this pursuit which brings the protagonist into contact with obstacles, creating conflict, and, therefore, drama. It should be noted, and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four, that alternative models such as the 'defection' film noted by Jeff Menne (2019: 75) drastically reduce and de-emphasise the active goal and the protagonist's pursuit of it, and that this goal-de-emphasised story model accounts for some of the most critically revered filmic texts in the cinematic canon, including *8 ½* (1963) and the majority of Fellini's work, *A bout de souffle* (1960) and the majority of Godard's work, *Blow Up* (1966) and the majority of Antonioni's work, *The Assassin* (2015) and the much of Hou Hsiao-Hsien's work, *Sonatine* (1993) and much of Takeshi Kitano's work, *Down by Law* (1986) and the majority of Jim Jarmusch's work, *Le quatre cent coups* (1959), *La Haine* (1995), *The Graduate*, *Badlands*, *Taxi Driver*, and a great many more highly revered and culturally influential film texts.

## **ii. Three-Part Structure**

Beyond the active goal, Aristotle identifies the dramatic plot as consisting of three parts, but goes into little further detail regarding a narrative's macrostructure,

describing the beginning only as ‘that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be’ (2007: 23), and the middle and the end in similar terms. Despite his brevity on the subject, the splitting of the narrative into three parts has informed all modern screenwriting theory. Paul Gulino: ‘Any time there is dramatic tension, there are three parts: it must be set up (question posed); it must be played out (question deliberated), and it must be resolved (question answered)’ (2004: 11). Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush: ‘A 120-page feature script is divided into three acts’ (2002: 19). Lance Lee: ‘We see that the immediate action itself falls into a clear beginning, middle, and end sequence... if it is not an instinctive way of organizing experience into stories to render meaning, then it is so deeply embedded in our culture that it might just as well be’ (2001: 5-6). There are those that disagree: Kristin Thompson contends that the bulk of Hollywood films ‘break perspicuously into *four* large-scale parts’ (1999: 27). Yorke suggests a ‘detailed refinement’ of the three-act model, breaking the long second act into three parts, creating a five-act schema—although he admits this ‘isn’t really different to a three-act structure’ (2014: 33). Both Vogler’s Hero’s Journey model and Campbell’s monomyth, on which the Hero’s Journey is based, divide the second act in the middle, creating what appears to be, in accord with Thompson’s observation, four large parts. McKee proposes a theoretically infinite number of acts based upon the number of major reversals, claiming to observe seven acts in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), eight in *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989)—although Gulino’s sequence approach offers a way to understand these parts as sequences within an overarching three-act macrostructure as opposed to self-contained acts in their own right.

### iii. Simple & Complex Plots

Beyond this three-part structure, Aristotle makes a definition between a 'simple' or a 'complex' plot, describing the simple plot as one in which 'the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition'(31) (other translations use the terms Peripety and Discovery in place of Reversal of the Situation and Recognition), and a complex plot as one which involves one or the other, or both. These two elements—reversal and discovery—are so deeply sewn into contemporary dramatic plotting that it can be hard to identify a plot, or even a scene, which does not contain both reversal and discovery on some level. The idea of a simple and a complex plot, however, is certainly relevant. Robert McKee uses the term 'conscious desire' to refer to the active goal, and notes that more simple, action-oriented plots will be limited to such a desire (he cites *Jaws* [1975] and *Big* [1988]), whilst more 'complex' protagonists will also have an 'unconscious desire', or an inner need, which may conflict with their conscious desire and creates a more 'memorable, fascinating' character (138). For example: in *The Social Network* (2010), protagonist Mark Zuckerberg's attempts to make Facebook the most successful social networking site in the world constitute an active goal, or a conscious desire, addressing indirectly and unwisely his underlying inner need and unconscious desire—the need to be liked. To McKee, a simple plot is one in which the active goal is not married to an inner need, whilst a complex plot contains both goal and need. Batty argues that the external want and the internal need 'form the basis of a dual narrative journey for the mainstream feature film protagonist: the physical journey and the emotional journey' (2009: v) and that 'understanding these two journeys' can help the screenwriter to 'map the movement of a protagonist across a screenplay narrative, both physically and emotionally' (v). He states that if



the audience 'does not connect with a character' both at the level of agency and emotion, then the actions within the narrative may feel 'hollow' (vi).

#### **iv. Causality**

Aristotle makes clear the importance of causality in drama, stating that plots based around 'episodic' action, in which 'the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence', are 'the worst' (28), and that causal plots 'are necessarily the best' (29). This focus on causality is a defining feature of contemporary dramatic plotting. Gulino notes that American films in particular tend toward 'involving the audience in a chronological, cause-and-effect story' (80).

According to McKee, 'most human beings believe that life brings closed experiences of absolute, irreversible change; that their greatest sources of conflict are external to themselves; that their existence operates through continuous time within a consistent, causally interconnected reality; and that inside this reality events happen for explainable and meaningful reasons' (McKee: 62). How McKee has identified this proclivity is not made clear, and he offers no consideration of the possibility that such a belief system, if it exists, could in fact be generated and/or disseminated by a conventional cinema which functions almost exclusively in this mode, from the first animated feature films children consume. However it is clear that conventional cinema functions in this causal mode, that this mode can be pleasing for an audience, and that failure to adhere to this mode can be detrimental. Bordwell states that 'through its history Hollywood cinema seeks to represent events in a temporally continuous fashion' and that narrative logic 'generally work[s] to motivate this temporal continuity' (1985: 9). The typical 'goal-oriented' Hollywood protagonist 'assumes a causal role because of his or her desires' (16). Classical narration, as he

describes it, 'communicates what it "knows" by making characters haul the causal chain through the film' (11). Lajos Egri describes how an effective play moves 'propelled by the conflict created by the characters in their desire to reach their goal', with 'each conflict caus[ing] the one after it' and each one 'more intense than the one before' (184), describing the rising action so commonly noted in the conventional three act model and its fundamental connection to Aristotle's concept of causality. It should be noted however that a key feature of the art film, as described by Bordwell, and working in conjunction with the de-emphasis of the active goal, is the de-emphasis of causal plotting. When 'other styles' emerged from the 1960s onward to 'challenge the dominance of classicism' (1985: 10), stemming from the 'international art cinema' of Bergman, Kurosawa, 'certain Italian directors, and the French New Wave' (10), and incorporating the likes of Scorsese, Altman, Schrader and others (372), the centrality of causality was challenged; linearity, in such films, is 'replaced by ambiguity' (373), wilful protagonists by 'unmotivated protagonists' (373), tightly linked causal plots with 'picaresque journey structures' and a 'looser, more tenuous linkage of events' (373). Causality then, as with the active goal, is not a core fundament of drama but of classicist drama, and indeed, as will be explored in further detail in chapter three, many of those post-classical texts from the 1960s and 1970s are amongst the most revered texts in the American cinematic canon.

#### **v. Undeserved Suffering**

According to Hiltunen, by focusing on the 'essence and nature of the plot structure in the *Poetics*' it becomes clear that pity, fear and *catharsis* form the 'integral parts of the process producing the "proper pleasure"' (6-7), and therefore can be seen as the fundamental structural guideposts held within the *Poetics*. He summarises

Aristotelian fear as ‘partly the expectation of impending danger’ (8) for the protagonist, and partly the hope that the protagonist will avoid that danger. As such, ‘fear is a special mixture of anxiety and pleasure’ (8). Essentially, this describes suspense as drawn out over a narrative’s macrostructure (as opposed to contained within one suspenseful scene or sequence) and is reliant on audience identification (or empathy) with the protagonist. Aristotelian pity is defined as an emotional response ‘caused by an image or notion of some bad or fatal event that happens to someone who does not deserve it’, an event which ‘must be identifiable as one that could happen to oneself or one’s loved ones in the near future’ (9). He calls it ‘essential’ that this feeling ‘arises through witnessing undeserved suffering’ by someone perceived as ‘morally good’ (9). The combination of Aristotelian fear (empathy & suspense) with Aristotelian pity (undeserved suffering) leads, then, to the *catharsis* experienced at the resolution, what Hiltunen describes as ‘release from pity and fear’ (12).

Certainly empathy for the protagonist and suspense (Aristotelian fear) are fundamental narrative tools, and critical elements of subsequent screenwriting theory, however they are also rather broad and general and tend to refer less to the musculoskeletal narrative macrostructure (the focus of this project) and more to the content found within that structure. Aristotelian pity on the other hand, or the representation of undeserved suffering, seems less general, suggesting a downward trajectory of fortune on the protagonist’s journey towards their goal. The impact of this concept on the development of contemporary screenwriting theory can be extrapolated—for example, Vogler’s focus on ‘ordeal’ (6) and the focus of many (Yorke, McKee, Lee) on the ‘crisis’ often found at the movement from second act to

third. Undeserved suffering then, it could be argued, has been knitted into the framework of the conventional screen narrative.

### **2.3 Campbell and the Monomyth**

In *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell provides an overview of the ways that mythological stories throughout millennia correlate, creating a macrostructure model (the monomyth) which Christopher Vogler would subsequently adapt into his Hero's journey. Campbell's work is rigorous, detailed, far more academic than the handbooks that would follow in its path, although as Sue Clayton notes Campbell 'has been criticized by scholars for the essentialism of his concept, instanced in its ahistoricism and its often cliched and stereotypical view of world cultures' (2011: 163). The text began to exert enormous influence over film culture, particularly American film culture, when George Lucas used its ideas in the construction of *Star Wars: Episode IV* (1977): 'When a hungry industry saw *Star Wars* become insanely popular and then learned it was built from a template and could thus be replicated, all hell broke loose. It was a gold rush. Suddenly there was a 'map', and if you didn't follow the map it was much harder to get your work made' (Yorke: 53). Significantly, the commercial success of *Star Wars* is a key event, along with the earlier success of *Jaws* and subsequent big budget flops by European-influenced auteurs including *Heaven's Gate* (1980), credited with putting an end to the formal invention of the New Hollywood period and ushering in the blockbuster-centric conservatism of the 80s and 90s.

Campbell's work, however, is a great deal more elliptical and flexible than any map to screenwriting success, and widespread use of his detailed survey as a model for the construction of cinematic narratives seems quite far from the work's original

intention. Campbell, for example, makes no suggestion that the monomyth should be regarded as a model for all storytelling—rather, as a survey of much storytelling within a mythic context, and here lies a key difference between Campbell's work and the model Vogler would draw from it: for Vogler, Campbell's monomyth describes an ideal for *all* storytelling.

Broken into three acts, with a midpoint containing a central ordeal and death/rebirth element, the monomyth's key macrostructural elements include two threshold crossings—one from the hero's home territory and into the unfamiliar world where the majority of the journey takes place (and marking the end of the first act) and a second return crossing in which the hero integrates back into their home land (marking the end of the second act and the start of the third) carrying with them the 'boon' (193) (a physical elixir or some kind of spiritual learning, or both) that can effect some kind of meaningful change in the home territory. In summarizing the first act of the monomyth, Campbell describes a hero 'setting forth from his commonday hut or castle,' being lured or otherwise proceeding to 'the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion)' (246).

The idea of an outward journey from a familiar zone of safety and into a zone of increased risk, threat and potential reward, is key, particularly to the subsequent works of Field and Vogler, arguably the two theorists who have exerted the most influence on the American development industry and, therefore, American film narratives, but also to Yorke, whose *Into The Woods* derives its title from this model. This unfamiliar zone becomes the setting for the second act: 'Beyond the threshold,

then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers)' (246).

Campbell devotes much of his focus to identifying a midpoint sequence, described as a supreme ordeal which instigates the change from non-hero to hero. Through triumphing the hero successfully claims the 'boon' he sought and 'an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being' (246). This intrinsic expansion of consciousness represents the moment of ascension, the moment of becoming heroic. The remainder of the narrative then focuses on the consequences of this change: the hero may be pursued; they cross the 'return threshold' and re-emerge 'from the kingdom of dread' with the boon, an 'elixir' that 'restores the world' (246).

This, then, is a very specific form of story: a story form of positive growth, in which a non-heroic character accrues the necessary experience to become heroic. It is a story form told on a sweeping scale, with clear moral definitions between good and bad. It is a story form which lends itself particularly well to science fiction and fantasy—film genres that function in exotic, non-realist worlds, which often take their characters on sweeping, epic journeys, the type in which heroic expansions of consciousness can occur, and in which powerful 'fabulous forces' (30) might be encountered. Perhaps above all else, it is a story form founded upon creating profound and positive change in its hero protagonist. In its most simple terms, its 'nuclear unit' (35), it contains three parts: 'A separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return' (35). This is a three-act model for heroic life-enhancement.

## **2.4 Field's Paradigm**

As mentioned in chapter one, Alexander Ross discusses the shift that occurred in the Hollywood studios towards the end of the 1970s, when the era of New Wave iconoclasts was coming to an end, its protagonists (Coppola, De Palma, Scorsese, Friedkin, Spielberg, Lucas) being defeated by or assimilated (not necessarily unwillingly) into an increasingly corporatized industry, particularly at the executive level. It was in this particular environment, after the system-smashing *Easy Rider* (1969) era had, to paraphrase Hunter S. Thompson, reached its high water mark and its wave begun to roll back, when studios were becoming more corporatized, decision-making more fundamentally profit-motivated, that Syd Field emerged with his paradigm: an easily digestible, readable, broad-strokes model that could be used by writers to create film narratives, and by development professionals to measure screenplays as a metric for quality. It is worth underlining that Field, like most of the prominent script gurus who would follow in his wake, was no veteran screenwriter, had never had and would never have a feature script produced, was working instead in development and education. *Screenplay*, his analysis of conventional narrative structure, however, not only changed the way the development industry functioned but has come to dominate the pedagogy of screenwriting, influencing the way screenwriting students learn, the way aspiring and working screenwriters write, and, perhaps most profoundly, the way development professionals assess (and reject) screenplays.

The paradigm Field presented is significantly less detailed than the monomyth or the Hero's Journey. Rooted in what Field claims as an Aristotelian three-act reading of the dramatic narrative (Aristotle does not, in fact, divide the narrative into acts as such, only three parts), it focuses on the shift from act one into act two and from act two into act three (Campbellian threshold crossings), and the way that the

narrative is turned at these points—the famous ‘plot points’ (115), often referred to in subsequent analysis of the screenplay as turning points, and which Field himself describes as incidents or events that ‘[hook] into the action and [spin] it around into another direction’ (115). Although most screenwriting theorists recognise that the idea of three-act structure is as old or older than Aristotle, and seems to be naturally recurring, rooted deeply in the way humans experience the world and order their experiences to create meaning, it is not the only way to understand the screenplay, and Field is often credited with popularising and disseminating three-act structure as the dominant story form: ‘though [Field] did not originate the notion of thinking of screenplays in terms of acts, the popularity of his book has helped make the “three act structure” the most common model’ (Gulino: 5).

Field does not describe what effect plot points have on meaning, but rather focuses on how they function on a schematic, musculoskeletal level, to keep the story in a manageable shape: ‘the plot points at the end of Acts I and II hold the paradigm in place. They are the anchors of your story line. Before you begin writing, you need to know four things: ending, beginning, plot point at the end of Act I, and plot point at the end of Act II’ (115). They are described more in terms of their usefulness for orientating the writer than in terms of their usefulness for orientating (and providing meaning to) the viewer, which perhaps explains the great success of *Screenplay*: it’s focus is on easing the writing process, something of great value to novice or aspiring screenwriters, but which tends towards simplifying and/or ignoring more nuanced or complex ideas. His focus on two key plot points however certainly tallies with the way subsequent theorists have formulated their narrative models, and by returning to Campbell’s monomyth and his threshold crossings the meaning produced by such plot points becomes clearer. An initial threshold crossing from the



homeland to the special world of the second act can be seen as a moment of propulsion, of physical and/or emotional movement, propelled by forces internal and/or external, across some significant border, either literal or figurative. A 'turning' of the plot at this point—or a hooking and spinning, to use Field's language—can be understood as an application of force, a hand on the protagonist's back, shoving them out of their ordinary world.

The second threshold crossing, in Campbell's model, is a return, from the special world back to the ordinary world, with the elixir—the power to 'restore' the ordinary world. A 'turning' of the plot at this point becomes explicable when correlated with the concept of the crisis. From the protagonist's lowest point, propulsive energy is found, from an external or internal source, or both, to 'turn' the protagonist and propel them from this crisis point, across a (figurative or literal) threshold towards the ultimate confrontation with the narrative's main antagonist—or, to speak in Campbellian terms, with the negative force that has infected and oppressed the ordinary world of the protagonist's homeland. Several theorists discuss a crisis point as a key element of the conventional macrostructure—Lance Lee positions it 'at the end of the Middle, where the protagonists' relationships and the resolve that had guided their action face collapse, or do collapse, endangering their survival' (54), and states that it always contains 'a reverse' (45); Yorke describes it as the point at which protagonists 'always choose to engage in the biggest battle (or climax) of their life' (30), and positions it, similarly, at the second act turning point; Vogler, somewhat differently, conflates his midpoint Ordeal with the crisis, although he also states that this structure 'allows for another critical moment or turning point at the end of Act Two' (157), and, in accord with Lee and Yorke,

identifies its function as a preparation for the movement towards the confrontational final act.

But despite its great influence, *Screenplay* is both a simplistic and problematic text, particularly when implying that Field's simplified model of conventional narrative structuring is not just a survey of common practice (as with Campbell's work), but a model of all successful practice within the screenplay. Field claims: 'do all good screenplays fit the paradigm? Yes', and 'screenplays that work fit the paradigm' (62). He states that 'the paradigm *works* [emphasis original]' and 'it is the foundation of a good screenplay' (16). Field's good/bad polarity would not be significant if not for the enormous influence his work has wrought over both the development industry and over higher education around the screenplay. Implicitly, Field categorises unconventional screenplays, those that do not fit the paradigm, as defective, not to be emulated by writers seeking development deals or screenwriting students developing their craft (and providing development executives and producers with a basis on which to reject and prevent unconventional work), marking as faulty such texts as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Le mepris* (1986), *Withnail & I* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *A Short Film About Killing* (1988), *No Country for Old Men* (2006), and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010). A limited list of texts that immediately present themselves and which have enjoyed significant critical success and award recognition, none of these films fit the paradigm. Field states that 'good films are always resolved—one way or another... the audience wants a clear cut resolution,' (62) adding *Le Quatre cent coups* (1959), *Blow Up* (1966), *The French Connection* (1971) and *Broken Flowers* (2005) to his defective list. This good/bad polarity, in which convention is praised and unconventionality undermined, is not isolated only to Field's work—as far as the influence of Field's paradigm can

be traced across the work of subsequent screenwriting gurus, the continuation of the good/bad polarity can also be traced.

## **2.5 Vogler and the Hero's Journey**

Christopher Vogler describes Campbell's text as 'a reliable set of tools for diagnosing story problems and prescribing solutions', and says that 'without the guidance of Campbell and mythology, I would have been lost' (xxviii). The monomyth, as Vogler saw it, was a checklist. Include enough of the elements of Campbell's monomyth in an effective order and you can avoid 'story problems'. If presented with story problems, refer to the monomyth for solutions. In *The Writer's Journey*, Vogler's simplification and repositioning of the monomyth in a cinematic context, he denies that such a prescriptive approach is his intention, before going on to encourage prescriptive use, creating a problematic discourse similar to Field's which undermines the obvious value of his work.

As a structural model, Vogler's Hero's Journey makes only a few subtle adjustments to Campbell's monomyth. Like Campbell's model it is divided into three acts, with a prominent midpoint splitting act two and creating, in essence, three acts in four parts (why this is not addressed as four acts is not made clear—and as previously noted, Kristin Thompson's model presents a similar structure with the two parts of the narrative's middle section understood as two separate acts). Like Campbell's monomyth (and Field's paradigm) it contains two threshold crossings—one marking the end of act one, and one marking the end of act two—and culminates with the hero returning to their home territory with some form of 'elixir'. Differences to Campbell's model represent minor modifications, simplifications, and rephrasing, with a movement away from certain spiritual or supernatural elements to

focus more on the role of character archetypes—thus Campbell's sections on 'supernatural aid' and 'meeting with the Goddess' become 'meeting with the Mentor' and 'approach to the inmost cave', whilst Campbell's sections on atonement with the father and apotheosis are replaced by Vogler's increased focus on the 'ordeal' which the hero experiences in the inmost cave (15), making a connection to Aristotelian pity and the concept of undeserved suffering.

Vogler tells the reader in his revised introduction: 'the conscious awareness of [the model's] patterns may be a mixed blessing, for it's easy to generate thoughtless clichés and stereotypes from this matrix. The self-conscious, heavy-handed use of this model can be boring and predictable' (xv). He argues against 'lazy, superficial use' of the Hero's Journey, warning that 'taking this metaphorical system too literally, or arbitrarily imposing its forms on every story can be stultifying. It should be used as a form, not a formula' (xviii-xix). There is much, however, in *The Writer's Journey* which seems more prescriptive than metaphorical, and as mentioned in chapter one, Vogler himself reports using the model in his analysis of every script and novel which he assessed. Often, Vogler shifts Campbell's theory, which accounted for many stories of the mythological type, to account for *all* stories, delegitimising any models which diverge. He talks about the 'eight common character types or psychological functions found in all stories' (xxvii), claims that Campbell 'exposed for the first time the pattern that lies behind every story ever told... He found that all storytelling, consciously or not, follows the ancient patterns of myth' (4), neither of which are claims made by Campbell, but which do suggest to Vogler's readership that his Hero's Journey can be applied not just to stories of 'fabulous forces' and elixirs that 'restore the world', but to all stories of all kinds across all genres.

This kind of language is typical of the best-selling theorists from development backgrounds (Vogler, McKee, Field, Yorke) and rarely occurs in the work produced by academics (Dancyger & Rush, Lance Lee, Gulino) or notable dramaturgs (MacKendrick, Egri, Mamet), and, as with Syd Field's good/bad polarity, would not be significant if not for the enormous influence of Vogler's text on both industry and education. As previously noted, Conor argues that the schemas located in the handbooks are 'strikingly' homogenous (2014: 128), and in addition to restricting screenwriting practice are a key feature of 'the curricula in a wide range of pedagogical frameworks for screenwriting in higher education' (122), whilst Macdonald states that although there are a variety of different approaches to shaping screen stories the discourse around the screenplay rarely moves beyond that single homogenous story form (2013: 59).

Development professionals, of course, are intrinsically wedded to the financial success of the films they help to develop, are professionally compelled to approach films as products, to a greater degree than the above-the-line creatives (screenwriter, director) for whom artistic success can often prove just as lucrative, and Vogler makes no attempt to mask the mainstream inclinations and fiscal imperatives underpinning his application of the monomyth. He talks about targeting 'the big Hollywood studios who use conventional patterns to appeal to the broadest cross-section of the public' (xvii), and his intention to use the monomyth 'to understand the phenomenal repeat business of movies such as *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters*' (xxvii). He tends toward business-oriented terminology such as 'flop' and 'hit' (xxix), counting a film's relative success by the dollar, and describes Campbell's ideas as 'a great key to life as well as a major instrument for dealing more effectively with a mass audience' (5). This two-pronged inclination—to apply

structural models to all stories, all of the time, therefore maximising their usefulness and commercial potential, and to use those models in order to maximise a screenplay's market potential—has serious connotations for the culture of the screenplay:

The trouble with mimicking Campbell's monomyth in screenwriting is that it favors a certain kind of plot to the exclusion of other valid (and often successful) plot structures. Vogler himself warned in his original memo, "Following the guidelines of myth too rigidly can lead to a stiff, unnatural structure, and there is the danger of being too obvious." Unfortunately, almost no attention in screenwriting instruction has been paid to successful strategies for veering away from the rigid path. Instead, Vogler and the other screenwriting gurus have built entire careers urging aspiring screenwriters to follow the monomyth as a formula for guaranteed success. (Gay, 2011: para 11)

Vogler's model, like Campbell's, is a model of life-enhancement, founded upon positive change in the protagonist, and Vogler's articulations often sound similar to the language of West coast psychoanalysis: he talks of heroes 'seeking a confrontation with their anima, their soul, or the unrecognized feminine or intuitive parts of their personality', and heroines 'seeking the animus, the masculine powers of reason and assertion that society has told them to hide' (167). The midpoint ordeal, according to Vogler, is crucial to this story model because it leads the way towards recovery—recovery from whatever psychological or spiritual issues may be

affecting the protagonist. The Hero's Journey, then, is one of recovery, ascension and self-improvement.

## 2.6 McKee's Story Values

McKee's major contribution to screenwriting theory, and his major differentiation from the previously mentioned models, concerns what he terms 'story values' (1997:34).

He proposes an understanding of the narrative based on a backwards-and-forwards vacillation on a single value (trust, love, self-respect), continuing throughout the story up until the climactic resolution—essentially an alternative envisioning of the goal/obstacle dynamic based around a core human principal, rather than (as has become more common) around an external want (goal) and an internal need (although goals and needs surely underpin the values McKee prefers to highlight).

He develops Field's idea of plot points which turn the narrative at the point of act transition, and miniaturises that concept to account not just for act structure, but for the micro-structures that form the act, describing how 'every scene' can become a turning point 'in which the values at stake swing from the positive to the negative to the positive, creating significant but *minor* change in [the characters'] lives' (217).

Such scenes may then 'build a sequence that has a *moderate* impact on the characters, turning or changing values for better or worse to a greater degree than any scene', whilst 'a series of sequences builds an act that climaxes in a scene that creates a *major* reversal in the characters' lives, greater than any sequence accomplished' (217).

Story values, to McKee, are, to borrow Campbell's phrase, the narrative's nuclear unit, and he expresses their importance in relation to a key feature of screenwriting (and, wider, storytelling) theory: change. He states that 'binary

qualities of experience that can reverse their charge at any moment are Story Values' (34), and that 'to make change meaningful you must express it, and the audience must react to it, in terms of a value' (34). Change, McKee claims, is the most fundamental element of storytelling, and without it, there is no story: 'if the value-charged condition of the character's life stays unchanged from one end of a scene to the other, nothing meaningful happens. The scene has activity—talking about this, doing that—but nothing changes in value. It is a nonevent' (36).

Rooting story in change certainly tallies with Campbell's model of heroic ascension, and with Vogler's model of self-improvement, and with Field's paradigm, but this is by no means the only valid approach to narrative storytelling—and as with Field, McKee's declarative manner has a tendency to delegitimise alternative approaches. There are, for example, a great number of film stories exploring the idea of stasis (*Uzak* [2002], *Slacker* [1991]) and a great number more concerned with gradually revealing a complex character than with depicting character change. Paul Schrader, speaking of his screenplay for *Taxi Driver*, states that his protagonist Travis Bickle does not change, but is revealed (2002: viii). This model of changeless narrative can also be seen in Lynne Ramsay's Schrader-influenced *You Were Never Really Here* (2018), in which her protagonist remains locked in his bleak, violent, nihilistic, fringe existence. The Schrader example is key: where development professionals tend to see imperatives, practitioners are more likely to see creative choices; where development professionals tend to see necessary practice, practitioners are more likely to see conventional practice and its unconventional correlative.

McKee also claims that three acts is a necessary minimum for a feature-length narrative: 'when a story reaches a certain magnitude—the feature film, an



hour-long TV episode, the full-length play, the novel—three acts is the minimum’ (217). But, of course, three acts are not the minimum for a feature length narrative, just the conventional minimum. There are two-act features: notably, Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986). Dancyger & Rush view Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* (1973) as a one-act narrative. Corneliu Poromboiu’s *Police, Adjective* (2009) can most convincingly be understood as a one-act narrative, as can the 2021 Academy Award Best Picture winner *Nomadland* (2021). McKee himself has recently updated his thinking, in line with the work by Dancyger & Rush, with an article on his personal website identifying a modern trend for what he sees as one-act features (McKeeStory.com, n.d) and revealing the problematic discourse in his original work. By treating convention as imperative, and ignoring texts that deviate from the conventional, McKee, like his fellow development professionals Field and Vogler, implicitly delegitimised the validity of unconventional practice within the screenplay, and like Field and Vogler this work has wrought great influence over the development arm of the film industry, higher education around the screenplay, and the way contemporary screenwriters practice.

## **2.7 Yorke’s Fractal Structure**

John Yorke primarily prescribes understanding screen narratives within a conventional three-act model, developing and rephrasing story elements identified by Campbell and applied by Field, Vogler, and McKee: a three-act model of positive change. As with these other models, Yorke’s analysis tends to stop short of the point of convention-breaking practice, which aligns with Yorke’s professional experience in the story departments of mainstream soap operas and TV drama series, where

conventional structuring is *de rigueur*. But despite framing much of his discussion in terms of three acts, Yorke proposes a more detailed understanding of the second act – that which Campbell and Vogler split into two halves, and which Thompson views as two separate parts – in which the second act is viewed simultaneously as both one act *and* three acts, creating a five-act structure which nevertheless, he admits, ‘isn’t really different’ (33) from the long-established three-act model: ‘simply put, five acts are generated by inserting two further act breaks in the second act of the traditional “Hollywood” paradigm. The first and last acts remain identical in both forms’ (33).

What then defines an act? According to McKee, the end of an act can be detected by a ‘major reversal of values’ (37), although what constitutes a major reversal of value and what constitutes a moderate reversal he leaves to the reader. To Yorke, an act ‘is discernible because of the three-part structure that mimics the overall story shape’ (80), and can be seen to have ended when the goal uniting the act has been resolved—however, scenes and sequences, as his own fractal theory teaches, have their own scene- and sequence-sized goals, and also mimic the three-part structure of the overall story shape, leaving the definition of where an act might begin and end open to interpretation. Indeed when he outlines what he calls the first act of Lawrence Kasdan’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) screenplay, the ‘act’ he identifies seems much more like an opening sequence than an act in its own right.

Yorke’s most original contribution to screen narrative theory involves miniaturising the act structure and applying it to smaller elements that make up the act. The key features of the three-act narrative, Yorke tells us, can be found not only within the narrative as a whole but within each act within that narrative, and within each scene within those acts. He terms this ‘fractal’ structure (77), and envisions it

as the ideal, describing its power to create harmony and unity throughout every element of a well-designed narrative. Like McKee however, he does not account for how and where he has noticed this practice beyond some brief examples, or why it should be preferable above a different narrative strategy (say, a slow inexorable progression towards the dramatic climax, as Dancyger & Rush notice in *Mean Streets*, or an intentionally disharmonious narrative shape, as in Richard Linklater's *Slacker* or Krzysztof Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Killing* [1988]).

Like McKee and Field, Yorke tends to characterise unconventional practice as a less desirable off-shoot of ideal conventional practice, or refuses outright to acknowledge the existence of unconventional approaches, for instance those based around a passive protagonist: 'If a character doesn't want something, they're passive. And if they're passive, they're essentially dead. [There is] no hope of telling a story, and the work will almost always be boring' (8). McKee, Field and Vogler also focus on will and activity as key elements of an effective protagonist, and, like Yorke, tend to frame any alternative type of protagonist as ineffective or poorly designed. Passive protagonists, of course, feature in a great number of significant and effective screen narratives: *The Graduate* (1967), *Badlands* (1973), *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), *sex, lies and videotape* (1989), *The Return* (2003). When Yorke does acknowledge unconventional practice, he dismisses it: 'a climax can be subverted (the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men* kills its protagonist at the crisis point, but it's very much an exception) but the effect is akin to Bond running from Blofeld. Unless it's part of a wider schematic plan it feels wrong—the writer has set up something and then refused to pay it off' (17). Elsewhere, he calls conventional structuring 'good' and unconventional or anti-conventional choices 'wrong':

There was one unifying factor in every good script I read, whether authored by brand new talent or multiple BAFTA-winners, and that was that they all shared the same underlying structural traits (xiii).

If all stories are about the battle between protagonist and antagonist, physics demands not just beginning and middle, but also end, which is why storytelling feels wrong if it's either omitted or underplayed (18).

When Yorke calls conventional narrative practice 'good' and unconventional practice 'wrong', and focuses his analysis of narrative almost exclusively on this 'good' conventional practice, folding the 'wrong' unconventional practice under the umbrella of the conventional model, occasionally noting that a feeling of wrongness can be artistically desirable before swiftly moving back to a method of analysis that idealises the conventional, he creates a discourse in which unconventional narrative practice is qualitatively less valuable, skilful and legitimate than conventional practice. Yorke's output as storyliner, producer and development executive functions exclusively within the realm of conventionally structured TV soap opera, drama and comedy-drama, and this proclivity is reflected in his ideology. *Into the Woods* has great value as a collation of theory on conventional story shapes, but ignores and delegitimises unconventional approaches.

## **2.8 Gulino's Sequence Approach**

Paul Gulino's *The Sequence Approach* is less hostile to unconventional practice, presenting a structural model flexible enough to make explicable and understandable

both conventional and unconventional structural approaches. His focus is on the same key elements agreed upon in previous theory, but where McKee sees a potentially infinite number of acts, and Yorke sees a central portion that is simultaneously both one and three acts, Gulino sees a model of three over-arching acts split into a variable number of sequences, the most common number being eight. He notes that 'in general' a typical feature film can be expected to have 'two fifteen minute sequences in the first act, four in the second, and two more in the third' but also notes that 'variations on this arrangement can be seen in many films, mostly in the length of the sequences and sometimes in their number' (2). He provides an analysis of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) in which he identifies sixteen sequences; in *Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) he sees twelve sequences; in *North by Northwest* (1959), nine. In each of these texts, Gulino places these sequences within a broader three-act macrostructure.

Using this model of analysis, Gulino is able to reveal unconventional approaches, making them explicable by their negative correlation to the convention. Citing Ernst Lubitsch's 1940 romantic comedy *The Shop Around The Corner*, Gulino describes the film's atypicality: '[It] is a challenge for study because in so many ways it violates the paradigm laid out in the classic construction of a movie like *Toy Story*. In fact, it breaks one of the most basic of the "rules" of screenwriting: it does not have a protagonist with a strong objective, much at stake, and a relentless drive toward achieving that objective over any obstacles that may come in the way' (41). The film's opening sequence 'has no identifiable protagonist and no thread of dramatic tension...No one character's objective carries the scene; rather, audience engagement is achieved first through curiosity, then by following the playing out of the various conflicts between the characters' (42-43). Dramatic tension, Gulino

states (being the tension created by a protagonist pursuing a goal and facing strong obstacles), is not the only way of creating audience engagement, merely the most common. 'The implication is that a passive main character—one with little or no desire and/or little interest in achieving an objective—is a poor choice of protagonist and should be avoided. The only problem with this argument is that some great films have been made with passive main characters... it is thus useful to remember that a writer is confined not by rules or formulae but only by the need to keep an audience wondering what is going to happen next' (145). In addition to dramatic tension, he identifies dramatic irony, dangling causes (the technique of arousing audience attention by delaying the effect of an action, i.e. 'dangling' a cause and delaying its pay-off) and telegraphing ('telling the audience explicitly what would happen in the future of the narrative' [7]) as alternative techniques for audience engagement. He cites *The Graduate*, *sex, lies and videotape*, *Stalag 17* (1953) and *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* as examples of successful films with passive protagonists, and notes Fellini's Oscar-winning *Nights of Cabiria* (1957) as an example of a text which opposes the neo-Aristotelian view on the primacy of causality, with half of its sequences 'connected logically and thematically, rather than causally' (80).

His model is also convincing on a historical level. Whilst the handbook authors tend to notice the ubiquity of three acts, they rarely account for that ubiquity, beyond linking it to Aristotle, who in fact never mentioned acts—only three parts (beginning, middle, end). Gulino makes a strong argument for how the sequences he has noticed within screen narratives might have arisen, and how they might then have been married into a broader, overarching three-act structure, sidestepping the naturalistic fallacy that other theorists fall into:

In the beginning was the sequence. Or more properly, the one-reeler. With the advent of projection movies in 1897, the celluloid carrying the images was wound up around spools that could hold about a thousand feet. At 18 frames per second, these lasted between ten and fifteen minutes. By the early 1910s, for reasons both artistic and economic, films were extended beyond one reel. (3)

If the notion of writing in sequences played a role in feature film writing for the decade and a half after 1913, the craft of screenwriting underwent a dramatic change starting in 1927, which saw the advent of the talking picture. Until then, writers had only to script physical action and title cards. With this new innovation, they had to write dialogue, and Hollywood producers turned to the experts to solve the problem—the thriving community of playwrights working on Broadway, which pulled the craft more firmly into the three-part structure first expounded upon by Aristotle (360-322BC). The result was an eight-sequence structure married to three acts. (4)

Gulino's sequences embody the major elements of the previous single protagonist models, but he positions these elements, convincingly, in relation to the sequences, with the 'point of attack or inciting incident' arising 'usually by the end of the first sequence', marking 'the first intrusion of instability on the initial flow of life, forcing the protagonist to respond in some way' (4). The inciting incident then, as Gulino sees it, is the climax of the first reel/sequence. The fact that it has become customary for this story feature to take up this position within the conventional feature narrative, therefore, becomes explicable, and relates to Yorke's fractal theory: if a film lasts for

a single reel, the climax must be positioned just before the end; if two reels, the second reel must build to a bigger climax than the first reel, and so on. This offers an explanation for why a striking number of feature films have inciting incidents occurring after roughly thirteen-to-fifteen minutes of screen time (*Papillon* [1973], *The African Queen* [1951], *My Name Is Joe* [1998], *Following* [1998], *L'enfant* [2005], *Red Road* [2006], *A Prophet* [2009], *Fish Tank* [2009], *Public Enemies* [2009]): if a reel (and hence a first sequence) lasts roughly fifteen minutes, then a 'reel climax' at fourteen minutes makes perfect sense. Even those films that open with something which could be described as an inciting incident, (*The Third Man* [1949], *Groundhog Day* [1993], *Fargo*, *Margin Call* [2011], *Zodiac*, *Bombshell* [2019]) almost always position a secondary incident at around the fifteen minute mark, which either significantly develops the story from the opening incident or which reveals itself to be the true inciting incident, pushing the story in a new direction. Either way, by viewing the feature narrative from a practical point of view—as a story built up from reels, each reel reaching its own climax, successively bigger than the last—Gulino explains the positioning of every key feature of the Conventional Monoplot: the inciting incident at the reel one climax; the first act turning point at the reel two climax; the midpoint at the reel four climax; the second act turning point at the reel six climax; the dramatic climax coming somewhere in reels seven and eight, or drawn out across both, depending on the needs of the story. Unlike other theorists however, Gulino also demonstrates how his model can adapt to account for alternative structural approaches.

Gulino also offers alternative theories regarding both the midpoint and the crisis point. The midpoint, as he sees it, is not so much a death-and-rebirth transformation (Campbell, Vogler) or a life-changing ordeal (Vogler) but 'a very clear



glimpse of an answer to the dramatic question' (16), the first moment when either the character, or the audience, or both, start to become aware of how the story might resolve itself, who or what the main force of antagonism is, and therefore what must be faced in the dramatic climax. Contrary to other theorists, Gulino does not see the second act turning point as, necessarily, involving a crisis, calling this 'a common misconception', and suggesting that it is 'far more useful for the writer to conceive of this moment in the story in relationship to the main tension in some profound way—either by completely resolving it or by reframing it significantly' (17). This tallies with Kristin Thompson's four act model, in which she claims each act presents its own separate goal, contradicting the single goal idea so fundamental to Mamet, McKee *et al.*

## **2.9 Dancyger & Rush's Critique of Restorative Three-Act Form**

Whilst the most widely read and influential screenwriting theorists tend to present the conventional mode as either the *only* properly functioning narrative form or, rather, as an ideal form (Field, Vogler, McKee, Yorke), there are those, like Gulino, who view the single protagonist, change-driven conventional three-act model not as a universal ideal, nor as a practical checklist for the development process, but as one definition of one of the narrative models available to the screenwriter, and one that is suitable only for realising and enforcing specific world views. As noted in chapter one, Ken Dancyger & Jeff Rush call this form restorative three-act structure, stating that its strength lies in its ability to provide 'character redemption and restoration' (23). They note that the neatness of this 'comforting' (38) form might not be the best way for the screenwriter to represent the world as they see it. If this form comforts the viewer, it stands to reason that the screenwriter must take a different approach if

they wish to unsettle, wrong-foot, or otherwise provoke—or, to use David Foster Wallace’s language, to render the audience more conscious. If the screenwriter does not wish the audience to experience their character’s actions as heroic, for example, but rather as flawed and human, they may wish to limit the amount of change the character undergoes throughout the narrative, as Schrader does in his *Taxi Driver* screenplay, and as Lynne Ramsay does in *You Were Never Really Here*. In this model, the narrative ceases to function as a schematic to induce profound and heroic change, and instead ‘becomes the microscope through which to observe their behaviour... The result is that each of [their] antagonists is diminished dramatically so that the main character’s actions are experienced as human as opposed to heroic’ (61-62).

If the screenwriter wishes the character’s story not to be experienced as one of self-improvement and ascension, but rather as something more limited, frustrated, perhaps more common, Dancyger and Rush suggest doing away with act breaks altogether, and employing what they describe as a ‘flattened’ single act model:

Martin Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* has no act breaks at all... When [this method] succeeds it carries a relentless accumulation of power that is hard to achieve in a more segmented story. Such a story starts with a conflict that is already well engaged and runs through a long, slow, second-act arch...

Flattened structure tends to confirm and deepen what we already know. It also tends to cast doubt on any possibility of change. (45-46)

Dancyger and Rush go on to identify certain other structural approaches: a multi-protagonist model granted unity by location, as in Richard Linklater’s *Slacker* and

Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) and *Nashville* (1975), and a two-act structure, as in Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*. They identify the limitations in the restorative tendencies of the Conventional Monoplot, and suggest some alternatives, but the scope of these alternatives is limited.

## **2.10 Aronson's Alternative Models**

Linda Aronson provides a more comprehensive analysis of alternative structural models. Although she states 'all of the unconventional narrative forms we find in today's films rely heavily on the traditional rising three-act model' (168), she identifies a number of significant variations, focusing largely on ensemble films with parallel narratives: the 'tandem narrative', containing 'equally important stories on the same theme, running simultaneously in the same time frame and geographical area, with the film's action jumping between stories' (168); the 'multiple protagonist narrative', in which 'a small team of people [are] thrown together in a group "adventure" which is specifically a quest, a reunion or a siege (emotional or actual)' (174); 'double journey narratives', containing 'two characters journeying either towards each other, in parallel, or apart (physically, emotionally, or both)' (175); and 'consecutive stories' where 'separate stories (with separate protagonists) [are] told one after the other, coming together at the end' (176).

These models all have particular dramatic benefits for the screenwriter which are not available if the writer is pressured to follow the conventional single protagonist model. 'If you want to write a film on the theme of poverty in the city, following a wide range of characters, your idea will probably be best served by tandem narrative... If you want to write about several possible outcomes triggered by one event, the structure to use is one of the 'consecutive stories' forms' (171). It

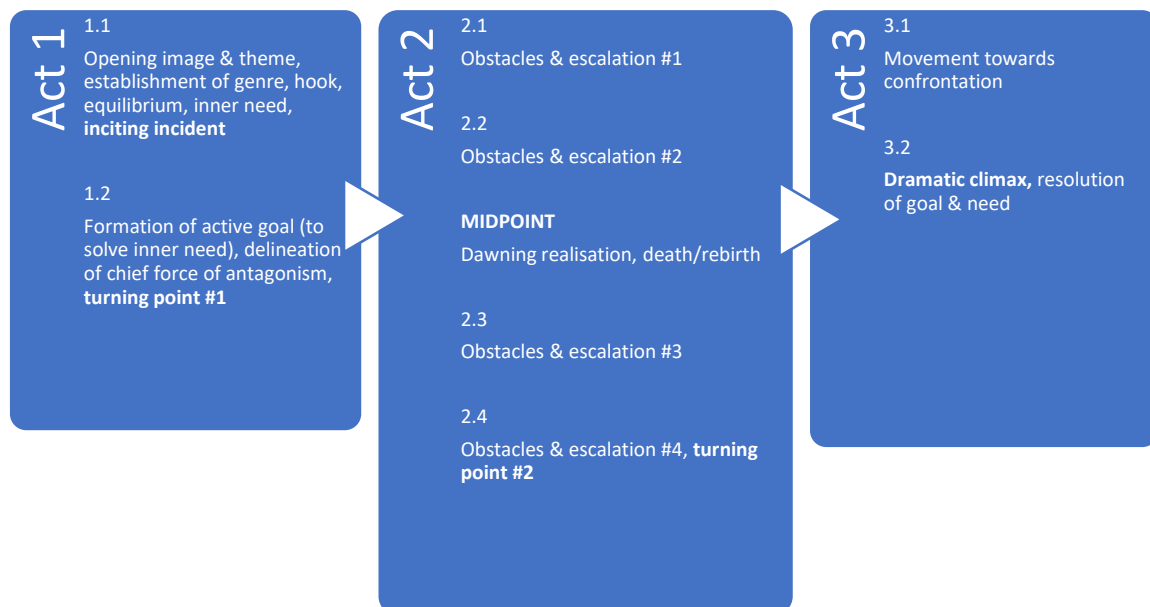
stands to reason that when development professionals and nascent screenwriters internalise a different message, that alternative models are wrong/bad whilst the conventional single protagonist model is right/good, screenwriters are less likely to innovate or experiment and more likely to squeeze stories into the restorative mode that would be better served by a different structural approach. 'If you work on the assumption that film structure is always about one hero on a single journey towards spiritual improvement, you have only two options when you come to write a story that you know has multiple stories and a group of equally important characters' – to avoid structuring your story, or to 'force your ensemble story into the standard one-hero model' (173).

## **2.11 Conventional Monoplot**

Through analysis of the above handbooks and the models, rules and systems contained therein, a composite model of conventional story shape has been compiled. Based on the most prominent and influential theory within both the development industry and in higher education, as well as complementary analysis carried out on a large cross-section of film texts, this composite model is intended to reveal how contemporary screen stories *tend to be shaped*, particularly in the American film industry but far beyond. The term Conventional Monoplot highlights the model's conventionality and uniformity. Using Gulino's 8-part model as a starting point, and working within the typical three-act shape, the most convincing and recurrent elements of existing theory have been assembled to create the model, building on the work done by Dancyger and Rush on restorative three-act structure and identifying in more detail the elements that tend to make up that structure. The model contains elements found within Campbell's Monomyth, Field's paradigm and

Vogler's Hero's Journey, correlated with conventions outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics*, McKee's *Story* and Yorke's *Into the Woods*. Cherry and Higgs (2011) talk about a creative disruption preceding innovation. For the screenwriter to disrupt, they must first have a model of convention, a body to rupture. The Monoplot model then offers a method of quantifying conventional structuring practice in the screenplay; unconventional models can be identified by negative correlation with the Monoplot model, and unconventional practice can be quantified in terms of deviation from the Monoplot. The model will be illustrated with select examples from film texts, to demonstrate not only how the model functions in practice, but how it can function effectively. This project does not make the argument that the Monoplot is an ineffective model—rather that its ubiquity restricts and revokes unconventional practice and leads to homogeneity of meaning within the screenplay.

**Figure 1.2 Conventional Monoplot Model**



## OVERVIEW

A *protagonist* is introduced. Their life is established, including usually (but not always) some missing feature—the *inner need*. An *inciting incident* initiates a story which shunts their life in a new direction, addressing the missing feature of their life. A *turning point* between acts one and two serves as a point-of-no-return, after which the protagonist has an *active goal* to pursue. A *midpoint* serves to focus the protagonist for the first time on the true force of *antagonism* preventing them from achieving their goal (point of dawning realisation), and the audience glimpses, for the first time, what must be faced for the protagonist to resolve their problem. A *turning point* between acts two and three serves to push the protagonist towards the final confrontation with that source of antagonism, sometimes but not always constituting a lowest point or crisis for the protagonist. The *dramatic climax* then occurs, in which the protagonist confronts the main force of antagonism, leading to *resolution* of the goal and (if present) the need. Resolution can be positive (goal and need achieved), negative (goal and need not achieved), or ironic (either goal but not need achieved, or need but not goal achieved).

## ACT ONE

### 1.1 Opening Image & Theme, Establishment Of Genre, Hook, Equilibrium, Inner Need, Inciting Incident

Conventional single protagonist narratives tend to begin with a *hook* scene or sequence appropriate to their style and genre: Bane's plane hijacking in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), a scene of barbed dialogue-based conflict in *The Social Network* (2010), the extended tracking shot car bomb sequence in *Touch of Evil* (1958). These hooks function to set audience expectation whilst raising curiosity.

Many films precede the hook with an *opening image* or short sequence of images, focused on mood, style and/or theme: the glittering eye and futuristic Los Angeles hellscape in *Blade Runner*, the reverse-exposing polaroid in *Memento* (2000). These images are often returned to at the film's closing, creating a sense of unity.

Many films hint at the narrative's underlying *theme* either in the opening image or during the hook scene/sequence. Many Coen brothers' films do so with an opening voice-over (*Blood Simple* [1984], *The Big Lebowski* [1998], *The Man Who Wasn't There* [2001]) or monologue (*Miller's Crossing* [1990], *No Country for Old Men*).

In some instances, the hook itself could be seen as an *inciting incident*: the previously mentioned car bomb opening in *Touch of Evil*, the car crash in *Three Colours Blue* (Kieslowski, 1993). In such instances a secondary incident usually follows at the typical incident point approximately fifteen minutes into the film, further catalysing or developing the story, and creating the reel one climax theorised by Gulino. An early incident signals a greater emphasis on plot.

Early incidents also reduce the screen time given to establishing *equilibrium*, but typical narratives devote a substantial portion of section 1.1 to this. We learn about the character through the demonstration of character traits, usually positive (heroism, humanism, idealism, underdog-ism), creating audience sympathy. Often, one particular trait that they need will be missing (assertiveness, bravery, self-acceptance), forming a *flaw* which prevents the protagonist achieving their *inner need*. The need can be external (need to be loved, need for companionship) or internal (need for self-acceptance, need to overcome addiction). *Genre* will be established.

In *A Prophet* (2009), the narrative opens with protagonist El Djebena entering prison, before an inciting incident in which the Corsican gangsters who run the prison order him to kill a fellow Arab inmate. In *Fish Tank* (2009), the narrative opens with troubled protagonist Mia getting into a fight with another young girl, before an inciting incident in which her mother's new boyfriend, Connor, enters her world and draws her sexual curiosity for the first time. In *Chinatown* (1974), the narrative opens when detective protagonist Gittes is hired by a woman purporting to be Evelyn Mulwray to spy on her husband, before an inciting incident in which the real Evelyn Mulwray reveals herself and confronts Gittes. In *Broken Flowers* (2005), the narrative opens with world-weary protagonist Don being left by his partner, before an inciting incident in which he discovers a mysterious letter from an unknown ex suggesting he has a son.

## **1.2 Formation Of Active Goal (To Solve Inner Need), Delineation Of Chief Force Of Antagonism, Turning Point #1**

Once the character's life has been interrupted by the inciting incident, the next section of the narrative forges their *active goal*. These sequences can take many forms, but tend to constitute a movement away from the protagonist's ordinary life towards the new world of the story (sometimes unwillingly). In *A Prophet* (2009), El Djebena tries to get out of the assassination contract that has been thrust upon him, but fails, and is forced to kill a fellow Arab, moving him past a point-of-no-return and into the world of organised crime within the prison. His goal is set: to conquer this world of crime and earn his freedom. In *Fish Tank* (2009), Mia gets drunk and pretends to be asleep whilst her mother's new boyfriend, Connor, undresses her and puts her to bed. Her goal is set: she wants Connor. In *Chinatown*, Gittes discovers



that Hollis Mulwray has been murdered. His goal is set: to discover the identity of the murdered and the truth behind the situation. In *Broken Flowers*, Don plans his journey and hits the road. His goal is set: discover who wrote the letter and find his son.

By establishing the goal, *the chief force of antagonism* will usually be established too: Luciani in *A Prophet*, Connor in *Fish Tank*. This can be a person, a system, an environment (*Alive* [1993], *Cast Away* [2000]) or an internal force such as grief (*Three Colours Blue* [1993]). In many stories, the chief antagonist will remain unknown until later in the narrative: detective stories, for example, and murder mysteries, based around the slow revelation of a criminal plot and/or pursuit of a criminal. In such instances, the identity of the antagonist is not known, but their function within the narrative is (unknown killer, unknown enemy leader, unknown blackmailer, etc). In *Chinatown*, Mulwray's killer is the chief antagonist, their identity unknown. In *Broken Flowers*, Don's letter-writing ex, identity unknown, is the chief antagonist.

This sequence will close with a *turning point*: often little more than a moment in which the character, obviously or subtly, chooses actively to begin pursuing their goal. As noted by most theorists but emphasised particularly by Yorke, this often entails a movement into a new physical space, or alternatively into a new and unfamiliar emotional and/or psychological space—moving, literally or figuratively, into the woods. There is often a sense, sometimes overt, of crossing a point of no return. In *A Prophet*, El Djebena kills Reyeb. In *Fish Tank*, Mia and Connor share intimate physical contact for the first time. In *Chinatown*, Gittes discovers Mulwray's body. In *Broken Flowers*, Don hits the road, physically leaving behind the ordinary world of the first act.

## ACT TWO

### 2.1 Obstacles & Escalation #1

The character begins to *pursue their goal*, and faces the first *obstacles*. In *A Prophet*, El Djebena begins working for the Corsicans but is abused and insulted as a lowly Arab. In *Fish Tank*, Mia begins to bond with Connor, but her mother gets in the way. In *Chinatown*, Gittes pursues the truth behind Mulwray's death but gets his nose sliced by hired goons. In *Broken Flowers*, Don travels to the first of his significant exes to see if she sent him a mysterious letter, but has a run-in with her flirtatious teenage daughter.

The protagonist gets closer to achieving their goal, but is pushed back by an antagonistic force. They will usually score a victory over that antagonistic force, discovering new information, self-knowledge, or a new ally, whilst simultaneously becoming aware of increased danger.

### 2.2 Obstacles & Escalation #2

The character continues to *pursue their goal*, but faces *obstacles of greater force* than in section 2.1. Often, if sequence 2.1 has climaxed with victory of some sort, this section will end in something closer to defeat. In *A Prophet*, El Djebena is trusted with a job that takes him out of the prison on leave, but is jumped and held at gun-point.. In *Fish Tank*, Mia bonds with Connor to the point of flirtation, but he unsettles her by taking it too far. In *Chinatown*, Gittes questions Evelyn Mulwray, but can't get beyond her layers of deception (a far stronger obstacle for him to overcome than mere goons). In *Broken Flowers*, Don meets the second of his significant exes, but finds her happily married and unfamiliar.

### **Midpoint—Dawning Realisation (Death & Rebirth)**

Sometimes extended sequence, sometimes scene, sometimes a moment within a scene, the *midpoint* of the conventional single protagonist narrative constitutes the point at which either the protagonist, or the audience, or both begin to become aware of the nature of the problem facing them. This can mean beginning to understand who or what the chief antagonist might be, or what lengths the protagonist may have to go to, or what skills they may have to acquire, in order to overcome them/it.

In *A Prophet*, the surprise attack during El Djebena's leave and his ability to successfully handle the situation gives him the confidence to begin building his own operations, laying the foundation for him to unthroned Luciani as boss of the prison. In *Fish Tank*, Connor's physical flirtation with Mia signals to her for the first-time that the togetherness she seeks with Connor will be sexual. In *Chinatown*, Jake (and the audience) meet Noah Cross for the first time, and Cross hires Jake to find Hollis Mulwray's purported girlfriend—in actuality Cross's granddaughter, the true heart of the cover-up and the subject of the dramatic climax. But there isn't a sense of any new knowledge, until Jake visits the hall of records and the orange groves and is chased and beaten unconscious by angry farmers. Waking, he tells Evelyn what he's discovered—he knows that Noah Cross is diverting water to steal land from the farmers. In *Broken Flowers*, Don's second unsuccessful trip to an ex ends with melancholia and the frustration of not knowing. In a dream sequence aboard a plane, the women of his past parade obliquely before him, and we get the subtle sense that this mission of his to discover revelatory truth is destined to fail.

As identified by Campbell and propagated by Vogler, the midpoint of the conventional narrative often contains some sort of literal, partial or metaphorical

death and rebirth. We can view this as the death of the old way of understanding, and the birth of the new; the movement from ignorance into knowledge. In *Chinatown*, Gittes is beaten unconscious. The screen slowly fades to black, remains that way for an unusually long moment, before fading up on Evelyn Mulwray, looking over a waking Gittes. In the latter half of the narrative Mulwray trusts Jake, and the two work together to defeat Cross—there is a new state of being, that leads inexorably to the climax. In *Broken Flowers*, Don sleeps on the airplane, his romantic life flashing before his eyes, before he returns to the road to continue his journey.

### **2.3 Obstacles & Escalation #3**

The character continues to *pursue their goal*, but faces *obstacles of greater force* than in section 2.2. In *A Prophet*, El Djebena goes into business on his own behind Luciani's back, but a drug deal goes wrong when his partner is ambushed. In *Fish Tank*, Mia gets closer to Connor, but her mum threatens to send her away. In *Chinatown*, Gittes discovers the Mar Vista old people's home and its link to the Albacore club, but is apprehended by Mulverhill, and shot at by Cross's goons. In *Broken Flowers*, Don visits Carmen, his third significant ex, but finds her changed and oddly hostile, and she refuses to spend time with him.

### **2.4 Obstacles & Escalation #4, Turning Point #2**

The protagonist continues to *pursue their goal*, but faces *the most powerful obstacles* of the second act. Often a profound discovery pushes the narrative towards the confrontational third act. In *A Prophet*, El Djebena goes to meet with Brahim Lattiche, but Lattiche suspects he's double-crossing them, and they are

almost killed in a car crash. In *Fish Tank*, Mia succeeds in attracting Connor, but once they've had sex he flees. In *Chinatown*, Gittes is implicated in the death of Ida Sessions, and in order to prove his innocence he must hand over Evelyn, believing her responsible for her husband's murder... only to find, shockingly, the far more terrible secret of her incestuous relationship with her father. In *Broken Flowers*, Don meets the most hostile ex yet and is beaten up by her husband, before visiting the grave of the final (deceased) ex.

Many theorists (Yorke, McKee, Lee) point to a crisis or lowest point in the transition from the second to the third act (a lowest point can certainly be seen in *Broken Flowers*, perhaps also a crisis in *Chinatown*), but as Gulino points out this is by no means universal—he prescribes instead viewing this point in the narrative as a significant redefinition of the active goal (17). In some cases the goal is completely resolved (*Poltergeist* [1982], *Lady Bird* [2017]), leading to a new third act goal (in accordance with Kristin Thompson's four-part model).

The second *turning point* then, be it a crisis, a lowest point, a resolution or redefinition of the active goal, functions to push or 'turn' the protagonist towards the final confrontation with the chief form of antagonism, and the dramatic climax, which will in turn resolve the active goal.

## ACT THREE

### 3.1 Movement Towards Confrontation

The character *prepares for confrontation*. They may physically journey towards or continue to search for the chief antagonist, they may prepare for battle by arming themselves or planning with allies, or they may, feeling defeated, find a final piece of information or knowledge or aid that propels them toward the confrontation.

In *A Prophet*, El Djebena is given an almost impossible job by Luciani—kill crime boss Jackie Marcaggi—and he resolves to use it as the opportunity to seize power from the Corsicans, triggering preparations with his partner for an audacious and extremely dangerous double-cross. In *Fish Tank*, Mia pursues the disappeared Connor, breaking into his house when no-one is home and discovering that he's married with a child. In *Chinatown*, Gittes begins a plan designed to extract Evelyn and Catherine safely from the situation. In *Broken Flowers*, Don returns home and reports on his failure to his friend Winston, fed up and discouraged, but he notices an oddly familiar young man the same age as his hypothetical estranged son.

Usually, some form of extended preparation (sometimes a plot-oriented scheme, sometimes a character-oriented emotional digestion of the events of act two) is needed to bring the character to the point of confrontation.

### **3.2 Dramatic Climax, Resolution**

The character confronts their chief form of antagonism in the *dramatic climax*, and either defeats it or is defeated by it, leading to *resolution* of the active goal. In *A Prophet*, El Djebena kills Luciani's men but spares Marcaggi and steals Luciani's power in the process, freeing himself from Luciani's control. In *Fish Tank*, Mia kidnaps Connor's daughter and, in a potentially tragic accident, almost drowns her. In *Chinatown*, Jake journeys to the dreaded titular district with Noah Cross, hoping to aid Evelyn's escape—but Escobar intervenes. In *Broken Flowers*, Don approaches the strangely familiar young man, playing a fatherly role, the role he's been running from his whole life.

The confrontation leads to the resolution of the goal. In *A Prophet*, El Djebena usurps Luciani and is released from prison, an established and powerful figure with

his own organisation. In *Fish Tank*, Mia returns Connor's daughter to her home before leaving her abusive mum to start a new life. In *Chinatown*, Jake solves his act two goal (discovering who was behind Mulwray's murder and why) before the third act, and his goal shifts: to get Evelyn and Catherine to safety. He fails: Evelyn is killed, providing a negative resolution. In *Broken Flowers*, Don's goal throughout act two has been to discover who sent him the letters. He fails, and returns home none the wiser, but sees the young man, and a new act three goal emerges: to discover if the young man is his son. But Don unsettles the young man and he flees. We never get a definitive answer on who the young man is. Don sees a passing car containing another young man who stares out of the window at him, and who bears an even more obvious similarity to Don than the initial young man, putting us into even deeper doubt. But this is not a lack of resolution: Don fails to find any definitive answer, providing a negative resolution to his goal.

## **2.12 Dominance of Conventional Monoplot**

The Conventional Monoplot model, formed by merging the theory contained within the most influential screenwriting handbooks, with its roots in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's theory of the 'Classical Hollywood Narrative', informed by the development of the cinematic form from single reel films as traced by Gulino, impacted by Aristotelian three-act structure brought to Hollywood by playwrights after the advent of sync sound, shaped subsequently by cinema's own development as a distinct form and the story models propagated by the likes of Field and Vogler, can be observed, in whole or in large part, in an extraordinarily broad cross-section of films—not just mainstream Hollywood cinema, but independent and arthouse cinema, and although perhaps more pervasive in American film the model is clearly

dominant in anglophone cinema more broadly, and, although it is beyond the scope of this project to investigate its dominance in other international cinemas, it can clearly be observed across national boundaries, as several of the examples cited in this project attest. It offers an often effective, replicable story model which screenwriters can use to shape their ideas into commercially viable properties, and, as is evidenced by the examples cited to demonstrate the Conventional Monoplot in practice, can lead to screen works of exceptional quality.

The problem with the Conventional Monoplot model however, as initially outlined in chapter one, is that through a process of solidification, attributable in part, this project argues, to the rise of the handbook models in the aftermath of the New Hollywood period and the role they came to play in an increasingly corporatized American film industry, Conventional Monoplot has come to dominate film culture, particularly mainstream American film culture, delegitimising unconventional forms and forcing them to the fringe, deifying one particular story form above all others—a restorative form rooted in deterministic comfort, and suitable only for telling particular types of stories with particular meanings. A wide landscape of industrial, economic, artistic and cultural factors contributed to the development of the Classical Hollywood Narrative, and undoubtedly wider cultural developments and the rise of counterculture in the 1960s and 70s enabled and drove the emergence of the New Hollywood movement, with its appropriation of the traits and techniques of international art cinema, which challenged and augmented the proclivities typical in American filmmaking. The commercial success and cultural centrality of the unconventional films of that era should be understood within the context of broader sociological and cultural shifts. This project is limited to scrutinising the way in which the film industry and the modern screenwriting handbooks shaped the Classical



Hollywood Narrative into the Conventional Monoplot during a period of increased conservatism and corporatization immediately following the New Hollywood era up to the present day; the way in which the handbooks both respond to and concretize that development; and the effect this has had on wider film culture and, specifically, the culture of the screenplay as it relates to the working screenwriter. The following chapter offers data to support this project's contention that the rise of Conventional Monoplot has had a conventionalisation effect on mainstream film culture, contributing to homogeneity of meaning and a decrease in both narrative sophistication and critical esteem.

### 3. The Conventionalisation Effect

#### 3.1 The Impact of Conventional Monoplot

Widespread application of the handbook models within the film industry, particularly those of Field and Vogler, is well-documented (see: Macdonald, 2013; Parker, 2003; Conor, 2014), as is their ubiquity as key texts in higher education around the screenplay. Indeed, this latter is an arguable necessity: if an instructor is tasked with populating a reading list for a practice-oriented screenwriting course there are few options beyond the handbooks: canonical texts on dramatic narratives are rooted in writing for the stage; narratological theory is rooted in prose fiction and oral storytelling traditions; other screen theory, such as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's work on the Classical Hollywood Narrative, approaches films as complete artworks, with limited focus on the screenplay in isolation. Texts in the emerging screenwriting studies field examine the screenplay as a site of art practice and cultural significance, but those which explore the craft skills of the screenwriter from a creative writing standpoint are quite limited—Gulino, Aronson, and Batty and Waldeback (2012) being of particular note. Furthermore, if screenwriting courses are in part intended to prepare students for industry, then the ubiquity of texts like *Screenplay*, *The Writer's Journey* and *Story* within industry make them hard to ignore.

The impact of their prominence is less examined. How, indeed, can such an impact *be* examined? This chapter attempts to demonstrate a correlation between the emergence of the handbooks and a corresponding movement within American mainstream cinema towards a striking homogeneity of story form, and although the role of the handbooks within that movement is difficult to quantify this project argues

that they can be seen as an important component within a broader cultural shift. This chapter will also put forth data suggesting that films which avoid or divert from the Conventional Monoplot model, quite against the arguments found within the handbooks and covered in the previous chapters, can not only be artistically and commercially successful but in fact account for some of the cinematic canon's most lauded and highly regarded texts as well as some of the highest grossing films of their eras. This chapter then provides a counter-argument to the handbooks' assertion that Conventional Monoplot is a necessary choice when crafting films for large audiences—rather, it will be argued, this is a cultural and stylistic choice, and perhaps a broader economic choice related not to the ability of an unconventionally structured film to reach and satisfy a wide audience but rather on its suitability for wide-scale product differentiation in accordance with the more horizontally integrated business model developed in the 1980s and 1990s. It will also put forth data suggesting that the move toward conventional story shape within American cinema has resulted in a significant reduction in critical esteem, evidenced by the fact that post-handbook cinema, in contrast to previous eras, has been unable to make an impact on the cinematic canon. Finally, data will be put forth showing that the link between high-grossing features and the Academy's Best Picture Award has been erased in recent decades, further highlighting a reduction in critical esteem for high-grossing cinema in the post-handbook period.

### **3.2 *Sight and Sound* Poll Data**

Cook describes the British Film Institute as 'one of the foremost agencies for moving image culture and education in Britain and the world' (2008: 142), outlining its influence on the development of screen studies, its role in producing and fostering

screen scholarship through BFI Publishing, and its subsequent repositioning as the primary body in charge of awarding development funding for emerging screen artists after the closure of the UK Film Council in 2011. As an institution, the BFI 'possesses a wealth of "cultural capital" that feeds into the national economy in myriad ways' (Cook: 143), has undoubtedly played a pivotal role in the development of screen scholarship, and continues to shape British cinema through its various funding schemes. Its flagship magazine, *Sight and Sound*, first published in 1932, was 'mainly devoted to the cause of promoting education through film' (Nowell-Smith, 2012: 237) in its early days but as time went on 'the focus of the magazine shifted towards the development of cinema as an art form' (238). Implicitly political, the magazine championed the international art film movement that began to emerge in the late 1950s (243), and under the editorship of Tom Milne it began to shift from an initial focus on a quite limited range of sober filmmaking to encompass a broader focus (245), embracing the various new waves which emerged around Europe and elsewhere from the 60s on, and by the latter 60s was 'dominant in the marketplace' (246). In the 1990s it merged with BFI's *Monthly Film Bulletin*, shifting from a quarterly to a monthly publication and incorporating reviews, synopses and full credits of all films released, taking the form it holds today. In 1952 it conducted its first critics' poll of the greatest films ever made, initiating a tradition that would be continued each decade, with a directors' poll being added in 1992, ultimately creating what amounts to the most substantive and convincing consensus on a cinematic canon in existence. The 2012 critics' poll (BFI, n.d.) surveyed 846 critics, academics, programmers and distributors, whilst the 2012 directors' poll surveyed 358 directors and filmmakers (see fig 1.1).

The polls are not without their critics (Gleberman, 2012; Comiskey & Horwitz, 2012; Emerson, 2012) but represent as convincing a survey of critical and directorial appraisal as exists, with the 2012 poll particularly convincing, featuring a far larger respondent sample than previous years, specifically recalibrated for a greater diversity of respondents (James, 2020). Critics of the polls have suggested that relatively minor shifts in vote tallies can be over-interpreted (see: Comiskey and Horwitz, 2012), and such criticisms are not unreasonable. What can be said is that the polls represent a convincing conglomeration of critical consensus and peer esteem, with a broad sample size and historic consistency, whilst remaining subject to the flaws and blind spots inherent in any such survey of qualitative opinion and the translation of qualitative opinion into statistical output. *Sight and Sound's* historical role as a champion of art-cinema and its contributors' affiliations with academia suggest a tendency toward sobriety, and indeed the most common criticism of the polls is their blind spot for comedies, however this also suggests a tendency and a capability for respondents to look beyond the familiar, the popular, the recent and the anglophone. It would seem reasonable to conclude that the BFI polls are reliable markers of artistic merit to the extent that any kind of artistic canon can be seen as such.

By separating those American and British films from those films from other territories (in order to limit the scope of this inquiry) and separating those American and British films by decade, the polls reveal that American and British films from the period 1960-1979 are held in particularly high regard, whilst films from the period 1980-present are held in considerably lower regard, with only three US or UK features released after 1986 appearing across the two polls. In the 2012 critics' poll, American films pre-1960 feature 22 times (see fig 1.2). There are three British films

from the pre-1960 period—*The Third Man* (1949), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943). American films released between 1960-1979 feature 11 times; one British film from this period is featured (*Lawrence of Arabia*). From the period 1980-present, there are four American features: three of these (*Raging Bull*, *Blade Runner* and *Blue Velvet*) were released between 1980-1986. The only American feature released since 1986 to feature in the list is David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001). No British films from the post-1979 period feature.

In the top 50, nine pre-1960 American features appear, whilst American films of the period 1960-1979 feature six times: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) [6<sup>th</sup>], *Apocalypse Now* (1979) [14<sup>th</sup>], *The Godfather: Part I* (1972) [21<sup>st</sup>], *The Godfather: Part II* (1974) [=31<sup>st</sup>], *Taxi Driver* (1976) [=31<sup>st</sup>], and *Psycho* (1960) [35<sup>th</sup>]. From the period 1980-present, only *Mulholland Drive* (2001) [28<sup>th</sup>] features. No British films feature in the top 50.

In the Directors' Top 100, opinion slants far more heavily toward films from the 1960-1979 period. American films pre-1960 feature 14 times. American films of the period 1960-1979 feature 21 times (including one US/Italy co-production), with ten appearing in the top 50, four of those in the top 10: *2001: A Space Odyssey* [2<sup>nd</sup>], *Taxi Driver* [5<sup>th</sup>], *Apocalypse Now* [6<sup>th</sup>], *The Godfather: Part I* [7<sup>th</sup>], *Barry Lyndon* [19<sup>th</sup>], *The Godfather: Part II* [30<sup>th</sup>=], *Once Upon A Time In The West* (1968) [44<sup>th</sup>=], *The Apartment* (1960) [44<sup>th</sup>=], *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* [48<sup>th</sup>=] and *Psycho* [48<sup>th</sup>=]. Seven American features from the period 1980-present appear—again, *Raging Bull*, *Blade Runner*, *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive*, with the addition of *The Shining* (1980), *Goodfellas* (1990) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007) . Two of those (*Raging Bull* and *Goodfellas*) appear in the top 50. Five British films appear in

the top 100, all from the period 1960-1979, with one (*Lawrence of Arabia*) appearing in the top 50.

### **3.3 Unconventionality & Critical Appraisal**

This chapter asks why features from the period 1960-1979 are held in higher regard than those from other eras, particularly from 1980 onwards. What is common between these features from the New Hollywood period, that feature so prominently in these lists? Ross (2011) describes the impact of the end of the studio system and the subsequent rise of counterculture during the 1960s, creating 'a sceptical, inquisitive perspective that seeped into unprecedentedly open studios that found themselves rudderless after the demise of the old system' (105). Previously tightly controlled modes of production run by 'charismatic moguls such as Daryl Zanuck, Spyros Skouras and Jack Warner' (105) crumbled, clearing the way for convention-challenging filmmakers influenced by the European movements of the French new wave and Italian neo-realism to produce significant and unusual features like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969). According to Ross, 'audiences responded to these movies not only in appreciation of their aesthetic quality, but also because they felt stimulated and challenged by the direction of the cinematic narrative', and their success paved the way for other directors of the New Hollywood period (Coppola, Lucas, de Palma, Scorsese, Friedkin, Spielberg) who would go on to create 'critically acclaimed movies that were also commercially successful' (2011: 105). Ross also identifies the link between the post-1979 movement away from unconventionality and the rise of the handbooks: 'Many studios today rely on the prescriptions of so-called script "gurus" like Robert McKee, Linda Seger and Syd Field to give executives, who often have limited or no literary background, an insight

**Figure 1.1 Sight & Sound's Top 100 Critics and Directors Polls 2012**

	2012 critics' poll		2012 directors' poll
1 <sup>st</sup>	Vertigo (1958)	1 <sup>st</sup>	Tokyo Story (1953)
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Citizen Kane (1941)	2 <sup>nd</sup>	<b>2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Tokyo Story (1953)	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Citizen Kane (1941)
4 <sup>th</sup>	La Regle de jeu (1939)	4 <sup>th</sup>	8½ (1963)
5 <sup>th</sup>	Sunrise (1927)	5 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Taxi Driver (1976)</b>
6 <sup>th</sup>	<b>2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)</b>	6 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Apocalypse Now! (1979)</b>
7 <sup>th</sup>	The Searchers (1956)	7 <sup>th</sup>	Vertigo (1958)
8 <sup>th</sup>	Man With A Movie Camera (1929)	7 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>The Godfather: Part I (1972)</b>
9 <sup>th</sup>	The Passion of Joan of Arc (1927)	9 <sup>th</sup>	Mirror (1974)
10 <sup>th</sup>	8½ (1963)	10 <sup>th</sup>	The Bicycle Thieves (1948)
11 <sup>th</sup>	Battleship Potemkin (1925)	11 <sup>th</sup>	Breathless (1960)
12 <sup>th</sup>	L'Atalante (1934)	12 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Raging Bull (1980)</b>
13 <sup>th</sup>	Breathless (1960)	13 <sup>th</sup>	Persona (1966)
14 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Apocalypse Now (1979)</b>	13 <sup>th</sup> =	The 400 Blows (1959)
15 <sup>th</sup>	Late Spring (1949)	13 <sup>th</sup> =	Andrei Rublev (1966)
16 <sup>th</sup>	Au Hasard Balthazar (1966)	16 <sup>th</sup>	Fanny & Alexander (1984)
17 <sup>th</sup> =	Seven Samurai (1954)	17 <sup>th</sup>	Seven Samurai (1954)
17 <sup>th</sup> =	Persona (1966)	18 <sup>th</sup>	Rashomon (1950)
19 <sup>th</sup>	Mirror (1974)	19 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Barry Lyndon (1975)</b>
20 <sup>th</sup>	Singin' in the Rain (1951)	19 <sup>th</sup> =	Ordet (1955)
21 <sup>st</sup>	L'Avventura (1960)	21 <sup>st</sup>	Au Hasard Balthazar (1966)
21 <sup>st</sup> =	<b>The Godfather: Part I (1972)</b>	22 <sup>nd</sup>	Modern Times (1936)
21 <sup>st</sup> =	Le mépris (1963)	22 <sup>nd</sup> =	L'Atalante (1934)
24 <sup>th</sup>	Rashomon (1950)	22 <sup>nd</sup> =	Sunrise (1927)
24 <sup>th</sup> =	Ordet (1955)	22 <sup>nd</sup> =	La Regle de jeu (1939)
24 <sup>th</sup> =	In The Mood For Love (2000)	26 <sup>th</sup>	Touch of Evil (1956)
27 <sup>th</sup>	Andrei Rublev (1966)	26 <sup>th</sup>	The Night of the Hunter (1955)
28 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Mulholland Drive (2001)</b>	26 <sup>th</sup>	The Battle of Algiers (1966)
29 <sup>th</sup>	Stalker (1979)	26 <sup>th</sup>	La strada (1954)
29 <sup>th</sup> =	Shoah (1985)	30 <sup>th</sup> =	Stalker (1979)
31 <sup>st</sup>	<b>Taxi Driver (1976)</b>	30 <sup>th</sup> =	City Lights (1931)
31 <sup>nd</sup> =	<b>The Godfather part II (1974)</b>	30 <sup>th</sup> =	L'Avventura (1960)
33 <sup>rd</sup>	The Bicycle Thieves (1948)	30 <sup>th</sup> =	Amarcord (1972)
34 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Psycho (1960)</b>	30 <sup>th</sup> =	The Gospel According to St Matthew (1964)
34 <sup>th</sup> =	The General (1926)	30 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>The Godfather: Part II (1974)</b>
36 <sup>th</sup>	Satantango (1994)	30 <sup>th</sup> =	Come and See (1985)
36 <sup>th</sup> =	Metropolis (1927)	37 <sup>th</sup> =	Close Up (1989)
36 <sup>th</sup> =	Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975)	37 <sup>th</sup> =	Some Like It Hot (1959)
39 <sup>th</sup>	La dolce vita (1960)	37 <sup>th</sup> =	La dolce vita (1960)
39 <sup>th</sup> =	The 400 Blows (1959)	37 <sup>th</sup> =	Passion of Joan of Arc (1927)
41 <sup>st</sup>	Pather Panchali (1955)	37 <sup>th</sup> =	Playtime (1967)
41 <sup>nd</sup> =	Journey to Italy (1954)	37 <sup>th</sup> =	A Man Escaped (1956)
43 <sup>rd</sup>	Pierrot le Fou (1965)	37 <sup>th</sup> =	Viridiana (1961)
43 <sup>th</sup> =	Close Up (1989)	44 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Once Upon A Time In The West (1968)*</b>
43 <sup>th</sup> =	Some Like It Hot (1959)	44 <sup>th</sup> =	Le mépris (1963)
43 <sup>th</sup> =	Playtime (1967)	44 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>The Apartment (1960)</b>
43 <sup>th</sup> =	Gertrud (1964)	44 <sup>th</sup> =	Hour of the Wolf (1968)
48 <sup>th</sup>	Histoire(s) du cinema	48 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)</b>
48 <sup>th</sup>	The Battle of Algiers (1966)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	The Searchers (1956)



50 <sup>th</sup>	City Lights (1931)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Psycho (1960)</b>
50 <sup>th</sup>	Ugetsu Monogatari (1953)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	Man with a Movie Camera (1929)
50 <sup>th</sup>	La Jetée (1962)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	Shoah (1985)
53 <sup>rd</sup> =	North by Northwest (1959)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	Lawrence of Arabia (1962)*
53 <sup>rd</sup> =	Rear Window (1954)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	L'eclisse (1962)
53 <sup>rd</sup> =	<b>Raging Bull (1980)</b>	48 <sup>th</sup> =	Pickpocket (1959)
56 <sup>th</sup>	M (1931)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	Pather Panchali (1955)
57 <sup>th</sup>	The Leopard (1963)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	Rear Window (1954)
57 <sup>th</sup>	Touch of Evil (1958)	48 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Goodfellas (1990)</b>
59 <sup>th</sup> =	Sherlock Jr (1924)	59 <sup>th</sup> =	Blow Up (1966)*
59 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Barry Lyndon (1975)</b>	59 <sup>th</sup> =	Conformist, The (1970)
59 <sup>th</sup> =	La Maman et la putain (1973)	59 <sup>th</sup> =	Aguirre, Wrath of God (1972)
59 <sup>th</sup> =	Sansho Dayu (1954)	59 <sup>th</sup> =	Gertrud (1964)
63 <sup>rd</sup> =	Wild Strawberries (1957)	59 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>A Woman Under the Influence (1974)</b>
63 <sup>rd</sup> =	Modern Times (1936)	59 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)</b>
63 <sup>rd</sup> =	Sunset Blvd. (1950)	59 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Blue Velvet (1986)</b>
63 <sup>rd</sup> =	The Night of the Hunter (1955)	59 <sup>th</sup> =	La grande illusion (1937)
63 <sup>rd</sup> =	Pickpocket (1959)	67 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Badlands (1973)</b>
63 <sup>rd</sup> =	Rio Bravo (1958)	67 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Blade Runner (1982)</b>
69 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Blade Runner (1982)</b>	67 <sup>th</sup> =	Sunset Blvd. (1950)
69 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Blue Velvet (1986)</b>	67 <sup>th</sup> =	Ugetsu Monogatari (1953)
69 <sup>th</sup> =	Sans Soleil (1982)	67 <sup>th</sup> =	Singin' in the Rain (1951)
69 <sup>th</sup> =	A Man Escaped (1956)	67 <sup>th</sup> =	In The Mood For Love (2000)
73 <sup>rd</sup> =	The Third Man (1949)*	67 <sup>th</sup> =	Journey to Italy (1954)
73 <sup>rd</sup> =	L'eclisse (1962)	67 <sup>th</sup> =	Vivre Sa Vie (1962)
73 <sup>rd</sup> =	Les enfants du paradis (1945)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	The Seventh Seal(1957)
73 <sup>rd</sup> =	La grande illusion (1937)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	Hidden (2004)
73 <sup>rd</sup> =	<b>Nashville (1975)</b>	75 <sup>th</sup> =	Battleship Potemkin (1925)
78 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Chinatown (1974)</b>	75 <sup>th</sup> =	M (1931)
78 <sup>th</sup> =	Beau Travail (1998)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>There Will Be Blood (2007)</b>
78 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)</b>	75 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>The Shining (1980)</b>
81 <sup>st</sup> =	The Magnificent Ambersons (1942)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	The General (1926)
81 <sup>st</sup> =	Lawrence of Arabia (1962)*	75 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Mulholland Dr (2001)</b>
81 <sup>st</sup> =	The Spirit of the Beehive (1973)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	A Clockwork Orange (1971)*
84 <sup>th</sup> =	Fanny and Alexander (1984)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	Fear Eats the Soul (1974)
84 <sup>th</sup> =	Casablanca (1942)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	Kes (1969)*
84 <sup>th</sup> =	The Colour of Pomegranates (1968)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Husbands (1970)</b>
84 <sup>th</sup> =	Greed (1925)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>The Wild Bunch (1969)</b>
84 <sup>th</sup> =	A Brighter Summer Day (1991)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	Salo, or The 120 Days of Sodom (1975)
84 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>The Wild Bunch (1969)</b>	75 <sup>th</sup> =	<b>Jaws (1975)</b>
90 <sup>th</sup> =	Partie de campagne (1936)	75 <sup>th</sup> =	Los Olvidados (1950)
90 <sup>th</sup> =	Aguirre, Wrath of God (1972)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	Pierrot le Fou (1965)
90 <sup>th</sup> =	A Matter of Life and Death (1946)*	91 <sup>st</sup> =	Un chien andalou (1928)
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	The Seventh Seal (1957)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	<b>Chinatown (1974)</b>
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	Un chien andalou (1928)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	La Maman et la putain (1973)
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	Intolerance (1916)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	Beau Travail (1998)
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	A One and a Two (1999)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	<b>Opening Night (1977)</b>
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (1943)*	91 <sup>st</sup> =	The Gold Rush (1925)
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	Touki Bouki (1973)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	Zero de Conduite (1933)
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	Fear Eats the Soul (1974)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	<b>The Deer Hunter (1977)</b>
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	Imitation of Life (1959)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	L'argent (1983)
93 <sup>rd</sup> =	Madame de... (1953)	91 <sup>st</sup> =	<b>The Killing of a Chinese Bookie (1976)</b>
		91 <sup>st</sup> =	Sans Soleil (1982)
		91 <sup>st</sup> =	Don't Look Now (1973)*
		91 <sup>st</sup> =	I am Cuba (1964)
		91 <sup>st</sup> =	Last Year At Marienbad (1961)
		91 <sup>st</sup> =	Le Samourai (1967)

American films released after 1959 highlighted in bold.

\* UK films

\*\* US/Italy co-production

**Figure 1.2 American and British films featured in *Sight & Sound's* Top 100 Critics Poll**

US & UK films pre-1960	US & UK films 1960-1979	US & UK films 1980-present
<i>Vertigo</i> (1958)	<i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (1968)	<i>Mulholland Drive</i> (2001)
<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)	<i>Apocalypse Now</i> (1979)	<i>Raging Bull</i> (1980)
<i>Sunrise</i> (1927)	<i>The Godfather: Part I</i> (1972)	<i>Blade Runner</i> (1982)
<i>The Searchers</i> (1956)	<i>Taxi Driver</i> (1976)	<i>Blue Velvet</i> (1986)
<i>Singin' in the Rain</i> (1951)	<i>The Godfather part II</i> (1974)	
<i>The General</i> (1926)	<i>Psycho</i> (1960)	
<i>Metropolis</i> (1927)	<i>Barry Lyndon</i> (1975)	
<i>Some Like It Hot</i> (1959)	<i>Nashville</i> (1975)	
<i>City Lights</i> (1931)	<i>Chinatown</i> (1974)	
<i>North by Northwest</i> (1959)	<i>Once Upon a Time in the West</i> (1968) *	
<i>Rear Window</i> (1954)	<i>Lawrence of Arabia</i> (1962)	
<i>Touch of Evil</i> (1958)	<i>The Wild Bunch</i> (1969)	
<i>Sherlock Jr</i> (1924)		
<i>Modern Times</i> (1936)		
<i>Sunset Blvd.</i> (1950)		
<i>The Night of the Hunter</i> (1955)		
<i>Rio Bravo</i> (1958)		
<i>The Third Man</i> (1949)		
<i>The Magnificent Ambersons</i> (1942)		
<i>Casablanca</i> (1942)		
<i>Greed</i> (1925)		
<i>A Matter of Life and Death</i> (1946)		
<i>Intolerance</i> (1916)		
<i>The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp</i> (1943)		
<i>Imitation of Life</i> (1959)		

\* US/Italy co-production

**Figure 1.3 American and British films featured in *Sight & Sound's* Top 100 Directors' Poll**

US & UK films pre-1960	US & UK films 1960-1979	US & UK films 1980-present
<i>Citizen Kane</i> (1941)	<i>2001: A Space Odyssey</i> (1968)	<i>Raging Bull</i> (1980)
<i>Vertigo</i> (1958)	<i>Taxi Driver</i> (1976)	<i>Mulholland Drive</i> (2001)
<i>Modern Times</i> (1936)	<i>Apocalypse Now</i> (1979)	<i>Blade Runner</i> (1982)
<i>The Searchers</i> (1956) <i>Sunrise</i> (1927)	<i>The Godfather: Part I</i> (1972)	<i>Blue Velvet</i> (1986)
<i>Singin' in the Rain</i> (1951) <i>Touch of Evil</i> (1958)	<i>Barry Lyndon</i> (1975)	<i>The Shining</i> (1980)
<i>The General</i> (1926) <i>The Night of the Hunter</i> (1955)	<i>The Godfather part II</i> (1974)	<i>Goodfellas</i> (1990)
<i>Metropolis</i> (1927) <i>City Lights</i> (1931)	<i>Once Upon A Time In The West</i> (1968)*	<i>There Will Be Blood</i> (2007)
<i>Some Like It Hot</i> (1959)	<i>The Apartment</i> (1960)	
<i>The Searchers</i> (1956)	<i>One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest</i> (1975)	
<i>North by Northwest</i> (1959) <i>Rear Window</i> (1954)	<i>Psycho</i> (1960)	
<i>Sunset Blvd.</i> (1950)	<i>Lawrence of Arabia</i> (1962)	
<i>Singin' in the Rain</i> (1951)	<i>Don't Look Now</i> (1973)	
<i>The General</i> (1926)	<i>Blow Up</i> (1966)	
	<i>A Woman Under the Influence</i> (1974)	
	<i>The Good, the Bad and the Ugly</i> (1966)	
	<i>The Killing of a Chinese Bookie</i> (1976)	
	<i>Badlands</i> (1973)	
	<i>The Deer Hunter</i> (1977)	
	<i>Opening Night</i> (1977)	
	<i>A Clockwork Orange</i> (1971)	
	<i>Kes</i> (1969)	
	<i>Husbands</i> (1970)	
	<i>The Wild Bunch</i> (1969)	
	<i>Jaws</i> (1975)	
	<i>Chinatown</i> (1974)	

into what they presume will impress at the box office. The result is a perpetuating framework of rules established by the studios to which writers must adhere' (2011: 102). As Ross correctly notes, 'none of these gurus has ever written a movie screenplay that has been produced' (103), and yet those screenwriters and filmmakers who ignore the rules 'risk being ignored, shunned and penalized' (102). The handbooks, he argues, 'have become detrimental to the development of a writer's voice' (102).

It is noteworthy that of those directors whose films appear most prominently across the *Sight and Sound* polls, particularly in the directors' poll, many are amongst the most unconventional of their eras: David Lynch appears twice in both polls, John Cassavetes appears four times in the directors' poll, and Stanley Kubrick appears twice in the critics' poll (including the 6<sup>th</sup> ranked feature) and four times in the directors' poll (including the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> ranked features). All are notable for breaking narrative conventions. Martin Scorsese (three films in the directors' poll including the 5<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> ranked features, two films in the critics' poll) is also notable for challenging conventions, including structural conventions and the use of moral ambiguity. In fact, the majority of the post-1959 US & UK features in both polls feature significant innovation at the level of the script, innovations that counter the conventional diktat of the handbook authors and the Conventional Monoplot form. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, one of the most unconventional feature films of its era or any other era, counters several structural conventions: the film's most prominent character, Dr Dave Bowman, is not introduced for 51 minutes, countering Blake Snyder's (2005) claim that good movies introduce all major characters in the first ten minutes; the narrative is split into four segments, fitting the model noticed by Kristin Thompson, but with no clear protagonist in the first section, and a protagonist in the

second section who disappears from the narrative at the section's close; the iconoclastic final section provides the most suggestive and oblique of endings, offering little in the way of conventional resolution. As previously mentioned, Yorke and McKee claim that all 'good' films focus on protagonists who change—but *Taxi Driver* features a protagonist, Travis Bickle, who, in the screenwriter's own words, is not changed but rather revealed (2002: viii). *Psycho*'s famous plot schism—the midpoint killing of Marion Crane—defies McKee's and Yorke's idea that the protagonist must remain to the dramatic climax, as well as the idea, supported by Mamet, Yorke, McKee, Field, Vogler et al, that successful drama focuses on a single protagonist with a single goal—as Hitchcock demonstrated, this is convention, not necessity, killing his protagonist at the midpoint and presenting to the audience a succession of replacement protagonists (and as Linda Aronson has demonstrated, multiple protagonist options abound).

*Apocalypse Now*, *Chinatown* and *The Godfather: Parts I & II* are more conventional genre urtexts: the highest level of achievement, the critical & directorial community seems to agree, within the war and crime genres respectively, and high on the technical brilliance that seems common across the cohort. They are less dynamically innovative on a structural level, but nonetheless feature lower level forms of innovation, most notably in moral ambiguity, the heroes of each demonstrating morally questionable behaviour which challenges audience sympathy, and suggesting a more nuanced worldview in which people are not simply good or bad but varying degrees of both—an approach also taken in *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Once Upon A Time In The West*, and in several of the films from the 1980s & 1990s that feature in the polls: *Raging Bull*, *Blade Runner* and *Goodfellas*. When less obviously iconoclastic features approach the critically-revered cohort, moral

ambiguity is usually apparent—in this way, these texts seem to question the veracity of their own genre whilst succeeding within it, questioning of form being another key feature of the cohort. *Blade Runner* (1982), in addition, challenges the conventional idea of resolution, which Kristin Thompson states is almost always present, with its famously unresolved, suggestive ending—an approach also notable in Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*. *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* features an atypical protagonist 'constantly distracted from [his] objective' (Gulino: 158), markedly different to the wilful, goal-pursuing protagonist described by McKee, Mamet, Yorke and Vogler, resulting in what Gulino calls 'muted' (158) dramatic tension. *Mulholland Drive* features a non-linear modular narrative that plays with temporality and character identity. *Nashville* (1975) contains a multiple protagonist narrative, what Aronson calls a 'tandem narrative' (188).

It would be reasonable to conclude, then, that far from compromising the quality of a potentially 'good' screenplay and rendering it 'bad', as the discourse of the handbooks tends to claim, well-deployed schisms from the Conventional Monoplot model—even strikingly radical schisms—feature prominently in some of the most highly revered film narratives in the cinematic canon. In that light, Ross's description of the handbooks as a perpetuating framework of detrimental rules, Batty's description of them as restrictive (2016: 60), and Connor's description of them as revoking and containing alternative approaches (2014: 97) take on great significance. The handbooks, it would seem, actively prevent a key aspect of excellence in the screenplay.

It is possible to criticise the polls for bias towards cinematic antiquity, and to explain the failure of post-1980s cinema to make an impact through its relative newness; that 'we need time to judge whether a great movie truly deserves to be

called a classic' and that 'a true classic reveals itself when it survives 20, 30, or 40 years and still manages to resonate deeper than most other films' (Huls, 2012: 6<sup>th</sup> para). However this only seems to apply to movies that come after that 1980 watershed, whilst those that came before were able to displace films from previous decades within a decade or so of their release. *Citizen Kane* topped the poll in 1962, and, according to Nick James, *Sight and Sound's* editor from 1997 to 2019, Welles' film may well have topped the 1952 poll too, 11 years after its release, if WW2 had not prevented many European critics from seeing it (James, 2020). *Ugetsu* (1953) appears in the 1962 top ten, nine years after its release, whilst *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) topped the 1952 poll a mere four years after its release ahead of films like *Intolerance* (1916), *The Gold Rush* (1925) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) which had had a quarter of a century or more to solidify their standing within cinema's developing canon. *8 ½* (1963) appears in the 1972 top ten, nine years after its release, as do *Wild Strawberries* (1957) fifteen years after release, and *Persona* (1966) eight years after release. *L'avventura* (1959) appears in the 1972 top ten, but more strikingly came second in the 1962 poll 'scarcely a year after its European release' (Comiskey and Horwitz, 2012).

This seems logical: as a young artform, cinema's lexicon was still developing, and innovative and exceptional film texts of each successive era seemed to make radical and impactful developments to the form, building on the nascent artistry of previous decades. Indeed, going back to the poll's conception, texts released within the two decades of each survey were consistently prominent. Texts from the iconoclastic 1960s and 1970s joined and usurped canonical texts from earlier eras. Texts from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s largely failed to do so. Neither can this be explained by a perceived exclusivity of the poll's respondents: the 2012 poll's 846

contributors were selected with specific deference to ‘the dominance of electronic media’, incorporating ‘a much wider international group of commentators’ that included among them ‘critics who’d established their careers online rather than purely in print’ (James, 2012: 4<sup>th</sup> para). James describes the ideology behind the polls: ‘Canon-forming of this kind is for us not a dusty matter of building statues to the dead but a living form of constant re-assessment that shows us how tastes in film evolve and change almost on a screening by screening basis’ (James, n.d.: 2<sup>nd</sup> para). The polls reveal, however, that films from the post-1980 era, unlike films from previous eras, have been largely unable to impact that re-assessment. The poll’s results, of course, do not imply that films of exceptional quality have not emerged in the past four decades—but they do show that the critical consensus finds the cinema of the past four decades inferior to that which came before, and that the same cannot be said for the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, or, for that matter, for any previous era.

### **3.4 Unconventionality and Box Office**

A common view, often encountered by working screenwriters attempting to find support for unconventional choices in their work, is that more challenging, innovative, expectation-subverting features, those often viewed in high critical regard, such as those that fill the *Sight and Sound* polls, cannot be expected to reach large audiences and must therefore be left to the arthouse. The handbooks support this idea: Field, McKee, Yorke and Vogler all make similar statements that unconventional choices result in a shrinking of audience size, and that if the screenwriter wishes to attract a mainstream audience they must follow the conventional model. Unconventional models like *Taxi Driver*’s unchanged



protagonist and *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest's* distracted protagonist, like *2001: A Space Odyssey's* segmented, unresolved narrative and *Psycho's* midpoint protagonist death, are all well and good, but studios cannot be expected to support such choices if they wish to reach a large audience.

This type of view, consistent across the handbooks, is not borne out by the data—indeed, might reasonably be viewed, through Comolli and Narboni's prism, as a by-product of the dominant ideology which functions to maintain that very dominance. By correlating the *Sight and Sound* polls with American domestic box office statistics it can be shown that not only were more of the cinematic canon's most critically revered films made during the iconoclastic 1960-79 period, but that several of these films, which demonstrate significantly unconventional structural choices, as well as other film texts not featured in the *Sight and Sound* polls but which demonstrate similarly unconventional narrative techniques, were amongst the highest grossing cinematic releases of their era. Unconventionally-shaped narratives, like their conventionally-shaped counterparts, may or may not be successful; they may or may not lead to superlative film texts and those texts of which they form a part may or may not be able to access and satisfy large audiences; however the data shows that unconventionally-shaped narratives, against the restricting dictum propagated by the handbooks, are, like their conventionally-shaped counterparts, a notable feature of high-grossing cinema.

A list of the highest grossing films of the 1960s (see fig 1.4) at the American box office, in unadjusted domestic gross, includes *The Graduate* [2<sup>nd</sup> highest grossing], *2001: A Space Odyssey* [8<sup>th</sup>], *Bonnie & Clyde* [15<sup>th</sup>], *Lawrence of Arabia* [17<sup>th</sup>] and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) [18<sup>th</sup>]. Both *The Graduate* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* were the highest grossing films of their respective years. The 1970s list

features *The Godfather* [6<sup>th</sup>], *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* [15<sup>th</sup>], *Kramer vs Kramer* (1979) [17<sup>th</sup>], *American Graffiti* (1973) [19<sup>th</sup>] and *Apocalypse Now* [25<sup>th</sup>]. These features exhibit several innovative and unconventional facets at script level, the type which often occur in features of the New Hollywood era and whose roots can be traced back to international art cinema movements such as the French new wave and Italian neo-realism: *The Graduate* and *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* feature goal de-emphasis and two different forms of passive protagonist; *Bonnie & Clyde*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Kramer vs Kramer* focus on morally ambiguous characters; *American Graffiti* features goal de-emphasis in a multiple protagonist coming-of-age narrative; *2001: A Space Odyssey*, as already noted, is one of the most unconventional American features to reach a wide audience. In short, a significant number of the highest grossing films from both decades feature unconventional elements at the script level, elements which contradict or reframe aspects of the Conventional Monoplot, with 10% of the features (four out of forty) appearing in the two *Sight and Sound* polls (*2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Godfather: part I*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) and all four of those films featuring unconventional elements. According to the data, unconventional films, even radically unconventional films, are not only capable of reaching wide audiences but of cementing positions in the cinematic canon whilst they do it.

The tenor changes markedly after the 1970s. The list of the highest grossing films of the 1980s contains several culturally significant and highly popular texts: *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* (1982) [1<sup>st</sup>], *Star Wars Episode VI* (1983) [2<sup>nd</sup>], *Star Wars Episode V* (Lucas, 1980) [3<sup>rd</sup>], *Back to the Future* (1985) [8<sup>th</sup>], *Tootsie* (1982) [12<sup>th</sup>] and *Rain Man* (1988) [14<sup>th</sup>] being obvious stand-outs. Whilst these films boast

significant qualities, they are also broadly conventional and narratively homogenous. *Rain Man* and *Tootsie* have more complex characters than *Star Wars* or *Back to the Future*, but rigidly conformist plotlines executed to the restorative three-act structure model, and in contrast to the 1960s and 1970s lists, none of the films from the 1980s highest grossing list appears in the *Sight and Sound* polls. It can be said that high-grossing films from the 1980s failed to impact the canon in the way that high-grossing cinema from each previous decade had, demonstrating the beginning of a decoupling of superlative film artistry, as measured by the best metric available, and large audiences. It can also be said that the most widely seen films of the 1980s, in contrast to the most widely seen films of the previous two decades, are broadly conventional and of less-than-canonical quality, whilst the most widely seen films of the 60s and 70s are less conventional and make a greater impact on the cinematic canon, demonstrating a parallel movement towards conventionality and a reduction in critical esteem.

As noted by Dancyger and Rush, without the form-challenging innovation seen in texts such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Graduate* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, what remains is the conventional recitation of inherently comforting restorative three-act stories, and whilst these stories may be highly successful on an individual level (*E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* for example), the dominance of similarly shaped, conventionally-structured film stories and the corresponding movement of unconventionally-shaped stories to the cinematic fringe represents a significant shift away from narrative sophistication and towards both narrative simplicity and homogeneity in screen culture. If, like Comolli and Narboni, we view the conventional storytelling mode as an inherent tool in service of society's dominant ideology, then it could be said that film narratives which employ dissenting

structures have been sidelined, beginning in the 1980s—an era defined in the West by political conservatism (Needham, 2016; Quart, 1993). *ET: The Extra Terrestrial* may or may not be more enjoyable than *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but the significance of *2001* lies in how profoundly it disrupts the soothing, restorative story shape in which *ET* revels, and its success in bringing that alternative story shape to a broad audience, hence challenging the dominant ideology with which restorative stories are enmeshed, not to a minor audience of art-film enthusiasts but to some of the largest audiences of its era. Falkowska (1995) notes that in films of political content, those which explicitly present political discourse, ‘the dominant ideology may be challenged, but it may also be reinforced’ (41), particularly at the level of story shape, noting how Kieslowski’s films challenged the dominant ideology of Socialist Poland at the structural level, whilst Wajda’s more traditionalist films, such as *Man of Iron* (1981), were oppositional in a ‘straightforward’ (45) manner. Kieslowski’s cinema, particularly his striking and unusually-shaped two-act narrative *A Short Film About Killing* (1988), challenged the dominant ideology but, unlike Wajda’s work, required its audience to engage in a different ‘discursive practice’ (47). Pursell (1988) makes a similar point about Kubrick’s two-act narrative in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), calling that structure, with its deliberate denial of closure, a political decision: ‘it is an eschewal of the seductive nostalgia to which that otherwise worthy film, *Platoon*, falls prey. Kubrick is rightly uncompromising over this. A conventional plot with conventional characterisations would simply re-inscribe patriarchal values, as *Platoon* ultimately does... *Platoon* tries; it very honestly presents the war as various kinds of rape, but the effort is re-absorbed into spectacles of heroic patriarchy’ (221), enabled through its adherence to a traditional, restorative structure.

**Fig. 1.4 Highest Grossing Films at American Box Office by Decade, by Unadjusted Domestic Gross**

	<b>1960s</b>	<b>1970s</b>	<b>1980s</b>	<b>1990s</b>	<b>2000s</b>	<b>2010s</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup></b>	The Sound of Music	Star Wars: A New Hope	ET: the Extra Terrestrial	Titanic	Avatar	Star Wars: the Force Awakens
<b>2<sup>nd</sup></b>	The Graduate	Jaws	Star Wars: Return of the Jedi	Star Wars: The Phantom Menace	The Dark Knight	Avengers: Endgame
<b>3<sup>rd</sup></b>	Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid	Grease	Star Wars: the Empire Strikes Back	Jurassic Park	Shrek 2	Black Panther
<b>4<sup>th</sup></b>	The Jungle Book	The Sting	Batman	The Lion King	Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest	Avengers: Infinity War
<b>5<sup>th</sup></b>	My Fair Lady	Superman	Raiders of the Lost Ark	Forrest Gump	Spiderman	Jurassic World
<b>6<sup>th</sup></b>	Thunderball	The Godfather	Ghostbusters	Independence Day	Tttransformers: Revenge of the Fallen	Marvel's the Avengers
<b>7<sup>th</sup></b>	Cleopatra	The Exorcist	Beverly Hills Cop	The Sixth Sense	Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith	Star Wars: the Last Jedi
<b>8<sup>th</sup></b>	2001: A Space Odyssey	Smokey & The Bandit	Back to the Future	Home Alone	Lord of the Rings: Return of the King	Incredibles 2
<b>9<sup>th</sup></b>	Guess Who's Coming to Dinner	National Lampoon's Animal House	Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade	Men in Black	Spiderman 2	The Lion King
<b>10<sup>th</sup></b>	How the West Was Won	Blazing Saddles	Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom	Toy Story 2	The Passion of the Christ	Rogue One: a Star Wars Story

<b>11<sup>th</sup></b>	It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World	Rocky	Top Gun	Twister	Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	Beauty & the Beast
<b>12<sup>th</sup></b>	Funny Girl	Close Encounters of the Third Kind	Tootsie	The Lost World: Jurassic Park	Spiderman 2	Finding Dory
<b>13<sup>th</sup></b>	The Love Bug	The Towering Inferno	Crocodile Dundee	Mrs Doubtfire	Finding Nemo	Frozen 2
<b>14<sup>th</sup></b>	Goldfinger	The Rocky Horror Picture Show	Rain Man	Beauty & The Beast	Shrek the Third	Avengers: Age of Ultron
<b>15<sup>th</sup></b>	Bonnie & Clyde	One Flew Over <b>The Cuckoo's</b> Nest	Three Men and a Baby	Ghost	Transformers	The Dark Knight Rises
<b>16<sup>th</sup></b>	The Dirty Dozen	Love Story	Fatal Attraction	Aladdin	Iron Man	Toy Story 4
<b>17<sup>th</sup></b>	Lawrence of Arabia	Kramer vs Kramer	Who Framed Roger Rabbit	Saving Private Ryan	Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone	Captain Marvel
<b>18<sup>th</sup></b>	Midnight Cowboy	Airport	Beverly Hills Cop II	Austin Powers: the Spy Who Shagged Me	Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	The Hunger Games: Catching Fire
<b>19<sup>th</sup></b>	The Odd Couple	American Graffiti	Gremlins	Terminator 2: Judgment Day	Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship of the Ring	Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom
<b>20<sup>th</sup></b>	Valley of the Dolls	Saturday Night Fever	Rambo: First Blood pt 2	Armageddon	Star Wars: Attack of the Clones	Toy Story 3

<https://www.filmsite.org/boxoffice2.html>

Seymour Chatman, in 1978, described the Russian folk tales of Propp's taxonomy as notably simple stories with 'rigid homogeneity of plot and simplicity of characterization' that did not reflect the complexity of modern narratives (15), noticing what would seem to be a quite natural development over time towards narrative sophistication, however the subsequent movement of mainstream American cinema has been a reversion to plot homogeneity and character simplicity—Conventional Monoplot.

The high-grossing features of the 1990s shift even further in this direction. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) [19<sup>th</sup>], *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) [17<sup>th</sup>] and *Jurassic Park* (1993) [3<sup>rd</sup>] are notable stand-outs in terms of critical appraisal, but all adhere to restorative three-act structure and, broadly, to the Conventional Monoplot. The 1990s list includes *Independence Day* (1996) [6<sup>th</sup>], *Twister* (1996) [11<sup>th</sup>], *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997) [12<sup>th</sup>], *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993) [13<sup>th</sup>], and *Batman Forever* (1995) [23<sup>rd</sup>]*—*all films which revel in simplistic, archetypal character design, surface action, and the kind of homogeneity of story form which Chatman observed in Propp's folk tales. As with the 1980s list, none of the films from the 1990s high grossing list appear in the *Sight and Sound* polls. In the 2000s, comic book features become dominant—both literal comic book adaptations, and features rooted in the same kineticism, simplified morality and archetypism familiar to comic books, the most critically lauded of that decade's highest earners being Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) [2<sup>nd</sup>], and Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* saga (19<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> chronologically). There are no other films of similar stature on the list of highest grossers, although there is an animated children's sequel (*Shrek 2* [2004], 3<sup>rd</sup>), an adventure based on a theme park ride (*Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* [2006], 4<sup>th</sup>), and two action films based on children's toys (*Transformers* [2007], 15<sup>th</sup>,

and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* [2009], 6<sup>th</sup>)—texts notable for their in-built and largely pre-sold potential for product differentiation. The 2010s list contains two *Star Wars* sequels (1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>), a *Jurassic Park* sequel (5<sup>th</sup>), five animated children’s films and six comic book franchise movies. *Toy Story 3* (2010) [20<sup>th</sup>] and *Black Panther* (2018) [3<sup>rd</sup>] are the only films from the highest grossing list of the last decade to be nominated for the Academy’s Best Picture Award.

### **3.5 The Erosion of the Link Between Box Office and Academy Award Success**

According to Simonton the Academy Award for Best Picture ‘can be considered a kind of summary measure of the total impact of a film as a creative product’ (2011: 170), displaying ‘a clear advantage over rival assessments’ such as those awarded by the National Society of Film Critics and the New York Film Critics Circle (170). In his assessment of consensus across the prominent American award ceremonies, he concludes that the awards ‘exhibit a substantial consensus, with the Oscars often representing the best of the lot’ (171). They have often been criticised and perceived as biased, their verdicts seen as ‘swayed by the local (Hollywood) tastes’ (Dekker and Popik, 2014: 97), or as ‘uncomfortable with sustained brilliance in their pursuit of firework displays’ (Sarris, 1979: 56), however they ‘do provide valuable clues to the industry’s self-definition’ (Sarris: 56), have ‘from the beginning... helped to define what a movie was supposed to be in the eyes of people actually working in the “industry”’ (Sarris: 53), and, more importantly, according to Simonton (2004), provide the single best indicator of consensus regarding artistic achievement in (primarily) American cinema. Ultimately, ‘those who take an Oscar home can have a strong likelihood of having exhibited superlative cinematic creativity or achievement’ (171).



In terms of measuring overall artistic achievement, the Best Picture Award specifically ‘display[s] a clear advantage over all rival assessments’ (170).

In the 1960s, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Midnight Cowboy* both won Best Picture awards (in 1962 and 1969 respectively), and were the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> highest grossing films of their decade. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Bonnie & Clyde* and *The Graduate* were all nominated, and all high-grossing. In the 1970s, *The Godfather*, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Kramer vs Kramer* all won (in 1972, 1975 and 1979), and were the 6<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> highest grossers of the decade. *Apocalypse Now*, *Jaws*, *Star Wars: A New Hope*, and *The Exorcist* were all nominated. The Academy Awards are awarded in February, to films released in the US before December 31<sup>st</sup> of the previous year. For this analysis, the year refers to the year of the film’s release as opposed to the year of the award ceremony, with data sourced from the-numbers.com (n.d.).

In the 2010s, that link between Best Picture winners/nominees and box office performance had disappeared. The 2010 winner *The King’s Speech* (2010), released over the Thanksgiving weekend in November 2010, made most of its American box office gross in 2011 (\$115,865,048), making it the 24<sup>th</sup> highest earner at the US box office for that year—when combined with its 2010 gross (\$22,932,401) its total (\$138,797,449) still places it behind *The Smurfs* (2011), *Rio* (2011) and *Puss in Boots* (2011). The top grossing film of 2010, *Toy Story 3* (2010), grossed more than three times as much (\$415,004,880), and is only the 20<sup>th</sup> highest grossing feature of the decade, taking less than half as much as the decade’s top grossing feature, 2015’s *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*, which earned \$936,662,225 at the domestic box office.

The 2011 winner, *The Artist* (2011), also released in November and making most of its money in 2012, was the 86<sup>th</sup> highest grossing film of that year (\$39,622,751), with its combined 2011 and 2012 total (\$44,667,095) placing it behind *Red Tails* (2012), *The Odd Life of Timothy Green* (2012) and *Parental Guidance* (2012). This pattern repeats for the remainder of the decade. The 2013 Best Picture, *12 Years a Slave* (2013), was released in October 2013, making a domestic US gross of \$56,671,993 over 2013-2014, behind 2013's 61<sup>st</sup> highest grosser *Escape from Planet Earth* (2013) and 2014's 56<sup>th</sup> highest grosser *Annie* (2014). The 2014 winner, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's *Birdman* (2014), released in October 2014, made \$42,340,598 between 2014-2015, placing it behind 2014's 78<sup>th</sup> highest earner *A Million Ways to Die in the West* (2014) and 2015's 68<sup>th</sup> highest earner *The Age of Adaline* (2015). The 2016 winner, *Moonlight* (2016), released in October 2016, was the 134<sup>th</sup> highest grosser of that year. Its combined 2016-2017 gross (\$27,854,931) places it behind 2016's 94<sup>th</sup> highest earner *Joy* (2015) and 2017's 89<sup>th</sup> highest earner *Fences* (2017).

According to this data, Best Picture winners and nominees of the 1960s and 1970s were amongst the best performing and most seen films of their respective decades at the box office, whilst Best Picture winners of the 2010s were seen by comparatively few. To frame the conclusion from an alternative angle, the most widely seen cinematic releases of the 1960s and 1970s tended to include those judged amongst the best of their year by what Simonton (2011) describes as the most reliable measure available (the Academy's Best Picture award), whilst the most widely seen cinematic releases of the 2010s did not.

It is perhaps not possible to draw broad and definitive conclusions from such limited data, particularly without delving into data regarding VOD and DVD rentals

which is beyond the scope of this project, however this project argues it would be equally unwise to ignore the implications. It would seem reasonable to conclude, accepting the need for further data, that mainstream American film culture seems to have shifted away from product of 'superlative' (Simonton, 2011: 171) artistic achievement toward product of lesser artistic merit. It can further be concluded that film product of superlative artistic merit seems to have shifted from widely seen to little seen; by corollary, from culturally central to culturally peripheral; that superlative film product seems to have dramatically decreased in prominence, whilst, at the same time, prominent film product has become more and more conventional.

### **3.6 Critical Acclaim, Unconventionality and Large Audiences**

The data outlined in this chapter shows that the vast majority of the most critically revered films in American cinema were made in the period before the emergence of the modern handbooks (pre-1980). Very few films produced in the period following the emergence of the modern handbooks (post-1980) appear in the revered cohort. The role of the handbooks in this shift should be seen as one facet in a broad movement that encompasses demographic changes and technological and cultural developments, however the handbooks' restriction and revocation of alternative practice and their defining and shaping of conventional practice is long documented (see: Connor; Macdonald; Thompson; Ross; Maras).

The data also shows that more highly revered films were widely distributed and consumed by large audiences before the emergence of the modern handbooks, and, significantly for this project, that more films containing formally challenging, structurally inventive and generally unconventional narrative elements were widely distributed and consumed by large audiences before the emergence of the modern

handbooks. The limitations of this analysis means this project is not in a position to comment on the number of unconventional films being made in sum—indeed it is likely that *far more* unconventional films have been made in recent decades than in the New Hollywood period (or earlier) given the strides made in digital technology, the new accessibility of filmmaking equipment and the sheer number of films of *all* types being produced today. It is also worth noting that films of significant quality and cultural impact have been rewarded with recognition by the American Academy—*Moonlight*, *Parasite* (2019) and *12 Years A Slave* being obvious examples—and widespread critical acclaim, even if they have not been able to compete with the era's most widely seen films in terms of audience size. However the significance of this data, this project argues, lies in what it reveals about i) shifts in the Hollywood greenlighting and development process, ii) the influence of the handbook models on the greenlighting & development process, and iii) the subsequent impact on American film culture.

If put in the context of David Foster Wallace's observation on the intention of the commercial and the art film, it can be said that more awakening, challenging, audience-active movies were widely distributed and consumed, in the American market, before the emergence of the handbook models. If put in the context of Comolli and Narboni's work on cinema and ideology, it can be said that more movies that challenged the ideology inherent in conventional story shapes were widely distributed and consumed, in the American market, before the emergence of the handbook models. Movement towards inclusivity, particularly in the wake of the #metoo movement, has been a significant feature of American filmmaking in the late 2010s, with more big budget, widely distributed features focusing on prominent female and non-white characters. Smaller budget and mid-budget features, such as

*Moonlight* and *Lady Bird*, have managed to garner critical acclaim and award recognition whilst shifting the focus to the experiences of characters more typically disempowered by the Hollywood storytelling model, but in terms of big budget, widely distributed, high grossing features, any shifts towards inclusivity (say, in *Black Panther*, or the female protagonist franchise *The Hunger Games*) occur under the conventional blanket of restorative three-act structure. This project has not been able to identify any films in the top 20 highest grossing lists of the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s or 2010s which feature any significantly unconventional structural elements whatsoever.

### **3.7 The Conventional Monoplot Model & Negative Correlation**

As Conor states, 'screenwriting work is constructed, facilitated and regulated by how-to screenwriting manuals and, more broadly, the how-to genre' (2014: 81). Despite 'heavy scepticism' (Maras, 2009: 9) towards them, the handbooks concretize and regulate the practice of screenwriting 'through a particular set of hegemonic codes and conventions' (Conor: 81). Readman describes the genre as 'a prescriptive, formulaic approach to a creative activity, that is biased towards the mainstream' but that 'offer[s] a reliable method of organising a story for the screen and ensuring that the requirements of a mainstream audience are kept in mind' (2003: 18). As the previous data demonstrates however, unconventional texts, be they mildly (*The Graduate*) or radically (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) unconventional, have been a prominent part of the mainstream in previous decades, if we define the mainstream by the root fundament of audience size, reaching some of the largest audiences of their day. The idea that unconventionality is anathema to box office success is

precisely the type of justification that Comolli and Narboni argue is created *by* the dominant ideology in order to maintain its dominance.

How then can the practicing screenwriter go about rethinking the rules? How can the development industry and the pedagogy of screenwriting encourage and nurture more innovative and unconventional screenwriting practice? How can the screenwriter develop their practice in unconventional ways? The most prominent screenwriting theory fails to give screenwriters a method for quantifying unconventional structures, writing off unconventional texts as unimportant anomalies, occasionally mentioning alternative approaches whilst simultaneously revoking and containing them (Conor: 97). Rather than viewing conventional, single-protagonist, change-oriented three-act narratives as the ideal, this model should be seen as a conglomeration of convention, effective for producing particular meanings only—specifically, for shaping journeys of profound and usually heroic change in a single protagonist, allied to an inherently restorative, deterministic form. If seen in that way, this model can be used to measure unconventional approaches to narrative by negative correlation, becoming a method for quantifying and understanding precisely the kind of unconventional choices which have previously been termed as wrong/bad, and which, counter to that claim, can be observed in many of the most revered films in the cinematic canon.

A great number of films, not just American films but from all across the globe, from rote B-pictures to flagship award-winners, no-budget indies to big budget event productions, adhere to the Conventional Monoplot model to a substantial degree. Gulino's tracing of the emergence of sequences reveals a storytelling form emerging from one-reelers with a single climax toward a longer eight-sequence form, gradually merging with an Aristotelian three-part structure as the introduction of sound brought

Broadway playwrights to Hollywood in greater numbers and allied the nascent storytelling norms of young cinema with those of the theatre. As Hollywood cinema became the dominant storytelling form across the globe the structure that underpinned it was naturally disseminated, and when Syd Field's paradigm began to conventionalise the simplest form of that model to an increasingly corporatized industry unconventional approaches were pushed further toward the fringe. Thus the Conventional Monoplot reached the dominant position it holds today. For the practicing screenwriter, the true utility of such a model, this project contends, is how it can function to reveal and quantify unconventional approaches through negative correlation. This will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

## 4. A Taxonomy of Unconventional Narrative Structures

### 4.1 Introduction

If screenwriting handbooks have over-emphasised conventional structuring norms, delegitimised unconventional approaches, and disseminated that iconoclasm-hostile discourse throughout Western film industries and higher education around the screenplay, then in order to redress the balance the working screenwriter needs a method for understanding and quantifying unconventional structural approaches and the different meanings they create, and how these different meanings compare to the closed, comforting effect of restorative three-act structure.

Better understanding and clearer knowledge in this area should allow the working screenwriter to make more informed structural choices, equipping them with the knowledge needed to achieve their creative aims and to argue their case with producers who may be (perhaps unconsciously) hostile to unconventional practice. This better understanding and clearer knowledge forms the central aim of this research project, constructed through the analysis of conventional structuring practice and its impacts in the previous three chapters, the survey of unconventional practice in this chapter, and the locating of a methodology for unconventional practice in the creative portion of the project (chapter five) and subsequent exegesis (chapter six).

Gulino, Dancyger and Rush and Linda Aronson have produced valuable work in the area of unconventional narrative structures, but Dancyger and Rush are quite brief on alternatives to the restorative model and there are unconventional models which Aronson's authoritative analysis, focused on multiple protagonist models, does not touch on. This chapter offers a taxonomy of unconventional approaches



available to the screenwriter, limited, for the purposes of creating a manageable scale of inquiry, to texts which, whilst unconventional and in many cases primarily affiliated with art cinema, exhibit crime genre elements—specifically a focus on criminal, victim or law enforcement (Leitch, 2002; Neale, 2000; Rafter, 2006). This choice has been made primarily to create alignment with the creative portion of the project. The chapter will analyse the meanings that unconventional structures create, using the Conventional Monoplot model to reveal unconventional practice by negative correlation. These models, of course, are applicable in any genre.

Essentially then this chapter presents groupings of unconventionally structured crime films, grouped together by their common deviation from the Conventional Monoplot. The Conventional Monoplot, as outlined, is a product of late twentieth and early twenty-first century screenwriting manuals and their influence on screenwriting practice (Connor; Macdonald; Maras) in an increasingly corporatized film industry context (Ross; Menne; Schatz; King). The films presented in this taxonomy may or may not have been produced before the emergence of the modern handbooks and their influence, nor has that been deemed a necessary consideration—the key consideration for this chapter’s aim is that each film offers an example to the practicing screenwriter of a narrative model alternative to the Conventional Monoplot, and which delivers a different meaning to that delivered by the Conventional Monoplot. Combating the restrictive impact of the handbooks and their doxa (Connor; Macdonald) in a manner that offers utility to the practicing screenwriter is the central concern.

This project proposes that the models presented herein represent new knowledge in the area of screenwriting, building on the work by Gulino, Aronson and Dancyger and Rush. This taxonomy is not exhaustive, necessarily limited in scope

by the scale of this project as a whole—further study would surely reveal further unconventional models that the screenwriter might employ, both within the crime genre and beyond. It would certainly be valuable, for instance, for further research to examine the differing poetics underpinning different national cinemas—the influence of the Quran and the *ghazal* on Iranian poetics for example—and the different narrative structures inculcated therein. Again, for the purposes and limitations of the project, only two considerations were important for this taxonomy: does the film divert from Conventional Monoplot, and can it be considered a crime film.

In two instances, films which are not primarily crime films have been included: *Full Metal Jacket* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. *Full Metal Jacket*, of course, is a war film, with no crime genre elements, however it represents a striking example of a two-act structure which this project could not find evidenced elsewhere, and it is preferable to divert from the crime genre parameter than to ignore this model altogether. *We Need to Talk About Kevin* is very deeply concerned with a crime—the high school massacre committed by the protagonist’s son—but is primarily a psychological art film. Crime elements and thriller elements are employed but are not dominant. However it offers a model for a particular form of modular narrative based around trauma, strong examples of which this project was not able to find elsewhere, and which will play a part in the creative element of the project.

#### **4.2 Survey Parameters and Context**

British crime cinema received startlingly little critical attention until Chibnall and Murphy’s edited collection in 1999 (Elliot, 2021). Subsequently, a critical framework has developed, as has an appreciation for the various cycles and movements that

have defined the genre—the post-war ‘spiv movie’ (Chibnall and Murphy, 1999; Elliot; 2021) for example, and the crime films of the British New Wave period which shifted focus away from more middle-class protagonists to the blue collar ‘tough guy’ (Spicer, 1999: 81) typified by Stanley Baker. The original screenplay which will follow this chapter has been envisioned not as a British crime film per se but as a British independent film, in which art cinema technique has been blended with crime genre elements, informed first and foremost by contemporary independent and arthouse cinema by the likes of Lynne Ramsay, Andrea Arnold, Ben Wheatley, Jacques Audiard, Hirokazu Koreeda, Lee Chang-dong, Barry Jenkins and the Safdie brothers. This project’s interest in genre is largely based on its function in limiting the scope of enquiry—the central interest is in unconventional practice, as defined not against genre convention but against the Conventional Monoplot. The unconventional practice which the project seeks to locate and define is limited to the screenwriter’s chief area of responsibility and craft expertise, the area most directly restricted (Conor) by the handbooks and their doxa (Macdonald): narrative structure. Films which break crime genre conventions by, for instance, eliding the crime (*Reservoir Dogs*, 1992) or focusing on the aftermath of the crime (*Blue Ruin*, 2013) are only of interest if they also divert from the narrative model of the Conventional Monoplot.

Rafter describes the crime genre as focusing primarily on crime and its consequences (2006: 6), whilst Leitch (2002), similarly, suggests that a crime film must focus on ‘any of the three parties to a crime—criminal, victim, avenger’ (16)—and for this project, such a definition has been applied, in both its specificity and breadth, in selecting appropriate texts. Both Leitch and Rafter further suggest typical characters (‘gangsters... vigilantes... maverick cops’ [Leitch: 13], ‘the corrupt cop,

the innocent on death row' [Rafter: 4]) and a focus on suspense, whilst Neale (2000) separates the genre into three subgenres (detective films, gangster films and suspense thrillers) for which he offers comprehensive definitions (71).

For this project however, the definitive focus on crime and its consequences and on one or more of Leitch's three parties is sufficient. Rafter also notes 'alternative' crime films (14) which might feature a disposition quite different to more classical texts, and certainly it is such alternative texts in which this project is primarily interested—hence a broad definition of the crime film which might encompass genre-hybridity, particularly regarding translations and reimaginings of the crime film within an art film style or mode, is favourable. Film selection here then is based on the prominence of crime and its consequences, a criminal/victim/avenger protagonist, and negative correlation with the Conventional Monoplot model.

Seven distinct unconventional approaches have been identified and will be covered:

- remodelling the first act
- one-act structure
- two-act structure
- goal de-emphasis & passive protagonists
- multiple protagonists
- untimely death of the protagonist
- modular structure.

These structural models will be illustrated with brief analysis of example texts. As the aim of this project is to shed light on the range of unconventional structural options available to the screenwriter and the range of meanings such models create,

a wide survey is favoured here above in-depth analysis. Future work exploring the unconventional shapes here identified and their corresponding meanings in greater depth would be valuable. The films selected come from extensive viewing and analysis of texts within the crime genre, incorporating international cinemas but rooted primarily in American cinema, including all budget levels and styles, from independent films and festival films to the more mainstream. The list may not be exhaustive, but represents a collation of significant alternative models identifiable within the scope of the project. An awareness of these models and their correlative meanings during the writing and development process, it is argued, should serve to combat the restrictive impact noted in the prominent handbooks.

### **4.3 Remodelling the First Act**

According to the Conventional Monoplot model, the conventional first act is typically split into two distinct sections, each with distinct functions. The first (1.1) functions primarily to establish a protagonist and to interrupt their life with an inciting incident. The second (1.2) functions to move the protagonist from the shock of the interruption to the decision to pursue an active goal, culminating with a turning point. Alternative first act approaches exist, however, which create correspondingly different viewing experiences.

#### **i. Elongation of Establishment: Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le Flambeur* & Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Goodbye South, Goodbye***

*Bob le Flambeur* (1956) was Jean-Pierre Melville's first original script, and it marked, by some accounts, a downturn in creative success for the director, 'greeted with a mixture of enthusiasm and bafflement' (Vincendeau, 2003: 99) by both the public and

the critical community upon the film's release. Melville described *Bob* as a 'love letter' (Nogueira, 1971: 57) to Paris, though perhaps it is in equal measure a love letter to the American genre cinema he admired. Its narrative appears enamoured with the qualities of place and character much more than the developments and reversals of a conventionally structured causal plot, and whilst this ambling approach to story may have been greeted with bafflement in certain quarters, perhaps it is precisely this divisive unconventionality that allows Ginette Vincendeau to describe *Bob* as the first in Melville's series of great gangster films.

Bob (Roger Duchesne) is an ageing bank robber turned down-on-his-luck gangster, a charismatic fixture on the streets of Pigalle, admired by criminals and police alike. When he meets a precocious young girl, Anne (Isabelle Corey), he takes her under his wing, and attempts to steer her away from predatory pimp Marc (G rard Buhr) and towards the affections of his young associate and surrogate son, Paulo (Daniel Cauchy). When he learns of a big score in the safe of a local casino, Bob plans a dramatic heist on an unprecedented scale—one big job to finally break his run of bad luck. With his gang, he meticulously plans the job—but when Paulo brags about it to Anne, and Anne lets slip to Marc, and when their inside man is turned by his controlling wife, the job seems set for disaster. Until, that is, an unexpected change in Bob's luck at the tables strikes at precisely the wrong moment.

The most unconventional section of the film, on a structural level, occurs in the first act—the section most embodying this love letter quality—and can be summarised essentially as an elongation of establishing sequences and a delaying of the inciting incident. Nothing resembling a typical inciting incident—a call to adventure, a cause for all that follows—appears for thirty-six minutes (when Bob's

associate discovers that the Deauville casino's safe is loaded with cash, passes this information on to Bob, and Bob immediately resolves to steal it) and when this incident does occur it both catalyses the main plotline and closes the first act. Shifting the inciting incident to this point creates narrative space, allowing Melville to spend a languorous first act focusing on character, mood and milieu. It is not a first act without incident—in fact the film's main subplot, a romantic entanglement involving Bob, Anne, Paulo and Marc, is initiated and gently developed throughout, but always with the minor key tension and slow pacing of subplot, as evidenced by the way this plot strand dwindles to background significance as the film nears its climax and the more prominent heist plot remains central. *Bob's* first act is not devoid of plot, but rather devoid of main plot.

Lumholdt describes 'both *Bob le Flambeur* and its creator' as 'the greatest examples of the genre', claiming that Melville never made a 'more sympathetic, invigorating, and friendly film' (Lumholdt, 2003: 53). Melville of course is famed for the way in which he carved his own path into filmmaking, self-funding his first film and setting up his own studio, and his work bears the hallmarks of 'an autodidact cineaste' (Palmer, 2007:7): loose plotting and an apparent ignorance of certain storytelling conventions mediated by an acute awareness of tone, style and mood—a similar disposition can be seen in the early works of other autodidacts from Bernardo Bertolucci to Ben Wheatley. As Palmer states, Melville's 'radical position as a self-styled amateur' allowed for a 'piecemeal, nonprofessional independence... unorthodox methods manifesting[ing] a controversial yet influential new model' (2007: 4). By immersing the viewer in character, setting and mood for a drawn-out first act, Melville is able to focus less on crime and more on the qualities of personality, time and place in a crime milieu, and on the 'foregrounding of specific

locations' within what Melville referred to as an 'atmospheric film' (Vincendeau: 99). Where crime films typically focus on the impact of the crime on 'the criminal who commits the crime, the victim who suffers it, and the avenger or detective who investigates it' (Leitch, 2002: 13), a slower opening act is able to focus more on the personal qualities of those people and the ways in which they interact in the absence of any overt, immediate criminality. In other words—establishment. In the Conventional Monoplot, establishment sequences typically account for less than fifteen minutes of screen-time (the space between the film's opening and the inciting incident) and are used, principally, to establish character and setting (as well as tone, genre, mood, style, and pacing). Since these sequences precede the inciting incident (typically) and the plot which it initiates, this establishment occurs (typically) in the absence of a pressurised event-based plot (barring the use of an early inciting incident). Such plots, by definition, impact upon their characters, shifting and beginning to change their identities and their relationships. As previously mentioned, McKee identifies this change as the very core of the Conventional Monoplot, claiming that if the drama fails to change 'the value-charged condition of the character's life' it is 'a nonevent' (36). In the Conventional Monoplot then, the opening section, pre-inciting incident, typically becomes a space in which we can know, see, hear and enjoy the characters in the absence of pressurised change, as well as enjoying being immersed in their world, as presented by the filmmaker, and all the tonalities associated with it (music, colour, imagery, symbolism).

If the inciting incident is significantly delayed, this creates a much longer, languorously-paced establishment section, in which mood, tone, style and character qualities can come to greater prominence. A world in which plot is de-emphasised is a world in which stasis is more prominent, and in which the viewer is invited to



consider the significance of the characters' behaviour and experiences within that more static world. More pronounced examples of this kind of narrative include the early works of Nuri Bilge Ceylan (*Uzak*, *Climates* [2006]) and Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-Liang (*Rebels of the Neon God* [1992], *Vive L'Amour* [1994]). *Bob's* first act, then, has enough gentle plotting to maintain viewer interest, but enough lack of plot to allow Melville to focus on the personalities and relationships of his characters, and the mood created by time, place and cinematic style (camera, music, etc) for more than double the typical screen-time. In this way, Melville is able to foreground the qualities of place, prioritising those qualities over the more commonly prominent qualities of propulsive change-oriented plot, in the same way as does the place writer within the world of prose, 'foreground[ing] the Parisian location as a topic in its own right' (Vincendeau: 106), resulting in 'a brilliantly conceived expressionist sense of private spaces that go hand in hand with the central characterizations' and a focus on 'the interplay of place and personality' (Hogue, 1996: 5<sup>th</sup> para). It feels appropriate then that, while the film's second act begins to focus on more typical heist plot dynamics, the third act reverts to type and de-emphasises the film's climax in order to focus on Bob's curiously likeable personality. Hogue describes a tendency in Melville's work toward 'paradoxical drama' (4<sup>th</sup> para), noticing how Bob 'repeatedly acts in contradiction to his proclaimed intentions and ends by succeeding on a grand scale simultaneously with the collapse of his greatest scheme' (4<sup>th</sup> para). In this instance, de-emphasis of plot redirects viewer focus to the qualities of place and character.

Similarly, in *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1997), Hou Hsiao-Hsien presents a first act notably different to the Conventional Monoplot model, and in doing so finds the narrative time and space to focus less on how pressurised plot events and active

criminality impact upon his characters, and more to explore the ways his characters interact within their crime milieu. *Goodbye South, Goodbye* concerns a small-time Taipei criminal Kao (Jack Kao) and his tender, familial relationships with young cohort Flatty (Giong Lim) and their bargirl lovers Ying (Hsu Kuei-Ying) and Pretzel (Annie Shizuka Inoh). As Kao goes about his business—counselling debtors, answering his boss Hsi's (King Jieh-Wen) orders, trying to run his restaurant—we see the group's intimate relationships playing out in the face of increasingly stressful pressures, until a trip back to Flatty's hometown leads to a run-in with his violent cop cousin and potential disaster.

Hou's style is 'contemplative, elliptical', defined by 'an ability to transform the small events and gestures of everyday life into resonant images with lasting emotional power' (Vick, 2008: 201). *Goodbye South, Goodbye* demonstrates his predilection for the resonance of the everyday: far more than plot, Hou focuses on the way his characters speak to each other, care for each other, eat together, within the world of low-level criminality in which they reside. Their criminality is background—foregrounded, instead, is a meditation on place, the tonalities of the Taipei shanty, and their manner of surprisingly intimate, familial togetherness. Such an approach would not be unusual during the establishment sequences in the Conventional Monoplot, but like Melville, Hou extends these slow, mood-oriented sequences far beyond what is conventional. Forty minutes into the narrative something resembling an inciting incident occurs—Hsi shows up at Kao's restaurant and gives him a job involving fraudulent sale of stud pigs—however this plot strand is resolved just a few minutes of screen-time later, leading rather coincidentally into the main plot strand: Flatty's conflict with his violent police officer cousin and Kao's attempts to help him. At this point, the narrative gains the propulsive causal energy

typical of the crime film, propelling the characters towards their elliptical finale, but this comes after more than half of the film's screen-time has been devoted to this languorous observation of place and intimacy.

How might *Goodbye South, Goodbye* be different if it more closely followed the Conventional Monoplot model? If the initiation of the stud pig scam were moved to the conventional 13-15 minute position, and Flatty's beating at the hands of his police chief cousin to the conventional first act turning point, initiating a revenge goal for Flatty, and giving Kao, our clear protagonist, a goal of helping/protecting Flatty (or, potentially, a goal of extricating himself from the criminal life, which seems to drive some of his behaviour), Kao and his gang would be pitted against the police for the majority of screen-time, making for a significantly more violent and conflict-laden narrative, losing the intimacy and mood which dominate, and which give *Goodbye South, Goodbye* such an unusually tender feel. Hou's oeuvre, credited by many for playing a key role in bringing Taiwanese cinema to international acclaim in the years following democratisation, is characterised by 'a great affection for wayward youths, petty criminals, and other societal misfits', whom he treats 'with a degree of respect and understanding that is genuinely touching' (Vick: 202). Rather than sending Kao, Flatty and co tumbling through the reversals, travails and pressurised conflict typical of the Conventional Monoplot, Hou 'pins his narrative pacing to the rhythms of his characters' lives, alternating between the stasis of hanging out, the simple ecstasy of riding motorcycles on the open road, and sudden outbursts of violence' (204). To create contemplative, elliptical cinema of unusual tenderness pinned to the rhythms of the characters' lives, Hou demonstrates that the conventional model may not be the most useful, and in doing so, has been able to play a key role in uplifting his nation's cinema on the international stage.

## ii. Zero Protagonist: Robert Bresson's *L'Argent*

As Cuneen notes, Bresson was not particularly concerned with 'traditional storytelling', nor did his work 'fit in with the assumptions of the broad moviegoing audience' (2003: 11). Rather, 'emotional distance' was typical, as was a focus on 'the mystery that is human action and the human heart' (14). Schrader called Bresson's work 'anachronistically nonintuitive [and] impersonal' (1988: 59). In *L'Argent* (1983), such emphasis is placed on the dramatic potential of incident and reversal that every scene in the first act contains an incident which could rightfully be seen to push the narrative in a new direction in the manner of an inciting incident or turning point, starting from the initial scene, in which a privileged schoolboy (Marc Ernest Fourneau) is denied a loan by his authoritarian father. The boy's friend shows him a forged note that he has created, and they use it in a photography store, pocketing the change. This sets in motion a spiralling series of increasingly terrible events in which the couple who own the store knowingly pass on the forged note to workman Yvon (Christian Patey), are robbed by their anarchist employee Lucien (Vincent Risterucci), and Yvon's life completely unravels in the wake of Lucien's false testimony and his subsequent wrongful conviction.

So little emphasis is paid to any one character above the others, so little time spent developing audience identification with one character above the others within the opening act, that rather than presenting a multiple protagonist narrative, in which our loyalties are split between two or more central characters with their own equally prominent dramatic goals, Bresson presents something much more like a *zero protagonist* narrative, in which the rapid spiralling of events takes on such a distant, impersonal, objective sense that none of the characters much resembles a traditional

protagonist in any convincing manner. Until, that is, we learn in the second act that the unfortunate Yvon's daughter has died, at which point he becomes a clear protagonist, building us towards a very different third act entirely focused around him, in which all previous prominent characters are uninvolved. Schrader describes an intention in Bresson's work, more than the typical, to render meaning through form: for Bresson, 'the form is the *operative* element—it "does the work"' (61) [emphasis original]. In this instance, the distancing effect is a result of clear structural choice: the lack of establishment scenes.

Each scene, from the first, is built around significant incident and plot reversal. At no point does Bresson linger over one character's emotional response to events, or define the emotional situation into which the plot impinges (as typically defines establishment scenes). Field describes the key aspects of the set-up portion of the conventional narrative as 'introducing the main character, stating the dramatic premise, [and] creating the dramatic situation' (94). Bresson, rather, presents a matrix of equally weighted characters with a rapidly spiralling chain of events. Point of view changes scene to scene—from the privileged boy, to the store owner and his wife, to Yvon, to Lucien. Where conventional multiple protagonist narratives would develop each of those prominent characters' plotlines to resolution, weighted fairly evenly throughout the narrative, perhaps with greater focus on one more prominent and sympathetic character (see *Fargo*, *American Beauty* [1999]), Bresson's narrative instead gradually phases out the now largely insignificant schoolboy (who, of course, opened the narrative) and his family and forger friend, and the store owner and store owner's wife, to focus on Yvon and, to a lesser extent, Lucien. For the majority of the second act, beginning from the point when we learn that his daughter has died of diphtheria, Yvon is the clear protagonist, a sympathetic character prominent within

the narrative facing strong forces of antagonism, with the majority of the second act focusing on his imprisonment. By the time we reach the third act, he is the only character from the first act remaining within the narrative.

In accord with Schrader, Kent Jones describes Bresson as 'impersonal' and 'systematic' (1999: 11), 'profoundly individualistic and idiosyncratic' (7), with his films existing 'outside the normal currents of cinema' (11) and defined by 'a God's-eye-view of the world' (19). Cuneen notes that Bresson maintains a certain distance, 'even from characters... with whom there is clearly a presumption of sympathy' (16), creating what Jones describes as 'the feeling that every character in Bresson's work remains a stranger, that the intimacy of his films remains the intimacy of an observer rather than an empathetic identifying participant.' (17). In *L'Argent*, this effect is achieved on the structural level. The audience is encouraged to form an emotional bond with Yvon, and to emotionally invest in his story and its tragic downward trajectory, but only after a zero-protagonist first act has established the implacable, impersonal quality of the world in which he resides, the context for his downfall. Cuneen observes that Bresson 'wants us to look closely at things as well as people' (176), to which we may add, he wants us to look closely at actions and events as well as people.

#### **4.4 One-Act Structure**

McKee, unlike several other prominent handbook authors, acknowledges the existence of alternatives to the three-act model, however he does so inconsistently. Initially, he is quite clear: one-act stories—those that 'build up to one major reversal, ending the story' but contain no other major reversals (read: act breaks) 'must be brief': the 'short story, the one-act play, or the student experimental film of perhaps

five to twenty minutes' (217). Regarding a two-act model, he states that 'two reversals are never enough... *three* major reversals are the necessary minimum for a full-length work of narrative art to reach the end of the line' (218). He has since updated his view, in an article on his personal website, in which he notes what seems to him a new movement for what he views as one-act films, defined by inner conflict and 'minimalism' (n.d.: para. 1). He states that whilst three-, four- and five-act films 'dynamically progress their conflict around major turning points to an all-or-nothing climax' a one-act feature 'accumulates pressure gradually, often exclusively within the protagonist's psychological and emotional life, and usually ends on a quiet release' (para. 2). The lack of 'major turnings' is the key defining element. He identifies *Wild* (2014), *45 Years* (2015), *Paterson* (2016), *Lady Bird* (2018) and *The Florida Project* (2017) as examples, describing them as 'stories of inner conflict [that] build around a life dilemma and end on the protagonist's choice to change her mind in one direction or the other' (para. 5). In this way, McKee's updated analysis agrees more or less with the earlier work of Dancyger and Rush, who state that one-act scripts are 'extremely difficult to sustain for two hours' but that when executed well this structure 'carries a relentless accumulation of power that is hard to achieve in a more segmented story', citing Scorsese's *Mean Streets* as the prime example (46).

Of course, one-act plays have a long theatrical history, described by Tornqvist as not containing 'any intermission, curtain or black-out indicating a change of time and/or place' (1996: 356). Suggesting the potential for the one-act model to stretch to feature-length, he observes that although 'most one-act plays are fairly short, their length, which is usually considered of great importance, is in fact irrelevant to the question of whether they are one-act plays' (357). He quotes Strindberg, who hoped

to 'educate' audiences so they could 'sit through a one-act play that lasts an entire evening' (358).

**i. Static One-Act: Corneliu Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective***

Agnes Petho describes Porumboiu as 'a prominent representative of the so called Romanian New Wave, whose films combine austere minimalist tableaux with explicit media reflexivity' (2015: 43-44). Whilst Melville and Hou modulated their first acts by delaying the inciting incident, in *Police, Adjective* writer-director Porumboiu withholds anything resembling an event of the catalytic scale of the traditional inciting incident until the film's dramatic climax, creating a flattened, minimalist single-act feature film and a resolution which strongly resembles a first-act turning point.

Cristi (Dragos Bucur), a weary young police detective in post-Ceausescu Bucharest, is tasked with tracking and reporting on the petty drug use of some harmless teenagers. Feeling this work to be unjust and unnecessary, Cristi goes about his work grudgingly—and the viewer observes the trudging mundanity of his work alongside the broader mundanity and isolating nature of his life, his marriage, and his relationships with his colleagues. Although Cristi's goal is clear, the level of activity is strikingly minimal, often entirely absent—as when, for example, we see Cristi return home at lunchtime to quietly eat a bowl of soup, alone, before returning to his surveillance. His surveillance had also been initiated prior to the film's opening sequences, robbing the narrative of a catalytic incident. Instead, at the typical point for such an incident, we see Cristi making an underwhelming non-discovery—used cigarette butts which may contain traces of marijuana—which effects the unfolding plot in the mildest of ways.



When this slow, ambling, quotidian storyline finally reaches a confrontation and climax—as Cristi is brought into his boss's office and declares his opposition to the sting operation which is being planned—that confrontation is initiated with an incident which functions as a climactic event, but which strongly resembles a typical inciting incident. Cristi's boss (Vlad Ivanov), unimpressed by his reluctance to follow orders, gives Cristi an ultimatum: conduct the sting and arrest the teenage suspect, or lose your job. This results in an extended sequence—the film's most unusual and innovative—in which the chief orders Cristi to search through a giant dictionary to define some key vocabulary: conscience, law, moral. Petho states: 'People in this film don't just engage in conversations, they pedantically dissect the meaning of words, the relationship between signifier and signified' (55). The confrontation is traditional in several ways—the protagonist facing a 'final showdown with their antagonist' (Yorke: 16) who has been orchestrating events throughout—but plays out, unusually, through a subtext-laden debate on semantics. When this debate is concluded—and Cristi defeated—the film's closing moment, in which the team plan the sting, has the qualities of the opening scene of a second act far more than of a conventional resolution scene, or post-resolution epilogue: a lead character progressing into the unfamiliar and jeopardy-filled territory of an active plotline from which there can be no turning back. At which point, the film ends.

'Here, in the figure of the policeman who is surveilling three high-school students suspected of using drugs, we don't just observe the characters from a distance, but observe a character who is himself observing other characters from a distance and moving continuously on a meandering trajectory around the same typically miserable post-communist blocks of flats, garages and sports grounds' (Petho: 53). In this manner, Porumboiu is able to redirect audience attention from

pressurised change to stasis, from matters of plot onto matters more esoteric and political: the banality of police procedure and the ways in which language and ideology intersect to our detriment. Of course, banal existences can be represented in more traditionally engaging dramatic plotlines, but such plotlines require the interplay of events and reaction, of characters changing under pressure. 'Pressure is essential', according to McKee—the only way to reveal 'true character', and 'the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation' (101). The textural qualities of isolation, lack of goal orientation, aimlessness—these can be suggested and briefly evoked within the Conventional Monoplot only to a limited extent. The space simply doesn't exist within the tight chain of causally linked incidents and highly pressured situations that fill the Conventional Monoplot to depict aimlessness at length—and doing so creates a markedly different viewing experience. When filmmakers such as Porumboiu, Nuri Bilge Ceylan and Gus Van Sant choose this more minimalist approach, they create an effect markedly different to the 'relentless accumulation of power' noted by Dancyger and Rush. Petho notes that so called 'slow movies' have 'etched out their own niche on the international film festival circuit' (40), becoming a recognised form in their own right. Although this technique is rarer in American cinema than in European, there are significant examples—Van Sant's *Gerry* (2003), and Jim Jarmusch's meditative assassin piece *The Limits of Control* (2009).

## **ii. Propulsive One-Act: Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets***

In *Mean Streets*, a kinetic, incident-packed, largely episodic narrative is provided unity through protagonist Charlie's (Harvey Keitel) internal spiritual struggle, his external struggle to guide and protect loose cannon loudmouth Johnny Boy (Robert De Niro), and, to a lesser extent, by a romantic subplot involving Charlie and Johnny

Boy's cousin Theresa (Amy Robinson). However, as Dancyger and Rush note, Scorsese and co-writer Mardik Martin's narrative progresses over a flattened structure, with no significant reversals that fit the standard turning point definition, producing a propulsive, highly active one-act narrative, in which Charlie's struggles with Johnny Boy develop inexorably toward an explosive climax.

Dancyger and Rush describe the foundational dramatic structure of such a narrative as starting 'with a conflict that is already well engaged' before 'run[ning] through a long, slow, second-act arch' (46) with none of the major reversals that, according to theorists like McKee, signal an act break. In *Mean Streets*' opening sequence, the audience is introduced to Charlie and his internal spiritual struggle, to the gang of characters who will feature at the heart of the incident-packed narrative, and to Johnny Boy, who is already in debt to Michael (Richard Romanus) and unable to pay him back. A scene between Charlie and Johnny Boy at the typical inciting incident position introduces this situation to the audience, and demonstrates Charlie's role in protecting him, defining the conflict that will underpin all that follows. Although this scene provides dramatic interest at the necessary point it is quite different to the typical inciting incident, in which some unexpected occurrence shifts the protagonist's life in a new direction. Rather, information is divulged which develops the audience's understanding of the pre-existing conflict.

The narrative then progresses over eight sequences, adhering to Gulino's sequence model, but without act breaks. Neither do the eight sequences fit easily into the four-part model noticed by Kristin Thompson, in which each part is defined and united by a separate goal. Dancyger & Rush describe the type of conflict uniting this kind of narrative as frequently 'so intense and fundamental it is beyond a defining, third-act character resolution. For example, Charlie's struggle between

salvation and family is no closer to a resolution at the end of *Mean Streets*' (46).

Although his struggles to protect Johnny Boy from Michael reach resolution (Michael shoots Johnny Boy) much of the conflict (his spiritual conflict, his relationship with Theresa, his duty to his Uncle) remains unresolved.

#### **4.5 Two-Act Structure**

McKee's thoughts on two-act structure are less well-defined, lacking the updated analysis granted to one-act features. In *Story* he claims two-act narratives must be brief: 'the sitcom, the novella, or hour-length plays such as Anthony Shaffer's *Black Comedy* or August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*' (217). Dancyger & Rush however identify a feature-length two-act model, what they term 'ironic two-act structure' (45), citing Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*, which they state 'makes no attempt to answer restorative expectations' and in fact 'ends with a deliberate flouting of our expectations' (45). Their analysis is brief, offering no other examples of the two-act form, however this idea of a deliberate flouting of expectations at the film's end seems prescient, and corresponds with the structurally anti-climactic ending of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, probably the most prominent example of a two-act feature in anglophone cinema. Since examples of the two-act model within the crime genre are extremely limited, and since Kubrick's text is such a significant example of this model, it has been included here in order to shed light on the possibilities available to the screenwriter.

##### **i. Third-Act Elision: Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket***

Whilst *No Country For Old Men* subverts the restorative model by removal of the protagonist from the dramatic climax, *Full Metal Jacket* removes the third act

altogether, presenting a largely conventional but notably long first act in which sympathetic protagonist Joker (Matthew Modine) is tasked with guiding the unfortunate, child-like Pyle (Vincent D'Onofrio) through his conflict with Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey), running to 43 mins, followed by a second, longer section (the narrative, it is important to note, is not split into two even halves) in which Joker and his cohorts are thrown into the disillusionment, disorientation and dehumanisation of the Vietnam War, a multi-protagonist strand headed by Joker in which the troops are tasked with surviving, and, on a deeper level, surviving with their humanity intact. It is notable that in both sections, Joker and the other characters encounter either a total or partial failure to achieve their goal: Joker cannot guide Pyle through basic training alive; Joker and most of his team survive their mission, but at the expense of their humanity.

This second section does not resemble a traditional, complete second act—rather, it resembles the first two thirds of a traditional second act, cut short after an elongated midpoint sequence in which the protagonist, Joker, goes through a life-or-death ordeal in what Vogler would term an ‘inmost cave... the most dangerous place in the special world’ (14) of the second act—in this instance, a sniper’s hiding place within a blown-out tower block. He ‘faces the possibility of death and is brought to the brink in a battle with a hostile force’ (15), coming face-to-face with the sniper, but emerges, reborn, forever changed. A structurally typical life-and-death midpoint ordeal, positioned at the climactic point of the narrative. Joker’s rebirth, however, is tragic: he is reborn without his humanity, into the land of the dead: a bleak warzone landscape, aflame and Bosch-esque.

Claude Smith describes *Full Metal Jacket*'s second movement as seeming ‘out of touch with the first’ and ‘anti-climactic’ (1988: 226), and although he frames

this pejoratively this anti-climactic feeling is clearly an intended result of the narrative design. As previously noted, Pursell describes the film's unconventional structure as a political decision, arguing that Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, with its conventionally shaped plot, falls prey to 'seductive nostalgia' and ultimately reaffirms 'patriarchal values' (1988: 18<sup>th</sup> para). Smith echoes Pursell's view, calling *Platoon* (1986) 'a tremendous box office success [that was] little more than a melodramatic allegory about the war between good and evil for possession of an innocent's soul' (226), in contrast to *Full Metal Jacket*, in which 'no such comforting theme of the possibility of grace emerge[s]' (226). Rather, Kubrick's 'denial of audience expectations... seems aesthetically necessary for him to recapitulate his incessant theme: that, despite our sophisticated technology, we remain apes fighting and fornicating over a watering hole' (231). Gruben (2005) notices that *Full Metal Jacket* is, unusually, 'split into two unequal and almost unrelated stories' (270), avoiding the 'usual three acts tracking the adventures of a clearly identified protagonist' (270), and that Joker's 'wanderings' (270) seem to be 'without purpose or result' (270), a feeling undoubtedly inculcated by the two-act structure's refusal to offer restorative closure. 'Given Kubrick's legendary attention to detail, there is no doubt that the film's alienated, unbalanced narrative was carefully planned' (271). Doherty describes the film as 'a cinematic usurpation of the historical record' (1989: 24), a usurpation made possible precisely by its anti-climactic denial of expectations.

Gruben calls the climactic killing of the young female sniper a 'major turning point' (277), which is correct: it is a turning point, and not a climax. Tellingly, Gruben describes an early treatment written by Kubrick, which contained an additional and sentimental closing movement, in which Joker is 'randomly killed' by a sniper, his death 'intercut with "home movie" flashbacks of a childhood game of Cowboys and

Indians, ending with a sentimental funeral scene' (273). In the completed film, this section has been excised, leaving essentially the body of a traditional three-act narrative without the head, and creating this feeling of alienation and imbalance at the structural level. Smith describes the film as a 'denial of expectations for an emotional bath' (231).

According to Vogler's Hero's Journey model, Kubrick's narrative ends after the eighth of twelve stages. It could be argued, using Yorke's five act model, that *Full Metal Jacket's* narrative plays out over three acts—the first three of the five-act structure, omitting the final section of the middle portion (the crisis) and the climactic fifth act. If viewed through the prism of Gulino's sequence model, six sequences can be seen—two less than the typical eight that Gulino identifies. Kubrick's narrative is not presented in two halves; rather, he presents a long but essentially typical first act, followed by a long second-act which ends after the midpoint ordeal, with no third act whatsoever—just a brief, structurally anti-climactic coda.

Joker's rebirth, a soulless child robbed of his humanity and left in 'a world of shit', leads to no simultaneous working out of action and character, no realization, redemption or restoration, as the restorative model demands. The restorative, redemptive portion is omitted. If restorative structure provides comfort, then it is precisely this comfort which *Full Metal Jacket's* viewer is denied. If *No Country for Old Men* creates, through its structure, the experience of a Godless world, a world where actions are not resolved, where tragedy is not accounted for, then *Full Metal Jacket* creates the experience of a world in which life or death trials lead not to redemption, ordeals do nothing but irreparably harm: a powerful structural match for Kubrick's subject matter, and one which, in its refusal to provide restorative relief to its viewer, points a critical finger at those Vietnam films, such as *Platoon*, that

preceded it, and which, however critical of the War, shape themselves in the restorative mode.

## **ii. Balanced Halves: Krzysztof Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Killing***

Kieslowski and co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz's two-act narrative, similarly, doesn't divide into two even parts, but unlike Kubrick's narrative the first act takes the greater screen-time and the structure functions to compare the two narrative halves, weighing one against the other. In the first half of the narrative, three characters are equally prominent: the misanthropic Taxi Driver (Jan Tesarz), dark-minded youth Jacek (Miroslaw Baka) and idealistic lawyer Piotr (Krzysztof Globisz). Lacking an inciting incident, the narrative progresses episodically, with causally disconnected moments demonstrating the differing characteristics of the three major players, unified by the foreshadowing of their shared trajectory: Piotr's idealism, ripe to be challenged; Jacek's wayward nihilism, slowly escalating; and the Taxi Driver's antagonistic misanthropy, inviting retribution. Several techniques are employed to signal to the viewer that these three characters are spiralling toward some terrible outcome, a mixture of telegraphing and dramatic irony making up for the lack of dramatic tension (being, according to Gulino's definition, the active pursuit of a goal and the encountering of antagonistic obstacles) which Gulino correctly notes is not the only method for creating audience engagement, merely the most common. Piotr's plot strand does contain some dramatic tension (he is taking the Polish equivalent of the bar exam) and a noteworthy incident (he passes), however this incident, occurring 21 minutes into the narrative, lacks the dramatic heft typical of the inciting incident, and is dramatically disconnected from Jacek during this first act (later, Piotr will become his lawyer), who becomes the most prominent figure in the



first act thereafter, leading into the extended, real-time murder sequence, marking a full 12 minutes of screen-time, in which he (brutally and realistically) kills the Taxi Driver. The disturbing sequence takes up the traditional point of a Voglerian midpoint ordeal, the narrative's central sequence, however as it draws to a close it also ends the long first act (48 minutes). A disorientating jump cut to Jacek and Piotr in court, the case ending, already tried and lost, signals the beginning of the narrative's second, final, and slightly shorter act.

Eidsvik describes Kieslowski's work as 'an antithesis to those classical fiction-film rhetorics in which each shot's job is to predict the next and in which the viewer is reassured by generic conventions that how the story is bound to end is predetermined' (1990: 51). Rather, Kieslowski 'sees the lives of individuals as ruled largely by chance rather than by fate or even probability', his characters having 'little control over their lives and little chance of success' (51). Clearly, the creation of such a feeling is aided by avoiding the restorative three-act model. The two-act structure, in this instance, functions to compare two killings: the murder of the Taxi Driver by Jacek and the execution of Jacek by the State. With each killing forming the disturbing climax of each act, Kieslowski's structure, and his title, invites the viewer to compare the morality/immorality of both. Further narrative actions are taken to indicate similarity between the two killings: both are forms of strangulation (ligature, hanging), and both sequences take up the same amount of screen-time: 12 minutes, from the beginning of Jacek's taxi ride to the end of the murder; 12 minutes from the Guard asking Piotr if he and Jacek are ready to the end of the execution. In this instance, the two-act structure functions to compare two opposing versions of the same action, and to deny the viewer the neat, restorative comfort of the three-act model. Falkowska (1995) argues that films can be seen as political to the extent that

they 'subvert or transform the classical film form', and that more traditionally shaped films may '[reveal] political content or... [present] political discourse' but, in their traditionality, reinforce the dominant ideology which they are, perhaps superficially, attempting to challenge (41). She notes that more challenging structural models, such as that found in *A Short Film About Killing*, 'undermine' the dominant ideology through an 'undercurrent of opposition' located in 'a strange solution to the plot, or other means detected by intelligent spectators' (41). Such films 'can be read as subversive statements, undermining the dominant ideology through the method of presentation' (41). In this case, Kieslowski's film '[puts] an equal sign between a murder committed by an individual and a murder committed by the state' (45). As Eidsvik rightly points out, such narrative unconventionality, combined with the director's other qualities, has led to Kieslowski being regarded 'as perhaps the most important, and certainly the most disturbing voice in Polish cinema' (51).

#### **4.6 Goal De-Emphasis & Passive Protagonists**

The most fundamental element of the Conventional Monoplot, according to multiple theorists, is the wilful pursuit of an active goal. David Mamet emphasises this particularly: 'That which the hero requires is the play. In the perfect play we find nothing extraneous to his or her single desire. Every incident either impedes or aids the hero/heroine in the quest for the single goal' (19). Alternative models he calls 'second-rate' and 'forgettable' (27). This opinion is echoed by theorists prior and post, particularly by those development industry professionals-turned handbook authors—McKee, Field, Yorke. Drama is, the consensus agrees, one person trying to do one thing. Of course, this is the convention—as Linda Aronson demonstrates convincingly, there are a wide number of equally sound multiple protagonist

structures, which create alternative meanings for the viewer. However there are also a number of ways in which screenwriters and filmmakers can de-emphasise the wilful pursuit of an active goal, in order to create specific effects, an approach noted by Menne (2019) in his analysis of the 'defection films' (75) that emerged in the early part of the New Hollywood era, in which protagonists 'wander' and drift through events which 'may lead to nothing' (58). The one-act model can offer a method of goal de-emphasis, demonstrated by *Police, Adjective*, but there are other prominent methods: stylistic de-emphasis; the passive survival goal; and the passive observer protagonist.

#### **i. Stylistic De-emphasis: Jim Jarmusch's *Down By Law***

*Down By Law* (1986) is a dual protagonist text in which Jack (John Lurie), a charismatic pimp smoothie, and Zack (Tom Waits), an anti-authoritarian out-of-work DJ, are duped by malicious acquaintances and wind up arrested and sharing a jail cell. The film's first act is devoted to establishing their characters, as well as the pace, mood and tone of the film, and developing the dual storylines that place them in the same cell. Once imprisoned, their goal is clear: to regain their freedom.

However Jarmusch, a 'darkly comic minimalist' (Levy, 1999: 186) whose work is defined by 'an unconventional approach to narrative structure' (Bollag, 1986: 11), is less interested in a rigorous and wilful pursuit of this goal than he is in spending time with the characters whilst they bond, and, more profoundly, with a stylish immersion in wry, cine-literate mood. Geoff Andrew calls *Down By Law* 'the filmic equivalent of a miniaturist's short story rather than of the novel', based around an 'adherence to slight, elliptical, seemingly inconsequential "stories" drained of the usual dramatic climaxes' (1998: 135), and this aversion to propulsive plotting is as

much a key part of the Jarmusch sensibility as his casting of alternative musicians or his Renoirian use of provincial settings. In de-emphasising goal orientation, Jarmusch is able 'to concentrate on those unspoken minutiae of human gesture and movement which say at least as much about the characters' emotions and states of mind as would any dialogue or dramatic plot twist, and to explore new methods of cinematic storytelling' (Andrew: 139-140). In a cinematic landscape suffused with conventional, maximalist methods, a focus on the unspoken minutiae of human gesture is a radical act indeed.

The bonding sequences, in which Jack and Zack become quarrelling buddies, and in which Roberto Benigni's comic relief character Bob is thrown into both their cell and their friendship, lasts from the 31<sup>st</sup> minute of the film to the 60<sup>th</sup>, taking the viewer from the initiation of the second act through to its clear midpoint (the three cellmates' escape). During this period, the plot develops over one issue: the three characters overcoming initial hostility to create a friendship bond. In other features, more focused on plot than character, this could have been achieved in thirty seconds of screen-time. For Jarmusch, however, this is an opportunity: a space to focus on minutiae, on gesture, on characterisation, on 'the slow but steady blossoming of friendship and mutual respect' (Andrew: 158). An NYU film school graduate and former assistant to Nicholas Ray, Jarmusch 'first had ideas about becoming a poet' (135), and like the poet he directs his focus away from the macro and towards the micro, not just in terms of character interaction but also in tonality: his style emphasises look, mood and soundtrack over and above plot incident. As Bollag states: 'traditional modes of narrative development are rejected... [the goal is] not to destroy the story but to construct it differently' (12). Much like Hou and Melville's goal de-emphasised studies of character and place, the presence of the crime milieu

is key—more so than the presence and subsequent cause-and-effect chain of an actual crime—as is the focus on ‘a small number of engrossing, psychologically believable characters’ over and above a ‘standard linear elaboration of single well-made plot line’ (12). Of course, Jarmusch is also interested in comedy, and as with many comedies much of the pleasure comes from establishing situations from which the performers can extract humour, and whilst the joke is still good, so is the situation.

*Down By Law* ‘proceeds by taking two habitual loners, unable or reluctant to commit to others, to a point where they grudgingly and hesitantly acknowledge the existence and the benefits of friendship’ (Andrew: 142), a minimalist narrative with only the most minor of changes in its dual protagonists, which, as with the one-act model, entails a flattening of the narrative, enabling Jarmusch to ‘create and sustain, throughout the film, a mood and tone tantalisingly pitched somewhere between poetic melancholy and deadpan, ironic, faintly absurdist humour’ (Andrew: 140). Key to Jarmusch’s cinema is a wilful aversion to mainstreamism, and what could be more mainstream than a propulsive, change-oriented plot?

## **ii. Passive Survival Goal: Takeshi Kitano’s *Sonatine* & Matthieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine***

In *The Sequence Approach*, Gulino argues that *The Shop Around The Corner* (1940), *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*, *The Graduate* and *Nights of Cabiria* all feature protagonists who, in different ways, are passive. Lajos Egri argues that protagonists need strength of will, but that that strength of will need not necessarily be active—citing the protagonist of Jack Kirkland’s *Tobacco Road*, he states, essentially, that inactivity can form a compelling driving force for a narrative when a

character remains wilfully inactive in the face of great pressure to change or develop, a dramatic set-up which can be observed to varying degrees in coming-of-age narratives such as *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *Diner* (1982) and *Dazed and Confused* (2014), in which teenage characters stubbornly resist the call to mature. According to Dancyger and Rush, 'a wide range of options is available when you begin to move away from the active main character' (141-142). As previously mentioned, Menne (2019) describes such texts as *Five Easy Pieces* and *The Graduate* as 'defection' films, characterised by wandering protagonists and muted resolution, depicting an existentialist lack of meaning and serving to critique, Menne argues, the corporate power structure within which the 'so-called auteurs' of the era were struggling and into which they would ultimately be integrated (78). He argues that calling such protagonists unmotivated misses the point: 'many of these movies drew such round protagonists that they seemed more like character studies than narratives, with questions of motivation often eclipsing the importance of plotted events' (80).

In Takeshi Kitano's *Sonatine*, 'to some, the director's best work' (Gerow, 2007: 101), the pursuit of the goal is de-emphasised through the use of a passive survival goal. As in texts such as Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), this dramatic configuration requires that the protagonist(s) kill time and deal with minor conflicts whilst awaiting either rescue or some other end to a life-threatening situation. It allows the screenwriter to focus on spending time with the characters, observing their interactions, their personalities, their manner of being, the development of their relationships, whilst the ongoing survival goal (and the threat of not surviving) creates a force of background tension and jeopardy, allowing the audience to enjoy

the characters, safe in the knowledge that a dramatic goal is still being pursued—albeit passively.

Murakawa (Takeshi Kitano) is a seasoned yakuza enforcer, in dispute with his boss's uptight lieutenant, when he and his team are given a job: travel to the island of Okinawa to intervene in a conflict between an affiliate gang and a local rival faction. Once on the island, the rival faction make a concerted attack, and Murakawa and his team are forced to hide out, taking refuge around a local beach as they wait for reinforcements from Tokyo or some other end to their immediate threat, 'bid[ing] their time with games in the sand' (Gerow: 101). Seemingly outgunned and outnumbered and therefore unable to fight back, they play games and practical jokes whilst Murakawa forms a dalliance with a local girl (Aya Kokumai), and a thread of gallows humour reminds us that they are, in essence, waiting for death. According to Gerow, '*Sonatine* was thought to be governed by the unchanging temporality of death' (105). Stephens describes the film as '[an] elegy to violence; a film about selecting the circumstances of your demise, and enjoying yourself while you wait' (1995: 34).

Such a structure allows the screenwriter to invert the expected roles of the gangsters. Although there are moments of proactive violence from Murakawa and his men, much of their behaviour is playful, childlike, silly, tender: 'with the fate of the savage men so clearly predetermined, Kitano takes his time with their destinies, and lovingly tinkers with the yakuza film's generic codes as he goes' (Stephens: 34). They begin to resemble much more a family—in the typical, as opposed to mafioso, sense—who happen to exist in a criminal realm, rather than a clan of violent criminals. Without the background survival goal creating tension, suspense and jeopardy, the screenwriter would be compelled to invent interpersonal dramatic goals

to motor these sequences, in the manner of a typical relationship drama. Instead 'patience and distraction are *Sonatine's* central effects' (Stephens: 34), and the survival goal allows Kitano, with his background in stand-up and sketch comedy, to sketch a succession of much more minor dangling causes and subsequent effects, rooted around the gangsters' time-killing—practical jokes, drunken dancing, late-night chats, sexual attraction—underpinned always by the approaching mortal threat. A 'dynamic of action and inertia, direction and distraction' is created (Stephens: 34). With music and editing Kitano draws out the ethereal, bittersweet mood, as his characters discover pleasure, laughter, brotherhood and tenderness, contrasting with the violent masculinity of the Tokyo establishment sequences, and suggesting the movie's central thesis: we are all of us, criminal or no, killing time before death. Our families, our friendships, our romantic entanglements, the narrative design tells us, all occur in the looming shadow of our mortality. Murakawa and his men are actively, above all other intentions, attempting to avoid death. Murakawa understands, and finally accepts, the futility of this. A different dominant goal for Murakawa, one more typically active—to kill the head of the local faction, or gain revenge on his Tokyo superiors, or escape the island with his new lover—would rob the viewer of this meaning. Instead, Murakawa enjoys the company of his de facto 'family' whilst metaphorically crossing his fingers and delaying the end which he gradually accepts as inevitable. Kitano's success on the international festival circuit is largely rooted in his creation of his own 'cinematic grammar, completely divorced from classical cinema' (Yamane, 2002: 11). *Sonatine*, as with much of his work, seems to be 'steeped in the conventions of so many yakuza and cop films' but in fact 'undermine[s] classical film form' (Yamane: 11).



In Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995), a film described by Kaleem Aftab in *Sight and Sound* as 'a Molotov cocktail... that sets fire to the comfortable middle class outings of much French cinema' (2020: 29), the same passive survival goal is used to provide dramatic tension, jeopardy and suspense to the time-killing exploits of his ethnic minority protagonists. Vinz (Vincent Cassel), Saïd (Saïd Taghmaoui) and Hubert (Hubert Koundé) are residents of a Parisian housing project which has clashed with the police, resulting in a resident being hospitalised. As they await news on the victim, the three friends go about their day in the project: hanging at a rooftop barbecue, meeting an unhinged drug dealer, telling jokes, crashing a swanky art opening. 'For the most part, the film shows the trio simply talking, joking, wandering the streets', with an 'emphasis on digression' (Hardwick, 2015: 129). Although an injustice has been committed against their community by the police, and although the police form the chief antagonistic force, emerging at key narrative points, including the dramatic climax, there is nothing resembling a coherent, defining active goal for the three friends (the most active strand involving Vinz's discovery of a lost police handgun and his subsequent resolution to use it to gain vengeance on a cop). Instead, as in *Sonatine*, they kill time and bond, pursue minor goals, short-term dangling causes, underpinned by a passive survival goal. There is an emphasis on 'loiterliness' as the film 'tracks the wanderings of its trio of protagonists' (Hardwick: 127). When the police appear they brutalise the protagonists: arresting and torturing Saïd and Hubert, and finally, in the shocking climax, accidentally killing Vinz. The goal for these multiple protagonists is clear: to survive their neighbourhood, in both the mortal and the psychic sense. When the characters are killing time, cracking jokes, finding fun, standing up to wealthy

hypocrites, they are also pursuing acts of survival: to survive their neighbourhood with their dignity, their humanity, their hope intact.

The film is marked by its 'closeness' with the central trio as they wander: 'This is where the film itself takes on the loiterly attributes of the critical awareness that wandering brings as well as the reporting back function' (Hardwick: 137). In order to maintain tension and suspense, Kassovitz employs 'shocking eruption[s]' (Cartelli, 2008: 63) of violence that 'lurk ominously' as the ambling narrative moves towards its 'harrowing conclusion' (Elstob, 1998: 44). How would a more typical active goal shift the meaning? Wilfully pursuing vengeance against the police would make the protagonists vengeful—they are not, they are victims. Seeking to escape their community by pursuing business opportunities, legal or otherwise, would make them empowered—they are not, they are disempowered, void of opportunities. Their environment—and perhaps, in fact, it is the environment, of which the police are a part, which forms the true chief antagonist—requires that they spend their time aimlessly, waiting always for the point where they, like their friend Abdel, may be killed. As Elstob states, 'their solidarity, friendship and humour emerge in the face of violent exclusion' (46). According to Aftab, 'since Mathieu Kassovitz's debut first screened there's arguably not been another French film that has had as significant an impact' (29), highlighting the power that can be created by diverging from conventional structural models.

### **iii. Passive Observer Protagonist: Terrence Malick's *Badlands***

Neil Campbell describes *Badlands* as 'an ambiguous and provocative film that resists comforting resolutions or moral closure' (2007: 37). Malick's narrative demonstrates how the use of a protagonist one step removed from the dramatic core can allow an

audience to engage with events driven by an unsympathetic character, allowing the viewer to enjoy observing the actions of a compelling and complex agitator without requiring them to root for their eventual triumph. The film's main characters are depicted with what Helen Patterson describes as 'opacity' and an 'equivocal state of being', which 'rather than disinterest us as viewers, actually serves to make us more curious about, and compelled by, their behaviour' (2007: 25).

Naive teenager Holly's (Sissy Spacek) life is changed when she catches the eye of charismatic amoral drifter Kit (Martin Sheen), who murders her father and takes her on a cross-state flight from the law that rapidly turns into a killing spree. Carried along in Kit's slipstream, Holly's unnervingly detached voice-over describes events with the incomprehension of a child, framing their killing spree as a childhood romance from which she expects little consequence. As Kit's killing snowballs out of control, and they approach the Badlands of Montana, where, in the opening sequence, Holly told us in voice-over their journey would end, she becomes disillusioned, and bails out on Kit, leaving him to face the police alone.

There is a precedent for structuring narratives around compelling but not sympathetic protagonists (*Portrait of a Serial Killer* [1990], *The Killer Inside Me* [2010], *Snowtown* [2011], the fiction of Jim Thompson), and equally it is perfectly possible to make unstable, violent, misanthropic characters lacking in positive qualities sympathetic (by, for instance, contrasting them with a world and other characters even worse than them, making a kind of sense of their behaviour, as in *Taxi Driver*). The connection can be made between a largely unlikeable character and the viewer by suggesting to the viewer that, given the circumstances in which the character finds themselves, they too might be no different—and in this way, sympathy is created. 'Deep within the protagonist the audience recognizes a certain

shared humanity' (McKee: 141). *I might do the same if I were in their shoes*. McKee states that the audience 'must' empathize, if not sympathize, with the protagonist, and 'if not, the audience/story bond is broken' (141).

Malick does not create such sympathy for Kit—his actions are shown as childish, irrational, impulsive, dishonest, dishonorable, selfish, brutal. As Yorke notes, the protagonist is the extension of the viewer, their on-screen 'avatar' (3)—they are the viewer within the film, a proxy self, through whom the viewer can experience, vicariously, the emotions of the narrative, and to cast a character like Kit as protagonist would be to risk alienating the viewer. Holly, on the other hand, despite demonstrating a series of negative characteristics (ignorance, simple-mindedness), is shown to be sympathetic within her context. Key to this are the variety of ways in which Malick shows her to be child-like: dressing as a child (in gym shorts, with twirling baton), observing the world with a child-like naivete. Not only a child—a girlchild: 'she is thus placed within her society—one that marginalises the female, giving them little scope to develop other than in acquiescence to the hegemony of male structures' (Latto, 2007: 89). Holly, we are shown, is led astray by Kit (himself often demonstrating the whims of a yet-to-develop teenager, despite being the far older character). We see her ignorance, we see her poor decisions, but, as a child, she is not culpable. Any child, the viewer must conclude, can be led astray by the wrong influencer. *I might not be so different*. Kit is more wilful and active, but in this instance, point-of-view and empathy are clear delineators. Beginning and ending with Holly's thoughts, the story narrated by Holly, events contextualised and missing story information filled in by her narration, audience sympathy directed toward her and, crucially, *not* Kit, narrative activity and wilfulness become less significant. Holly, a passive observer protagonist, changes little, if at

all, 'seeming, like so much in *Badlands*, trapped in cycles of repetition' (Campbell, 2007: 39). Holly's passivity creates its own particular meaning, quite apart from the meanings created by wilful, active protagonists: 'because Kit controls the journey just like her father does her life, it is only through her narration she gains power, transforming events into a romantic fantasy of love and honour. Holly remains alienated, existing within her mind and creating her own story to fulfil her particular dreams' (Campbell: 39).

Linda Aronson identifies a structure she terms the 'mentor antagonist' model, in which a 'weak person' achieves 'spiritual growth through the influence of a mentor figure' (20). She describes this mentor as 'a fascinating, enigmatic outsider with a wisdom born of pain, who, while clearly the most interesting character in the film and the person the film is about, is neither normal, nor a person whose shoes we can be inside, nor a person who changes and grows' (20-21). Although Holly's growth is negligible, Kit certainly fits Aronson's description (his questionable wisdom is swallowed by Holly), with the definition between 'who the film is about' and who is the protagonist being key.

#### **4.7 Multiple Protagonists**

By far the most common alternative structure involves the use of multiple protagonists, and as noted comprehensively by Linda Aronson the different subtypes of multiple protagonist narratives are extremely wide and varied, all providing different viewing experiences and creating different meanings. Aronson has covered this area extensively, but special attention will be paid here to significant texts in the crime genre and their varying multiple-protagonist structures. The definitions chosen

here focus on the number of protagonists, the relationship between those protagonists, and the nature of the connection between viewer and protagonists.

### **i. Parallel Protagonists: Michael Mann's *Heat***

As noted briefly in chapter one, *Heat* employs what Kristin Thompson calls a parallel protagonist structure, what Linda Aronson terms a double journey narrative. In this model, two protagonists are given equal or close-to-equal weighting within the narrative (prominence, point-of-view, screen-time, sympathy) and, as in the romantic comedy and indeed most romantic stories, the characters function as each other's main antagonists. This differs from the dual protagonist model, as seen in buddy movies like *Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid* (1969) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) in which the two protagonists essentially function as one dramatic force, pursuing together the same goal, in conflict with the same main force of antagonism, travelling a single dramatic journey together. In the parallel model, two protagonists travel separate journeys, 'either towards each other, or in parallel, or apart' (Aronson: 246).

Mann's two protagonists, troubled expert detective Vincent Hanna (Pacino) and self-reliant expert thief Neil McCauley (De Niro), are pitted against each other, but given equal prominence and weighting, the viewer encouraged to sympathise equally with both. Their qualities mirror: both are dedicated, determined, effective, single-minded, professional. Kept separate for the majority of the film, Hanna and his team of cops tracking McCauley and his crew of thieves, their paths eventually converge in a famous mid-point scene of mutually respectful dialogue. The similar foes, clearly appreciative of each other's skill and cognisant of their fundamental similarity, discuss dreams and existence. The narrative then develops toward a final

confrontation between the two men, in which one must kill the other to resolve their unavoidable conflict. Hanna's triumph is tempered by loss: he has killed his other half, his shadow self. Hanna takes McCauley's hand in sympathy as he dies, and the film ends, the narrative's restorative circle complete. Combs describes Mann's predilection for narratives about 'transformation... in which opposing tendencies may meet and merge' (1996: 13), his films 'filled with a variety of blending' (15). *Heat's* narrative weighs its chief law enforcer and law breaker equally, shaped to give their meetings epic significance, climaxing with the merging that can only happen with one man's death at the hands of the other.

Lindstrom (2000) discusses how *Heat's* narrative focuses on the destructive impact both central characters' career-focused goal orientation has on their personal lives. Criminality is shown as profession, as skilled labour, with McAuley and his crew demonstrating at least as much dedication and professionalism in their endeavours as the police—indeed McAuley's life is a good deal more orderly than Hanna's. Mann invests in his characters 'less traditional combinations of traits and situations: chaotic cop versus orderly robber, good guy cop versus good guy robber, cop and robber versus the real bad guys, work life versus home life' (Lindstrom, 2000: 35<sup>th</sup> para). If there is a good-bad spectrum at play in *Heat* then McAuley and Hanna exist, essentially, at the same end of it: 'by the end of the classical genre film the gangster lies dead in the street, he is the bad guy, and social order is restored. In *Heat*, however, the gangster and the cop are relatively sympathetic, and the forces of disorder and chaos are parsed out to several characters' (Lindstrom: 35<sup>th</sup> para), notably the ill-disciplined redneck criminal Waingro (Kevin Gage) and the hubristic white collar criminal Van Zant (William Fichtner). The parallel protagonist structure is key to this dynamic: '[such narratives are] about two individuals in a social context,

and they make their point through an exploration, often critical, of how society moulds and restricts these two individuals' (Aronson, 2010: 246).

## **ii. Dual Protagonists: Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Cercle rouge***

In Melville's *Le Cercle rouge* (1970), dual protagonist criminals Corey (Alain Delon) and Vogel (Gian Maria Volontè) are brought together to join forces in a heist. The first act functions to align the two men's trajectories: Corey is released from jail and sets out to settle an old score, whilst Vogel escapes police custody and, by chance, hides in the trunk of Corey's car. As the second act begins, their partnership is established. If the beginning of the second act marks, in John Yorke's terminology, a movement into the woods, into the special world of the narrative, then the special world of *Le Cercle rouge* is a relational world, specifically the fraternal bond between these two criminals. The remainder of act two develops and solidifies this bond through their shared heist, peaking with the extended robbery sequence, which lasts for a full 31 minutes of screen-time, taking up the bulk of the second half of act two (a structure observable in many heist narratives, including *Rififi* [1955] and *Thief* [1981]), before the culmination of their partnership in act three—a climactic confrontation with the detective (Bourvil) who had been tracking them since Vogel escaped his custody in the first act. Vogel solidifies the meaningfulness of his bond with Corey by saving him from the detective, sacrificing himself in the process, but this success is short-lived, and Vogel, Corey, and the recovered-alcoholic ex-cop (Yves Montand) who had reclaimed his sense of self by aiding them, are 'mowed down as unceremoniously as the rabbits in *La Règle du jeu*' (Hogue, 1996: 17). All three, however, took control of their lives before this point, establishing their sense of purpose and control, their sense of self, in the face of great external pressure, and



hence their deaths, as with Neil McCauley's death in *Heat*, symbolise a form of moral victory. *Better to die standing up than live on your knees.*

Hogue describes *Le Cercle rouge* as 'the last of his consummate efforts' with 'a dramatic scope that is matched only by *L'Armée des ombres* among Melville's films' (Hogue: 20). He argues that the film 'takes shape as a species of revenge tragedy, with events playing themselves out as dispassionate demonstrations of an older police official's repeated assertion that all men, criminal or not, are guilty' (Hogue: 16). More profound however, this project argues, is the even weighting given to the dual criminal protagonists as they seek to outwit the police. The narrative shape highlights the bond between the two men over and above the personal journey of either, and the dramatic climax supports this, demonstrating that the code both men lived by, which they recognised in each other upon first meeting and which, therefore, led to their dual journey, was more important than even their lives. That they die together in assertion of their shared ideals only solidifies the bond which lies at the heart of the film's dramatic structure.

### **iii. Cannon Protagonists: Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* & Derek Cianfrance's *The Place Beyond the Pines***

Aronson identifies a model she terms a 'consecutive stories narrative' (328), in which she includes a variety of texts including *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Amores Perros* (2001), *City of God* (2003) and *Rashomon* (1950). She describes films that 'tell a series of separate stories (often different versions or consequences of the same event) one after the other', and provides a series of subtypes: 'stories walking into the picture', 'different versions/perspectives of the same event', and 'different consequences triggered by the same event' (328). In the simplest version of the consecutive stories

narrative, largely discrete stories proceed sequentially, with different protagonists—sometimes protagonists linked by the same overarching story, sometimes linked mainly by theme. We can call this model a cannon protagonist model, since the story shape relies on the settling of one protagonist's story before handing over the narrative to the next protagonist (even if that story is nested within a larger macronarrative), and because, although minor links exist between these storylines, the segmentation is clear and profound.

Jia Zhangke is described by Celia Mello as 'one of cinema's most innovative and important directors', claiming that his work has 'significantly changed the history of Chinese cinema and left an indelible mark in world cinema history' (2014: 344). Jia's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) is an example of a cannon protagonist narrative in which each instalment is linked largely by theme—in this instance, the inhumanity of China's capitalism, and the violence which underpins it. The narrative is strikingly balanced: an opening 4-minute hook sequence introduces Zhou San (Wang Baoqiang) as he encounters and expertly slaughters three hoodlums, before he crosses paths with Dahai (Wu Jiang); Dahai becomes the protagonist in story one, in a self-contained sequence lasting 35 minutes; Zhou San reappears as the protagonist of story two, in a self-contained sequence lasting 24 minutes; a locational link then leads us into story three—as Zhou San rides away from a murder scene on a bus we hand over to another bus passenger, on his way to meet Xiao Yu (Tao Zhao), the protagonist of the third story, a section lasting 30 minutes; the fourth and final story contains only thematic links to the others (and resultingly feels somewhat anti-climactic), in which down-on-his-luck menial worker Xiao Hui (Luo Lanshan) falls in love with a sex-worker, ending in tragedy—a self-contained sequence also lasting 30 minutes; a final 4 minute coda features Xiao Yu escaping, moving towards

freedom, with the help of a character from the first story, bringing us back to the location of the film's opening, and a traditional play which scored part of the first story's action. Hook and coda both last four minutes and are set in the same location, featuring different characters but linked by music, bookending four sections of roughly 30 minutes each (two exactly 30 minutes), totalling almost exactly 2 hours of screen-time (2 hours 8 minutes with the addition of the hook and coda).

Kristin Thompson states that 'since the earliest years of the feature film... Hollywood practitioners have, whether deliberately or instinctively, tailored their narratives into large-scale segments of roughly balanced length' (1999: 21-22). She claims that these large-scale parts of a narrative 'have remained roughly constant, averaging between 20 and 30 minutes in length', allowing filmmakers to create 'subtle patterns of balance' (36), and also notes that 'the most frequent reason a narrative changes direction is a shift in the protagonist's goals' (27). In this sense, despite changing protagonists, each section of Jia's narrative conforms to convention: conventional length, each defined by a different dramatic goal for its protagonist, each section ending when the goal has been completed, a new goal introduced along with the new protagonist. The imbalance created by the shifting protagonists is counter-weighted by the structural balance of the narrative. Here, then, is an example of what Jason Lee meant when he stated that 'some of the best screenplays seemingly break all the rules but if we look under the surface they are simultaneously keeping many of them' (128-129)—and Jia's film, notably, was chosen in 2017 by the *New York Times* as one of the best 25 films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (*New York Times*, 2017) and won the Best Screenplay award at the Cannes Film Festival 2017.

Jia has been described as ‘the foremost Chinese director of his generation’ (Rayns, 2013: 32), his work defined by a ‘concern with the oppressing social relations in capitalism’ (Jovanovic, 2019: 31). *A Touch of Sin* was inspired by real events in Jia’s homeland, and the film itself can be viewed as a kind of “state of the nation” report (Rayns: 32). Through the sequential multiple protagonist structure the narrative is able to focus viewer attention not on the trials of a single wilful protagonist but on a cross-section of peers all struggling under the same oppressive system, whilst the circularity provided by the epilogue and prologue creates unity and focuses attention on the ultimate systemic antagonistic force underpinning each of the four narrative segments, with the narrative ‘closing, as it began, in Shangxi Province with the rapacious expansion of the Shengli Corporation’ (Rayns: 32). This ‘neat circularity... consolidates Jia’s observation that expanding conglomerates, working hand-in-pocket with local government, have effectively replaced the Communist Party as controllers of individual destinies’ (Rayns: 32).

Derek Cianfrance’s *The Place Beyond The Pines*, praised by Peter Bradshaw for its ‘repudiation of neatness, its unintegrated narrative, [and] structural daring’ (2013: para. 2), presents a similar structural model, but with more profound links between each protagonist’s story—indeed, each story can be seen as a sort of extended chapter in a larger macronarrative, with some but not all protagonists playing significant roles in other sections. It also features an example of an additional unconventional dramatic schism, initially introduced in *Psycho* (1960) and noted in *No Country for Old Men*: the untimely death of the protagonist.

Despite the overarching macronarrative the story is clearly divided into separate sections (three in this instance), each headed by a different protagonist. Thirza Wakefield, in her *Sight and Sound* review, describes it as ‘a trans-generational

narrative without a dominant character' (2013: 85) in which life 'move[s] around' the characters as they remain 'unalterably themselves, and getting nowhere' (84). The first story runs from the film's opening and lasts for 52 minutes, with stunt biker turned bank robber Luke (Ryan Gosling) the protagonist, the end of the section marked by his death; in a striking innovation, his killer, police officer Avery (Bradley Cooper), then takes over as protagonist, in a section in which he faces both the corrupt members of his own police force and his guilt over the killing of Luke, lasting for 50 minutes of screen-time; followed by a third and final section featuring Luke and Avery's two sons, Jason (Dane DeHaan) and AJ (Emory Cohen), with Jason the most prominent, lasting 44 minutes. Cianfrance's narrative shape highlights the passing down of emotional and psychological damage between generations: the damage of Luke's wayward parenting and early death is handed on to Avery in a different emotional form, through the guilt that tortures him; Avery's struggles to overcome both that guilt and the corrupt forces in his department lead him, ultimately, to emotional distance and an abusive dynamic with his own son, AJ; Luke's son Jason, troubled by the mystery of his absent dad, forms a bond with AJ and discovers his father's identity, and Avery's role in his death, leading to a final confrontation. An emotional through-line ties the stories, accumulating power as it draws together disparate protagonists in different time periods.

A.O. Scott, in his New York Times review (2013), states that 'the most radical aspect of *The Place Beyond the Pines* is its relentless linearity, the way it tells its story without foreshadowing or flashing back or resorting to other conventional shortcuts' (6<sup>th</sup> para), referring to the sequential cannon structure. Robitzsch (2018) argues that the film 'operates with a quite different understanding of time: a cyclical rather than a linear one' (23<sup>rd</sup> para), helping to 'complete the sketch of a world in

which events repeat themselves at certain intervals' (5<sup>th</sup> para). The cannon structure suggests that 'actions are fated' (3<sup>rd</sup> para) but tied to generational connectedness as opposed to the more individual-oriented determinism presented by the restorative single protagonist model. 'The emphasis on fate and cyclical thinking makes *The Place Beyond the Pines* very atypical viewing for mainstream Western audiences' (3<sup>rd</sup> para). Bradshaw compares Cianfrance to Terrence Malick, 'another real filmmaker who makes his own mistakes in his own style in the course of making his own fiercely individual, stunning movies' (para. 6), highlighting the impact of his unconventional structuring and placing such unconventional structural practice in a canonical context.

#### **iv. Interweaved Protagonists: Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu's *Amores Perros***

Aronson views this model as a 'portmanteau film', a version of the consecutive stories narrative, in which the narrative begins at the second-act turning point and 'returns there after all other stories are told' (347). The portmanteau plotline is able to 'support and sustain many plots', whilst the 'jump from its opening second-act turning point back to its disturbance' creates suspense and 'rapidly [tells] audiences what film they're in' (347).

In *Pulp Fiction*, the story of Jules' (Samuel L Jackson) spiritual awakening forms the portmanteau story, framing the other plotlines. Tarantino creates an extra layer of complexity by opening the film with Pumpkin (Tim Roth) and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer), not revealing until the film's climactic sequence their placement in Jules' plotline. Such techniques emphasize progressive disclosure: Tarantino slowly, piece-by-piece, reveals the full shape of his narrative and the links between

each story, leveraging one of the key tools in audience engagement—the unanswered question (*who is this character? How do they fit into the narrative?*). Aronson states that despite the many ways in which Tarantino’s narrative challenges orthodoxy ‘it is strikingly powerful, fast, suspenseful’ (2010: 351). This project would argue that it is in large part *because* the structure challenges orthodoxy that it discovers this power.

In this model, the interweaving of storylines is profound and impactful, creating a very different feel to the clearly segmented cannon protagonist model. Even in a text such as *The Place Beyond The Pines*, in which there are significant links between stories and an overarching macronarrative, the segmentation of the separate stories creates an ordered, progressive feeling. In more deeply interweaved narratives, such as *Pulp Fiction*, the separate stories are fused together through various techniques (fractured timelines, non-linear timeframe, circular narrative, shared characters), creating the sense that these protagonists and their stories exist in a concurrent timeframe (even though they may not), and our sympathies for them, rather than progressing neatly from one to the next, overlap. The interweaving is profound and thorough, creating a markedly different viewing experience to, for instance, Jia’s *A Touch of Sin*, in which the principle link between stories is thematic. Thematic links play a key role in Tarantino’s narrative too: as Aronson points out, there is ‘no inherent chronologically rising suspense’, but instead the narrative jumps between ‘a range of equally important stories... connected by theme and character’ before ending ‘in the chronological middle’ (2010: 354).

Similarly, in Iñárritu’s *Amores Perros*, the segmentation of the stories is broken in several ways, creating a concurrent sympathetic connection between protagonists, and a more profound interweaving effect than can be noticed in the

cannon protagonist model. As with *Pulp Fiction*, the narrative opens on the second act turning point of the portmanteau story featuring Octavio (Gael García Bernal) and Susanna (Vanessa Bauche), the good-hearted younger brother of an abusive thug (Marco Pérez) and the brother's young wife, then flashes back to the initial disturbance of this story, before progressing to two further stories. However the Octavio & Susanna portmanteau plotline, unlike the separate plotlines in *A Touch of Sin* and *The Place Beyond The Pines*, is not stand-alone: rather, it contains set-up elements of the other two stories which will follow it, sewn into the set-up of the portmanteau story, much like a more traditional multiple protagonist narrative of concurrent plotlines. Therefore, although the three stories are presented in segmented order, framed by the portmanteau, they bleed into each other, creating, as in *Pulp Fiction*, the sense that these characters and their stories exist in a concurrent temporal and emotional space, interconnected by happenstance, chance, chaos, community, regionality, nationality, or (often) a combination of these factors. As Berg (2006) states, 'the nonlinear ordering of events as seen in *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs* doesn't do away with the cause-and-effect chain, it merely suspends it for a time, eventually to be ordered by the competent spectator' (41).

Such a structure 'serves to underline the thematic negotiation between contingency and determinism in these films' (Cameron, 2006: 75), marking a movement away from 'linearity and causality' and towards a different kind of narrative, 'discontinuous and fragmented' (Klecker, 2011: 11), quite different to the classical Hollywood narrative, which 'functions to promote narrative clarity' (Panek, 2006: 4<sup>th</sup> para). González Iñárritu has cited notable iconoclasts John Cassavetes, Lars Von Trier and Wong Kar-wai as key influences in the development of this fractured storytelling structure, whilst screenwriter Arriaga, originally a novelist, 'cited



William Faulkner... as the basis for this technique' (Menne, 2007: 74). Bordwell has labelled such narratives 'network narratives', defined by intertwining plotlines, and emphasising the interconnectedness of societies and systems (Bordwell, 2006: 1<sup>st</sup> para). Janet Murray uses the term 'violence hub' (Murray, in Cameron: 63) to describe narratives in which a central violent incident creates 'a web' of plotlines that explore or react to the incident 'from multiple points of view' (Murray, in Cameron: 63). As Cameron notes, this allows the screenwriter and filmmaker to focus on 'the confrontation between contingency and order, with the violent event representing an eruption of the contingent' (Cameron, 2008: 63). Furthermore, by 'displacing' death from its more narratively typical place at the dramatic climax and shifting character deaths to more unexpected points, to 'the beginning or middle of the narrative', as Tarantino does with Vincent's death in *Pulp Fiction*, such a narrative 'makes death immanent rather than imminent' (Cameron: 63). Such irruptions of contingency and the immanence of death mark these narratives apart from the restorative model, in which linearity and causality lead to restorative endings.

#### **v. Concurrent Protagonists: Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven*, The Coen Brothers' *Fargo* & Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic***

In the concurrent protagonist model, the audience's sympathies are divided between a collection of protagonists, as opposed to being sequentially tied to cannon protagonists or interweaved protagonists. This model accounts for multi-character stories in which a band of heroes pursue the same goal (*The Magnificent Seven* [1960], *The Full Monty* [1997]); stories in which protagonists linked by the same overarching problem or situation pursue separate goals and act in antagonistic force against each other but, crucially, share audience sympathy (in essence, a more

complex model of the parallel protagonist structure); and stories on a broad social scale in which a large number of mostly disconnected protagonists pursue separate plotlines linked primarily by theme.

Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven* (2002) is a prominent example of the first type of concurrent protagonist narrative. An adaptable director whose extensive filmography straddles multiple genres, Soderbergh is not averse to pushing conventional boundaries—his debut feature, *sex, lies and videotape* (1989), is noteworthy for its use of a passive protagonist. His work exudes 'a playfulness toward established cinematic forms' and a tendency to rework 'conventional narrative tropes while gesturing self-consciously toward Hollywood's past' (Carruthers, 2006: 9). Whilst Daniel Ocean (George Clooney) and right-hand man Rusty (Brad Pitt) head the *Ocean's* band of heroes, and whilst Daniel takes the bulk of audience sympathy, particularly during his subplot with ex-wife Tess (Julia Roberts), our sympathies are divided between him, Rusty and the rest of his team as they work together towards the same dramatic goal—the big casino heist. This is the most familiar model of the multiple protagonist structure, described by Aronson as 'several people travelling the same journey, with the story passed from one protagonist to the next, like a relay race, and each character showing a different response to the quest, siege or reunion adventure' (209). Aronson defines the *Ocean's* model as a 'one last job' narrative, and proposes other subtypes: 'soldiers on a near-impossible quest; 'the Cinderella sports team', 'let's put on a show', and several others (210-211). We can term this model a *concurrent allies* model, since it focuses on a bonded group or team pursuing the same goal. Berg (2006) calls this a subdivided version of the single protagonist model, citing *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) as other examples.

A second type of concurrent protagonist narrative features a small number of interconnected protagonists pitted against each other—what we might call a *concurrent adversaries* narrative. Joel & Ethan Coen's *Fargo* (1996) is key example: with its 'simple set-up' it looks 'like a straightforward crime narrative' but 'soon spirals through countless narrative convolutions' allowing the Coens to 'subvert audience expectations, right down to the title card that claims that the film is based on a true story (this would later be revealed as a ruse)' (Godfrey, 2015: 58). The film opens with Jerry Lundegaard (William H Macy), an anti-hero protagonist, facing criminal antagonists Showalter (Steve Buscemi) and Grimsrud (Peter Stormare), as well as the antagonistic forces within his own family, headed by father-in-law Wade (Harvey Presnell). This opening section of the drama lasts 33 minutes, forming the entirety of the first act, from Jerry's initial meeting with Showalter and Grimsrud to Showalter & Grimsrud's fatal encounter with an unfortunate patrol cop and two passing civilians. It is not until the conclusion of this first act that we are introduced to Margie Gunderson (Frances McDormand), the most sympathetic character in the overarching narrative, a comedic take on a typical heroic protagonist, tasked with investigating the crime that Jerry has initiated.

As the narrative progresses, Showalter is not dramatically limited to an antagonistic role: rather, he has his own separate and well-defined plotline as an antihero protagonist in conflict with the silent, threatening Grimsrud. There are three distinct storylines in total, with differing protagonists: Margie vs Jerry & Showalter & Grimsrud, Jerry vs Showalter & Grimsrud & Wade & the Police, and Showalter vs Grimsrud. The plotlines are interweaved such that each protagonist plays a crucial antagonistic role in (at least) one of the other plotlines.

A possible reading of the narrative might define Margie as a standard detective protagonist (who, as most classic detective protagonists, from Phillip Marlowe to Jake Gittes, undergoes no change during the narrative but rather witnesses change in a prominent secondary character), with Jerry the main antagonist. The other plotlines, headed by Jerry and Showalter respectively, can be read as subplots to the main plot. This being the case however, we must accept that this compelling narrative waits until the beginning of the second act to introduce its single protagonist, and whilst all unconventional schisms are possible this reading does not seem to accurately reflect the *Fargo* viewing experience, and our connection with the pitiable, unfortunate Jerry and with the put-upon Showalter.

In this shape then, three separate protagonists interact, one being a comedic take on a heroic protagonist, the other two comedic versions of antihero protagonists, each in conflict with their own antagonistic forces, some of which are played by other protagonists. This structure presents a web of interconnectedness, with a partitioning of sympathies between a small group of characters, and a spiralling loss-of-control as each character is drawn deeper and deeper into the consequences of the opening act's criminality. Fundamentally, this shape highlights the expanding consequences of a single event and its impact on several characters whilst keeping those characters tightly causally connected (the interweaved model can also focus on the consequences of a single event—indeed *Amores Perros* does just this—but explodes those consequences out on a broader scale to more disconnected characters, creating a more society-wide viewpoint). By presenting criminal antagonists Jerry and Showalter as sympathetic protagonists in their own plotlines, the narrative is able to focus on the pitiable nature of their inadequacies, as opposed to the fearsome and/or powerful force typical of the crime antagonist (and

which, in this narrative, is possessed only by Grimsrud and fringe antagonist Shep Proudfoot [Steve Reevis], neither of whom, tellingly, play a protagonist role). Again, this ties into the comedic tone: criminals in this world are more pitiable than fearsome. Key to both the ally and adversary examples of the concurrent protagonist narrative is that several protagonists progress through their plotlines concurrently, our sympathies divided (not necessarily equally) between them. Generally regarded as amongst the most 'idiosyncratic' (Godrey: 78) filmmakers in contemporary Hollywood, resistant to 'the linear approach to storytelling typical of traditional Hollywood' (Carstensen, 2019: 334), the Coens' will to deviate not just from expectations of character tropes but from structural norms creates the opportunity to move beyond the rather limited meaning offered by the restorative single protagonist model. By 'dividing the plot among several characters' they are able to create 'a sense of objectivity and omniscience [that] more realistically mimics the way real-life events tend to occur' (Robson, 2008: 79). Their crime narratives in particular are notable for their plausibility—though their characters may be larger-than-life and rooted in a cineliterate postmodernism, events progress in highly plausible ways, defined by credible motivations within context.

A third type of concurrent protagonist narrative is possible, in which a wide number of protagonists, encompassing a broad overview of a society or culture/subculture, progress along separate plotlines linked by the same socio-political issue or theme. Aronson terms this model a 'tandem narrative', which she describes as 'always didactic and typically deal[ing] with communities', consisting of 'equally important stories... unfolding simultaneously and chronologically in the same time frame' (182) which may be largely unconnected except by theme (182). In this model, the protagonists are neither allies nor adversaries (for the most part), but

rather *concurrent peers*, linked by community or system. Examples include Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2002) and Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra* (2008).

Each of these models—concurrent allies, concurrent adversaries, concurrent peers—creates different meanings and viewing experiences, focusing on comradeship, the spiralling consequences of one event on a small group of people, and on society-wide impacts of one socio-political issue respectively.

#### **4.8 Untimely Death of the Protagonist: the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men*, Derek Cianfrance's *The Place Beyond The Pines* & William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in LA***

Perhaps the most shocking schism from the Conventional Monoplot model occurs when a typical single protagonist, one with whom the audience has formed a sympathetic bond, is killed before the dramatic climax. The original untimely death, of course, occurred with the shower scene murder of Marion Crane, 46mins into Hitchcock's *Psycho*—a scene described by Robert Ito in *The New York Times* as 'one of the most familiar in film history' (Ito, 2017: 10), a scene which has been 'dissected by scholars and critics and parodied by everyone from Mel Brooks to *The Simpsons*' (Ito: 10). The cultural impact of this schism was so profound, in fact, that at least one entire book has been written in response: Phillip Skerry's *Psycho in the Shower: The History of Cinema's Most Famous Scene* (2008). Indeed, *Psycho*'s enduring legacy may be based in large part on its midpoint protagonist killing and the shockwaves it created. As Hitchcock himself told Truffaut in their canonical interview: 'the construction of the story and the way in which it was told caused audiences all over the world to react and become emotional' (2017: 283).

Significantly, it is the story construction, the way the narrative is shaped, that Hitchcock points to as central to the film's impact.

As covered in chapter one, the Coen brothers' *No Country For Old Men* offers a significant example of this model—particularly significant because, despite such an unconventional schism, the film, like *Psycho*, was both critically and commercially successful, winning Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay and grossing \$164m (The Numbers.com, n.d..). Further examples in the crime genre have also been mentioned previously: Derek Cianfrance's *The Place Beyond the Pines*, a canon protagonists narrative in which the protagonist of the first story is killed by the a new character who then becomes the protagonist of the second story, and William Friedkin's *To Live And Die in LA*, in which the morally dubious detective protagonist, Chance, is brutally and shockingly killed by a secondary antagonist in the build-up to the dramatic climax, leaving his partner and ally to take over as protagonist.

This model offers a powerful, visceral shock, brutally severing the sympathetic link between viewer and protagonist at an unexpected point in the narrative. Schneider describes the power of this model in relation to *Psycho*: 'narratively-speaking, there is no expecting such a horrific act, given the hermeneutic code thus far established... [Marion's] death constitutes a rupture in the hermeneutic code' (1999: 72). Canet suggests that '*Psycho*'s status as a milestone in film history is due to a significant extent to this highly influential scene' (2018: 18), causing aftershocks which 'reverberated far beyond the industry' (Thomas, 2010: 87). More than any other unconventional schism, this model embodies the wakeful effect mentioned by David Foster Wallace. It can function to redirect viewer attention from personal conflict to more existential matters (*No Country for Old Men*), and to depict a ruthless

and chaotically violent world (*Psycho*, *No Country for Old Men*, *To Live And Die in LA*).

#### **4.9 Modular Structure: Christopher Nolan's *Following* & *Memento* & Lynne Ramsay's *We Need To Talk About Kevin***

In Christopher Nolan's first two feature films, *Following* (1999) and *Memento* (2000), a linear storyline is fractured into distinct separate plotlines, creating a non-linear viewing experience in which the audience forms a sympathetic connection with different iterations of the same character from different points in the chronology of the story, waiting for the gaps between those iterations to be filled. As in the interweaved protagonists model (particularly *Pulp Fiction*) this approach masks story information, intensifying the impact of progressive disclosure and not only dangling causes but, additionally, dangling effects: the audience witnesses the aftermath of some unseen event, and waits for the cause to be depicted. Subsequently, suspense is increased. Cameron describes these modular narratives as 'articulat[ing] a sense of time as divisible and subject to manipulation' (2008: 1), comprised of 'a series of disarticulated narrative pieces, often arranged in radically achronological ways via flashforwards, overt repetition or a destabilization of the relationship between present and past' (1). They address time, and our relationship to it, as a central concern, their rise in prominence concurrent with rapid technological development and reflecting, Cameron argues, a techno-cultural shift and its impact on the way filmmakers (and film viewers) order the world to make meaning.

In *Following*, a lonely aspiring writer (Jeremy Theobald) is drawn into a web of criminality when he forms a bond with a yuppie-ish career burglar (Alex Haw) and a



mysterious blonde woman (Lucy Russell). The narrative is divided into three distinct timelines: timeline A features the protagonist pre-criminality, naïve and uncertain and scruffy; timeline B features the protagonist post-criminality, confident and well-dressed; and timeline C features the protagonist after some terrible incident, complete with black eye and split lip. As with Jia's *A Touch of Sin*, a hook and epilogue frame the action: in this instance, the protagonist opens the film telling his story to an unseen man; this conversation is returned to at points throughout the narrative; until it is revealed, in the epilogue, that the protagonist is in fact giving a confession to a detective (John Nolan), and that the trap set for him by Cobb has sealed his fate.

The opening hook gives what Nolan describes as 'the headlines' (Nolan, 2012) of the story, including visions of the protagonist in each of the timelines: scruffy loner, slick criminal, beaten victim. Timeline A then proceeds until the 16<sup>th</sup> minute of screen-time, depicting the protagonist's meeting with antagonist Cobb (inciting incident) and his first act of criminality (turning point). In this reduced-length, micro-budget, 67 minute narrative, the end of this opening sequence is also the end of the first act. The second act begins in timeline B: time has passed, and the protagonist has changed, become the slicker, more confident version we saw in *Snatches* in the opening hook. He meets the mysterious blonde woman, who he is able to entice using his newfound confidence. The narrative then shifts into a brief fragment of timeline C: the protagonist, beaten and bloodied, making a phone call to Cobb, with whom he is now, apparently, at odds. The second act progresses in this fashion: shifting from timeline A to B to C, until timeline A bleeds into timeline B after 44 minutes of screen-time, when Cobb encourages the protagonist to commit credit card fraud and, resultingly, to change his hair and clothes. A short sequence

showing his image change then closes both timeline A and the second act, leaving timelines B and C to complete the third act, including a climactic burglary scene. Midway through the third act (after 53 minutes of screen-time) timeline B then bleeds into timeline C, in a scene in which Cobb beats up the protagonist, revealing how the protagonist got his injuries and closing timeline B. Timeline C remains, playing out in linear fashion, blending with the framing device (protagonist's confession) which then closes the narrative.

In *Memento*, a similar version of the same model can be observed. The opening hook shows what would be, chronologically, the narrative's climactic murder playing out in dream-like reverse. Timeline A is then initiated: presented in black-and-white to differentiate it visually, this timeline plays out forwards over a short timeframe, with protagonist Leonard (Guy Pearce) talking to someone on the phone, delivering expositional story information; the narrative shifts quickly to timeline B, presented in colour, which plays in reverse sequence, moving backwards from the opening scene's murder, each new scene depicting the events that immediately precede the last. After 95 minutes of screen-time, in the middle of the climactic sequence, timeline A ends and blends with the start of timeline B, uniting the two timelines and shifting from black-and-white to colour mid-scene. The remainder of the scene shows how this moment ties up with the opening of the last scene from timeline B, ending the film.

The narrative, then, is constructed from two timelines, one moving forwards and one moving backwards towards the same point: 'at the very end of the film's syuzhet (plot), we are deposited at the beginning of the fabula (story)' (Cameron: 101). Notably, when viewing the story in chronological order, it becomes clear that the moment the two timelines are moving towards would be, chronologically, the act

one turning point—Leonard’s murder of the drug-dealer Jimmy Grant (Larry Holden), his point of no return and movement into the violent world of the narrative. Timeline A, then, is the chronological first act; timeline B the chronological second and third acts. Chopped up and spliced together, of course, they form a different macrostructure, with the chronological act one turning point becoming the film’s dramatic climax.

Cameron argues that modular narratives ‘put the narrative future in jeopardy by suggesting that events may be predetermined, and put the past in jeopardy via the destabilization of memory and history’ (140). Buckland points out that whilst such films emphasize a highly complex narration (syuzhet) they may partner that narration with a simple and conventional story (fabula) (2009). More radical films, such as David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997), partner complex narrative with complex story, leading to a substantially more alienating effect, what Berg calls ‘fascinating examples of avant-garde filmmaking, firmly within the Dadaist tradition’ (2006: 12). Nolan’s work requires more active audience participation than the typical, conventional, restorative three-act narrative, emphasizing ‘the fundamental role of viewers’ activity in the process of film viewing’ (Ghislotti: 88), but the use of a familiar story (fabula) mediates the alienation effect created by more avant-garde filmmakers such as Lynch. Nolan, ultimately, is making art films for the multiplex. His films challenge the audience, demanding ‘meticulous attention’ to a ‘detailed, complex narrative’ (Ni Fhlainn: 150), but provide them with familiar stories, making the task of reconstituting and making sense of the narrative more manageable, the overall impact of the film less alienating. *Memento*’s story (fabula), as is the case across Nolan’s oeuvre, adheres to the conventions of the restorative three-act model, but the distortion of that story through the fragmented and re-ordered narrative (syuzhet)

fundamentally shifts the meaning typically engendered by restorative stories. Whilst the restorative model suggests a kind of determinism, it does so at the point of resolution, creating a retrospective and comforting sensemaking: *it all meant something in the end*. The predetermination effect in *Memento* has an altogether more disturbing connotation: *terrible things lie in the future and nothing can be done to change them, because they've already happened*. The conventional story creates unity and structural harmony, and makes the audience's job of reconstituting the narrative more manageable, but the radical fragmentation of the narrative undermines and challenges the restorative implication inherent in that structure.

With the gaps between the different iterations of the protagonist creating more than the typical number of dangling causes and, innovatively, dangling effects, suspense is heightened, as is the sense that the viewer, like the character, is travelling through an unsafe and untrustworthy world, where people may not be what they seem. It also heightens the sense of foreboding: in *Following*, for instance, the protagonist's scenes with the enticing blonde woman are immediately followed by scenes in which he is bloodied and black-eyed, suggesting her link to his downfall. In classics of the noir genre, such foreshadowing is often done verbally through voice-over, as in *Double Indemnity* (1944), but Nolan's structure allows him to achieve the same foreboding effect visually.

In Lynne Ramsay's *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2011) a similar modular structure is used to represent the protagonist's response to trauma, and, as in Nolan's work, to intensify progressive disclosure and heighten suspense, achieving 'surprising narrative intensity and cohesion' despite its fractured and 'impressionistic' structure (McGill, 2011: 16). Three timelines intersect: timeline A, the present, features protagonist Eva (Tilda Swinton) dealing with the aftermath of a mass murder

committed by her son Kevin (Ezra Miller). The narrative flashes back to two separate past timelines: timeline B shows Eva's life before the incident, whilst timeline C shows snatches of the incident itself and the events immediately preceding it. In the first of two first-act sequences, the majority of the narrative occurs in timeline A, as Eva tries to obtain a new job and deals with the emotional and psychological aftermath of the murders, flashing back to brief moments from timelines B and C, represented as dreamlike, distant, flavoured with foreboding, contrasting with the cold reality of timeline A. In the first act's second sequence, timeline A intercuts with a more realist, wakeful timeline B, depicting Eva's pregnancy and struggles with the infant Kevin, with very limited flashes of the traumatic incident contained within timeline C. The second act is rooted largely in timeline B, as Eva and her husband (John C Reilly) deal with young Kevin and his growing behavioural problems, intercut with sequences from timeline A. Timeline C largely disappears, until, near the beginning of the third act, timeline B blends into timeline C and we finally see (obliquely) Kevin carrying out the mass murder—the traumatic event that timeline B has been moving towards, that timeline A has been moving away from. The incident, the crux of timeline C, in fact forms, chronologically, the climax of timeline B and the opening disruption of timeline A. Once this traumatic event has played out, only timeline A remains, bringing the narrative to its conclusion, as Eva visits Kevin in jail, and comes to some kind of understanding and acceptance around what has happened.

De Luca describes Ramsay's cinema as an interrogation of 'the very phenomenology of the moving image' (2019: 5<sup>th</sup> para). According to López, her work is 'obsessed' with 'traumatic experiences... it is precisely in her films' crucial scenes of trauma that the core of Ramsay's cinematic approach becomes clear' (2019: 119).

As her camera moves the viewer out of the 'observational', objective perspective, the viewer becomes immersed in a highly 'subjective', expressionistic recreation of her characters' inner worlds: 'the contours of the real world disappear, its sharpness recedes, sound fades, the camera moves hypnotically as in a trance' (López: 119). The viewer is invited to experience Eva's deeply traumatised mental state in the manner she experiences it. Not just stylistically, but structurally. *Kevin* becomes 'a jigsaw exercise in disassembly, suggestive of a catastrophe so explosive it has splintered time' (Robey, 2011: 79)—a tragedy whose effects we are faced with from the opening sequence but which we aren't actually shown until the film's climactic movement. As in *Memento*, causality is ruptured and upended, and effects precede causes. The resulting narrative impact is far from that of the restorative model: 'deeply demoralizing and destabilizing in the moment and extremely impressive after the fact' (Telaroli, 2008: 73). In further similarity to *Memento*, the story (fabula) is broadly conventional, and the dramatic climax ties together the disparate narrative threads in a unifying way familiar from the restorative model, but the ordering of events in the narrative (syuzhet) fractures temporality and causality in a way which fundamentally disturbs and undermines the restorative qualities in the story.

#### **4.10 Unconventional Structure in Practice**

The Conventional Monoplot model offers a highly effective method for telling particular stories with particular meanings. Structured around a single, wilful, sympathetic protagonist with a propulsive causal plot, the narrative is designed to put the protagonist through a journey of profound change. In the typical model, this change is heroic: the protagonist accrues the experience, skills, knowledge, wisdom, self-insight, equipment to overcome their greatest antagonistic force and transcend

their lesser self (*The Apartment* [1960], *Lawrence of Arabia* [1962], *The Verdict* [1982], *Star Wars* episodes IV, V and VI [1977; 1980; 1983], *Three Colours Blue* [1993], the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy [2001; 2002; 2003], *A History of Violence* [2005], *Red Road* [2006], *A Prophet* [2009]). In the minimalist model, the shape of the journey is the same but on a reduced scale (*Wild Strawberries* [1957], *Rosetta* [1999], *In The Mood for Love* [2000], *Fish Tank* [2009], *Weekend* [2011]). In the inverted model, a grandiose, naïve or hubristic character brings about their own downfall (*Sunset Boulevard* [1950], *The Godfather* [1972], *Chinatown* [1974], *Scarface* [1983]). This model orders the world into a restorative, comforting shape, in which every action leads inexorably and indivisibly to the conclusion which, on its revelation, becomes inevitable.

If the screenwriter wishes to represent the world in an alternative manner, to create alternative meaning, they must look to an alternative structure. Multiple protagonist models focus on the relationships between people rather than the transformative journey of one person. One- and two-act structures confound restorative expectations and de-emphasize the possibility of change. Modular structure re-envision our relationship with time and identity whilst heightening suspense. The untimely death of the protagonist breaks the connection between viewer and protagonist, depicting a more chaotic and less knowable world. Re-modelling the first act shifts focus from propulsive, change-oriented plotting toward stasis and the tonality of time and place. De-emphasising the goal allows for passive protagonists and anti-mainstream stylization.

The following two chapters offer the creative element of this project (feature screenplay *A Reverie*) preceded by a contextualizing introduction and followed by a reflective analysis. The screenplay seeks to demonstrate unconventional structural

choices in practice in the crime screenplay, whilst the reflection seeks to contextualize and interrogate those choices and their meanings. The two chapters together will locate a methodology for unconventional practice in screenwriting, completing the practical framework for unconventional practice which this project has sought to create.



## 5a. Introduction to *A Reverie*

The aims for the creative portion of this project have been: to demonstrate use of one of the unconventional models in practice, and in doing so locate through practice a methodology for unconventional screenwriting; to advance and develop my own structuring skills as a screenwriter in light of the knowledge created in chapters one to four, and in doing so to ‘activate’ (Batty and Waldeback, 2019: xxvi) that knowledge; and to create a viable script for production within the British independent scene which functions in a manner that counters the Conventional Monoplot. By applying the structural theory developed in the critical portion in practice this project focuses on utility, on the practical impact that can be engendered through a shift in mindset, within industry, towards consciously unconventional structural practices. As stated in chapter one, this project is concerned with the act of creation, with the tools available to the practicing screenwriter, and in this manner aims to create new knowledge specifically designed to be of utility to practicing screenwriters. As Bailey states, practitioner-academics ‘take their perspectives as working screenwriters or filmmakers with them into academic discourse’ (2019: 30) and by ‘privileging process and practice, screenwriting research is capable of informing the creative work of future screenwriters’ (30). Implicit within this intention lies the need to consider the cultural impact of the application of those tools, as the previous chapters have attempted.

The screenplay, then, is a demonstration of the practical application of one of the unconventional structural models noted in the previous chapter, making ‘use of the intellectual space offered by the academy... to incubate and experiment with ideas that are research-informed, with the intention that the screenplay and/or the

screenwriting process changes as a result' (Batty & Waldeback, 2019: xxv). I selected a modular narrative structure for the creative project, influenced particularly by *Following* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. As noted in the previous chapter, such narratives can combine a complex story (fabula) with a complex plot (syuzhet), creating an alienating and avant-garde viewing experience, as in David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, but more typically combine a quite traditional and familiar story (and familiar character tropes) with a complex plot, and in such cases the familiarity of the story aids the viewer as they reorder and attempt to make sense of the fragmented narrative. The result, as with Nolan's work, is a film product incorporating methods of art cinema but palatable to mainstream audiences. In such instances, crucially, the comforting, restorative effect created by restorative three-act narratives is undermined and distorted by the complex articulation of time and the interruption of causality. Resultingly, largely mainstream film stories can be told whilst undercutting and subverting the restorative message such films tend to deliver. The intention has not been to create a shocking new form of narrative—but rather to demonstrate the conscious application of an extant unconventional narrative model, and in doing so to suggest how an understanding of unconventional narrative models might be applied in industry to nurture and encourage a greater diversity of narrative form.

As Batty and Waldeback note, the script development process is often 'convoluted', with 'many voices enter[ing] the fray to offer comments and demand changes, not always with great insight or knowledge' (2019: 3), and the screenplay itself 'will evolve from meeting to meeting, until all those with an interest (often financial) are satisfied' (xix). The models in the taxonomy, then, are intended not just to aid invention and creation but to help guide a project through complicated and

convoluted development processes, where many voices will impact the writer's artistic freedom. A vague idea that the writer wishes to move away from the conventional may not survive such a process, however a clearly articulated plan based on existing texts and an awareness of the meaning and impact that can be created by a specific and quantified divergence from the conventional shape is much easier to justify, and **far** more likely to survive a multi-voice development schema.

For this project, I selected a familiar subset of crime narrative which I sought to reimagine through a modular prism: the expert protagonist narrative. In such narratives, a protagonist is depicted as a ruthlessly efficient, highly skilled, highly principled outsider who performs criminal work (bank robber, assassin, safe cracker, etc) with a strict ethical code (Neilan, 2014). Crucially, in the establishment scenes, the protagonist is rendered sympathetic explicitly through their expertise and mastery of a criminal craft—rather than demonstrating empathy, nurturing love, tenderness, underdogism, authority-skewering humour or vulnerability in the establishment sequences, as is perhaps more typical. The audience is encouraged to form a sympathetic interest based on expertise, dedication, stoicism, effectiveness, leadership—not necessarily a 'likeable' character but 'definitely interesting and engaging' (Batty & Waldeback: 21). The protagonist is depicted as isolated both by the unlawful nature of their work and by their fierce dedication to it. As in many effective narratives, the protagonist is shown to have an inner need (for connection, intimacy, love) and a character flaw which prevents the attainment of that need (dedication to work) which will need to be overcome if the need is to be achieved. Typically, the opportunity to achieve the need arises through a romantic plotline, and equally typically the protagonist fails to achieve the connection and love they need but achieves a sort of moral victory by asserting their ethical code and remaining

loyal to their professionalism. The urtext is Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1967) but other examples include Michael Mann's *Thief* (1981), Anton Corbijn's *The American* (2010), and Nic Winding Refn's *Drive* (2011).

In writing the screenplay, I used the Conventional Monoplot model to create and guide the development of a largely conventional story (fabula) that adhered to the expert protagonist tropes. I applied similar plot techniques to those observed in *Following* and *We Need To Talk About Kevin* in particular in order to articulate that conventional story through a fractured structure (syuzhet) and a disrupted causality. Specific techniques will be addressed in the reflection chapter, following the screenplay. Additional influence was found in Jacques Audiard's *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* (2005), particularly in terms of the expressionist-realist tone that defines Audiard's work. Such a tone, perhaps more familiar to European arthouse cinema than British independent cinema but notable in the films of Andrea Arnold, enables a greater focus on interiority (emotion, psychological state) than can typically be observed in the work of Nolan or Mann, allowing for a greater evocation of tenderness and intimacy, elements which are important to my work, and which serve to offset the harsh masculinity which is often unavoidable when working within the crime genre (and which, itself, is often a key aspect of what is examined and deconstructed in the crime genre).

*A Reverie* is not a perfect screenplay, nor need it be to fulfil the aims of this project. *A Reverie* can be no more than it is: an unproduced screenplay, written by a doctoral student, who desires to grow and improve his practice, written in such a way as to, if successful, make a contribution to the field of screenwriting studies, a contribution to how the act of writing the screenplay is understood and discussed within the academy, and, ambitiously, to contribute to a potential shift in the way the

screenplay is enacted within industry, to provoke a change in the way unconventional practice in the screenplay is revoked and contained. Batty and Waldeback argue that 'screenwriting is an *active* form and screenplays are *living* products' [emphasis original], and as such 'screenwriting craft theory should concern itself with *activating* the form and *living* with the product' (xxvi). In this way, the screenplay aims to 'activate' the knowledge explored in the previous chapters.

**5b. Creative Element: 'A Reverie'**

A REVERIE

By

Chris Neilan

Inspired by Jacques Audiard's 'The Beat That My Heart  
Skipped' and Michael Mann's 'Thief'

Chris Neilan, 2020

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SUNLIGHT ON A TROPICAL SEA-GREEN SEA seen from a moving ferry.

The light flares and shimmers as the credits play, fading in and out in the same emerald green as the glittering water.

Mixed up with the sound of the water we hear LIVE MUSIC: amplified guitar, gain and feedback, heard through a filter of time.

Gradually, the SOUNDS OF THE SEA overpower the music, with OMINOUS STRINGS, and on a powerful FLARE TO WHITE...

*DREAM IMAGE*

*CLOSE ON the freckled face of a boy (10 or 11) staring straight into camera... a look of terrible shock...*

*CLOSE ON GUY (40), caught in some terrible act, staring back...*

*Light FLARES beyond the boy, and that GUITAR SOUND carries us into...*

*INT. GIG VENUE--NIGHT*

*Guy is pushing desperately through the crowd... Following a man...*

*We can't see the man's face, but he's looking back at Guy, pushing through the crowd as if he's fleeing...*

*Guy is desperate to catch up, but can't push through the bodies... A LIGHT FLARES in his eyes...*

VOICE (PRE-LAP)  
Hallo hallo?

*EXT. PASSENGER DECK, THAI FERRY--DAY*

Powerful sunlight washes over Guy as a brown hand shakes him awake.

THAI TEENAGER (O.S.)  
Hallo hallo mister?

Guy is lying on a bench on the ferry's top deck. He blinks his tired eyes in the light.

(CONTINUED)



THAI TEENAGER (O.S.)  
Hallo, arrive.

*DREAM IMAGE*

*We're in bed, looking at the face of AN UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN.*

*Late 30s, a look of warmth on her face. She's on her side, under the sheet, looking right at us*

*Her mouth is moving, but we can't hear the words. Instead we hear the sounds of the sea, the background hum of guitar feedback.*

THAI TEENAGER (PRE-LAP)  
Dis way, dis way.

EXT. BEACH, THAI ISLAND--DAY

Powerful Thai sunlight flaring through palm leaves, as a silhouetted hand brushes them aside at half-speed.

THAI TEENAGER (O.S.)  
Dis way sir.

And now we see Guy properly: sun-reddened, crop-haired and clean shaven, sweating. He's trying to follow the Thai boy, but his sandalled feet are slipping on the rocks.

His foot goes-- the SEA-GREEN SPORTS BAG almost goes flying!

He just keeps his grip, the bag splashing the surface.

THAI TEENAGER  
Okay?

Guy checks the wetted bottom of the bag.

GUY  
Yeah.

THAI TEENAGER  
Okay, dis way.

RUDE MAN (PRE-LAP)  
It's this way for fuck's sake!

EXT. COMMERCIAL STREET, BRIGHTON--DAY

And we're in England, some rainy side-street, a RUDE MAN in a grey overcoat clutching a grey Louis Vuitton ladies' handbag holding open a jewellery store's door for his wife.

RUDE MAN

You got rocks in yer 'ead av ya?

We'll meet **3 versions of Guy** throughout this film as the timelines chop and change: this Guy is stubbly, the bagged eyes of a drinker. **FIRST ACT GUY**. He bumps the man.

GUY

Sorry pal.

RUDE MAN

Nah no bovver mate.

(to wife)

Fuckin' come on then.

In CLOSE UP we see Guy pulling a GREY PURSE from the grey handbag, slipping it into his jacket pocket.

LATER

He opens the purse: a WAD OF CASH. Removes it, riffles through a collection of cards. Tosses the purse.

*DREAM IMAGE*

*A man in a GREY BALACLAVA runs, panting, in dreamy slow motion, down some side street. Early morning light flares.*

BARMAID (PRE-LAP)

Four-eighty please.

INT. PUB, BRIGHTON--EVENING

In tight CLOSE UP we see Guy slip a twenty off the top of the wad, slide it across the bar.

GUY (O.S.)

One for yourself hun.

The twenty year old BARMAID gives him a look, wary of him.

Guy takes a long draught of his pint. Over his shoulder, a hipster-ish OPEN MIC HOST is playing some bloodless cover of an American standard to a dozen or so clustered drinkers.

(CONTINUED)

Guy looks at the Host. The Host catches Guy's eye, grins and winks as he sings.

GUY (PRE-LAP)  
What is it then?

MITCH (PRE-LAP)  
Ladbrokes, safe job.

EXT. NORTH LAINE PUB--DAY

The outside area of a buzzing pub on a sunny day. Guy's at a table with his friend MITCH (East End, bolshy, 40ish). Pint jars clink as a glass collector squeezes past.

BARMAID (O.S.)  
Oop, sorry hun.

MITCH  
Nah no bother love.  
(watching her)  
Fuh kin ell.

GUY  
Holding up a Ladbrokes? What is this, nineteen eighty-two?

MITCH  
Money's money sunshine.  
(sees off his pint)  
Your round.

GUY  
What, in 50p change bags?

MITCH  
HA!

There's a group of buskers over Mitch's shoulder. Guy watches them.

MITCH  
Well wot else you wanna do,  
eh? Fancy a bit of cyber crime do  
ya? Spot of Wannacry?

*DREAM IMAGE*

*The man in the grey balaclava runs, half-speed...*

*Two other balaclava'd men are leading the way ahead of him--*

## EXT. THAI ISLAND--DAY

Guy squints and covers his eyes, white sunlight flaring.

(This version of Guy, the first we met, with his cropped hair and clean shave, this is **THIRD ACT GUY**. The Guy all this is building up to.)

## THAI TEENAGER

Zese here.

The Thai boy is pointing out a row of beachside huts. A few sunbathers dot the porches, or lie on towels on the sand. Two sunning bikini girls turn to look at Guy.

Too many people, too much visibility.

## GUY

(in Thai)

*I want that one.*

The Thai boy looks where Guy is pointing: one isolated hut, away from the others, hidden by palms.

## EXT. BRIGHTON STREET--DAY

The group of buskers trundle through a bluegrass number, upright bass and harmonica, crowds passing.

## GUY

So who's job is it?

## MITCH

Symmons.

Guy raises an eyebrow. Mitch shrugs his mouth--'and?'

## INT. PITCH AND PUTT CAFE, ROTTINGDEAN--DAY

CLOSE ON a man **strangling another man** at half-speed, fat pale hands around the throat.

TIGHT ON GUY as he and another man enter the cafe, also at half-speed, his eyes locked on the strangler.

(CONTINUED)

We hear chuckles and snatches of dialogue. The strangler is SYMMONS (a fleshy incompetent), the stranglee FLETCH (a sniggering beta to Symmons' alpha).

SYMMONS (PRE-LAP)  
S'easy innit.

LATER

Guy and RAYMOND (40s, French, career criminal) sit opposite Symmons and Fletch.

SYMMONS  
Iz mate works there weekends  
dun'ee, so ee knows when they do  
their banking n'at, knows where  
they keep the spare safe key, and  
ee knows when the bleedin'  
manager's gonna be there and when  
the place is in the 'ands of the  
fuckin' incontinent fifty-year-old  
munter oo 'elps 'im out two days a  
week and don't know 'er 'orrible  
saggy old arse from 'er elbow.

He bites into his sausage sandwich. Ketchup oozes.

SYMMONS  
Fuck.

FLETCH  
Oops, your time o' the month is it?

SYMMONS  
(calling to the woman behind  
the till)  
Oi, you fink you put enough ketchup  
in ere do ya? You got any more?

She looks uncomfortable--mutters through the kitchen hatch.

SYMMONS  
Ere, you got a finger lickin'  
service? I'll pay extra!

FLETCH  
HA!

RAYMOND  
(in French)  
I think he's a halfwit.

(CONTINUED)

SYMMONS

Wot? Speak English, cunt.

RAYMOND

I sink you're an 'alfwit.

SYMMONS

You wot?

GUY

So his mate knows where the safe  
key is and he knows who's working  
and he knows they an't done the  
banking. Right?

SYMMONS

Spot on Monsieur.

FLETCH

Monsieur Cuntyballs.

SYMMONS

Ha!

GUY

How much is in there?

SYMMONS

Forty thou, give or take.

GUY

Ten each?

SYMMONS

Eight each, eight for the gov'nor

GUY

Who's the gov'nor?

Symmons taps his nose, leaving a dab of ketchup.

FLETCH

Got sauce on ya.

SYMMONS

Wot?

FLETCH

(gesturing)

Sauce.

SYMMONS

Oh, right. Ta.

GUY

(to Raymond, in French)

It's not much.

Raymond shrugs.

HALF-SPEED: THE UNIMPRESSED WAITRESS watches Guy as they walk out.

FEMALE SINGER (PRE-LAP)

*How can ya, how can ya ask me  
again--*

INT. PUB, BRIGHTON--EVENING

Back at the open mic night, a young female singer-guitarist is doing a proficient Bob Dylan cover.

FEMALE SINGER

*It only brings me sorrow--*

Guy, a bit drunk, has muscled his way into the conversation of a couple of amused/intimidated looking young'uns. They'll improvise some verite-style responses.

The female singer wraps up her set, thanks the crowd. Whoops, cheers. Guy joins in, too loud:

GUY

Whoop! Fuckin' beautiful my  
love! Roberta Zimmerman, eh? Eh?  
(to the young'uns)  
Not bad eh? Could you do  
that? No? Could you?

The host has spotted Guy being a bit lairy, tries to move things on:

OPEN MIC HOST

Alright, thanks Sadie, awesome as  
always.

Guy throws back too big a mouthful of his pint, bothers the girl with some improvised joshing.

OPEN MIC HOST

--so if there's anyone else--

Guy chucks back the end of his pint as he stands--

(CONTINUED)

GUY  
 Yep! Over 'ere!

EXT. BRIGHTON STREET--DAY

VOICE (O.S.)  
 Over here! Over here!

Mitch turns in his seat to try and see where the voice is coming from--

*DREAM IMAGE*

*THAT BUSY GIG we saw in the opening, Guy pushing through the crowd, desperation in his face--*

*--and this, we might notice, is **another version of Guy**, First Act Guy's scruffy hair neater, stubble grown out to a rugged beard, cleaner, stronger: this is **SECOND ACT GUY**--*

*--following the unidentified man in woozy slow-motion. The MAN turns and looks--*

*--we see his face, a bearded average face, looking back at Guy as he continues pushing away from him--*

*--and the sound of the FEEDBACK merges with the RAIN--*

INT. CAR--DAY

Rain battering windscreen, Guy leaps into passenger seat.

GUY  
 Fuck me it's raining!

RAYMOND  
 Jesus man!

Raymond tosses a hand towel at Guy, who tousles his head.

RAYMOND  
 Well is not so bad. Less people,  
 you know.

He starts the engine.

We stay CLOSE ON Guy as he stares through the windows: rain pummelling, only vague hints of the grey streets beyond...

...we begin to hear the SOUND OF THE SEA...



*DREAM IMAGE*

*THAT DARK BEDROOM in the pre-dawn...*

*...that WOMAN we don't know yet rolling next to us, leaning her head on us, mouthing words we can't hear...*

INT. CAR--CONTINUOUS

Guy gazes from the window.

*DREAM IMAGE*

*THE GIG, the bearded man's hard-to-read face, mouthing important words at us that we can't make out...*

INT. CAR--CONTINUOUS

RAYMOND (O.S.)  
(breaking Guy's reverie)

Hoh!

Raymond pulls over, shoves a GREY BALACLAVA at Guy, pulls a black one over his own head.

RAYMOND  
(in French)  
Let's go.

And with that Raymond's out of the car.

Guy takes a half-beat, pulls the balaclava on and follows.

WOMAN (PRE-LAP)  
This one here?

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--NIGHT

This time we can hear the woman's voice. She's tracing scars on Guy's shoulders and torso with her finger.

GUY  
Erm... daring daylight robbery.

WOMAN  
This one here?

(CONTINUED)

GUY  
Mexican stand-off.

CLOSE ON the finger, gentle on the pale ribs in his skin.

INT/EXT. CAR/BRIGHTON STREET--DAY

Guy's door SLAMS shut as he exits.

(For the rest of the sequence we'll stay tight on Guy, the sounds of BREATHING and PULSE high in the mix, other sounds muffled).

EXT. BRIGHTON SIDE STREET--CONTINUOUS

He follows Raymond, who is gripping a hammer, hand around the head, handle up his sleeve. Guy has his own hammer--

It's pissing down--rain machine-gunning--

Up ahead, two other balaclava'd men (Symmons & Fletch) appear, heading for the Ladbrokes--

A male CUSTOMER exits as they arrive--they scare the shit out of him, send him running, enter--

Raymond isn't far behind, then Guy--

INT. LADBROKES--CONTINUOUS

Symmons is already screaming at the 50-year-old till woman--

Fletch is on crowd control, threatening the only two customers--a large black man (40s) and a weasely white man--

Raymond grabs the woman, pulls her towards the tills--

Guy makes for a cubby hole, swiftly finds the SAFE KEY--

As he makes for the safe he sees Raymond making the woman open the tills, shouting at her, emptying the money into a canvas bag, and beyond him--

Symmons squaring up to the big black customer and threatening him with his hammer.

Guy only pauses for a moment...

Then he's to the safe. He pushes the key in, turns--

It sticks. He tries again--

It sticks. He tries again, lifting, turning--

(CONTINUED)

Hearing a muffled SHOUT and OOMPH, he turns. Symmons has thumped the black customer in the stomach--he's crumpled at Symmons' knees holding his abdomen. Symmons HITS him in the cheek with the handle of his hammer.

Guy shouts out, muffled. Symmons retorts, muffled. Raymond yells, gestures at safe.

Guy lifts, turns, OPENS. He starts lifting wedges of cash into his canvas bag, zip-loc bags filled with each day's cash banking, plus the change bags he joked about to Mitch--

In thirty seconds he's done, on his feet, passing the terrified woman, tapping Raymond's shoulder--'let's go.'

Symmons goading the crumpled man. Guy pushes him toward the door, which Fletch is holding open, but he sees as he goes--

The BLACK CUSTOMER crumpled, bloody, his face a horrible mess, and cowering a few paces away, behind a pillar, what he'd missed before: the man's LITTLE GIRL, 3 or 4 years old.

Half a beat as Guy takes this in, on the move, then he's

OUTSIDE

And back into the passenger seat of

RAYMOND'S CAR

Symmons and Fletch in the back. They all pull off their balaclavas. Sound becomes slightly clearer, but pulse and breathing still muddy everything, voices distant and blurry.

Raymond starts engine, pulls away--we're still tight on Guy.

Symmons is cheering and whooping and pounding the back of Guy's headrest in celebration, blood up.

The rain has eased somewhat. Guy gives Raymond directions.

Symmons continues prattling on.

Raymond pulls over. Staying tight on Guy, we get the impression of a secluded BREAKER'S YARD. They exit the car.

EXT. BREAKER'S YARD--CONTINUOUS

Raymond tosses keys to OVERALLED MAN who's greeting them.

Guy nods hello. Symmons is air-boxing Fletch, throwing jabs.

Guy walks over, head of his hammer clenched in his fist giving it more weight, and THUMPS Symmons in the kidneys.

(CONTINUED)

Still tight on Guy, the world swirls around him...

At his feet, Symmons is crumpled and whinnying.

He looks at Fletch--backing away, hands up.

Guy pulls a wad of cash from his bag, another, gives a quick count, pockets them, drops the bag on Symmons, strides away.

Raymond shrugs, does the same, and follows Guy. We HEAR chuckles, glasses clinking...

INT. PUB, BRIGHTON--EVENING

Open mic night, Guy stumbles to the mic, half-cut, pulls the guitar's strap over his head.

OPEN MIC HOST

Okay ladies and gentlemen, give it up for Guy.

He leads a lukewarm applause. Guy looks out at the room.

And looks. Taking them in. The amused chuckles die away to discomfort. Guy takes a breath, all amusement and facade falling away.

Uncomfortable laughter from the crowd. Maybe there's something honest, something deep inside, that he's about to finally release...

GUY

Nah, fuck it.

He pulls the guitar back over his head, drops it on the ground before the host can grab it--it clatters and reverbs as he staggers off the stage.

The FEEDBACK from the 50w amp stretches out...

*DREAM IMAGE*

*The same image we saw at the film's opening: THE BOY, staring right at us, seeing something terrible...*

*Guy, staring back, caught in some awful act...*

*The SOUND OF THE SEA and the background hum of FEEDBACK rise, as sunlight flares the screen to white--*

EXT. BEACH, THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

HALF-SPEED: Flames blown from the mouth of a fire dancer paint the night sky. They lick and coil in the air.

Another dancer's fiery torch spins, blurring and flaring...

GUY (PRE-LAP)  
(in Thai)  
How much?

EXT. SECLUDED BEACHSIDE HUT, THAI ISLAND--DAY

The empty, lonely interior of a basic, hot, small, dim hut.

THAI TEENAGER (O.S.)  
Two hundret twenny baht.

Guy nods, peels off a few bills, hands them over.

On a beachside access road, a scantily dressed THAI GIRL (early 20s) is leaning on her friend's dusty motorbike, the friend, a short-haired TOMBOY, sitting on the seat. The girl has the sexualised look of a bar girl.

She's eyeing Guy. She says something to her friend, who looks at him too.

THAI TEENAGER (O.S.)  
(in Thai)  
*You speak good Thai, huh?*

GUY  
(in Thai, eyeing the girl)  
*Just a little.*

The WAVE SOUND melds with BASS-HEAVY DANCE MUSIC--

EXT. BEACH, THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

CLOSE ON Guy's feet kicking through the shallows. Music blaring, voices, cheers, applause.

The fire dancers are full speed now, tubthumping music. A crowd of drinkers and loungers on the beachside tables.

Flames twisting and flying, sweat beading on the dancer's cheeks, their muscular backs, their warrior-pose thighs.

Guy pushes through the crowd, muttering 'excuse me'.

(CONTINUED)

SOUTH AFRICAN MAN (PRE-LAP)  
 How many of these fuckin' islands  
 even are there,  
 bru? Y'know? S'ridiculous.

INT. BAR--LATER

Guy's sitting alone on a stool at the bar, nursing a bottle.  
 A banged wrist comes into frame, hand on his arm.

THAI BAR GIRL (O.S.)  
 (propositioning)  
 Hallo mister.

GUY  
 (in Thai)  
 No thanks.

At another table, an annoying young South African man is  
 holding court. He notices Guy.

THAI BAR GIRL (O.S.)  
 (in Thai)  
 Oh, you speak Thai?  
 (switching to English)  
 Come on, you can buy me drink na?

GUY  
 (in Thai)  
 Don't want.

The South African man is watching.

THAI BAR GIRL  
 Is no problem, I'm nice girl. Can  
 teach me English na.

Guy's seen the South African seeing him.

GUY  
 (in Thai)  
 Go away.

She makes an annoyed sucking sound with her mouth, retreats  
 muttering curses, gesturing to the other bar girls.

SOUTH AFRICAN MAN (PRE-LAP)  
 Come on bru, it's so obvious.

LATER

The S.African (DENZIL, oversize t-shirt, high on coke or  
 speed or both) and his group have foisted themselves on Guy.

(CONTINUED)

DENZIL

Can tell it a mile off mate! And  
what do newbs do? Bruno?

BRUNO

Death charge!

Cheers from the group.

DENZIL

Death charge bru!

A ridiculous-looking cocktail is brought Guy's way.

DENZIL

S'like a depth charge only it'll  
brutally kill you man! If you're  
*weak.*

Cheers and whoops from the group.

DENZIL

Are you a weak guy Guy? Are you a  
weedy weakling guy Guy?

Guy eyes him for half a beat. Denzil eyes him right back,  
but maybe his smirk wavers. And then Guy chucks back the  
disgusting drink in one.

Cheers, backslaps. An arm grips Guy around the neck--

*DREAM IMAGE*

*A flash of Symmons' hands around Fletch's throat,  
play-strangling him at half-speed...*

*Squeezing the flesh...*

GUY (PRE-LAP)

Fuck off is it!

EXT. SMOKING AREA OUTSIDE PUB, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

Guy is bothering a group of younger drinkers.

GUY

I was listenin' to them when you  
were still--

(CONTINUED)

DRINKER #1  
Blah blah blah mate.

GUY  
I was listenin' to them--

DRINKER #2  
Blah blah fuckin' blah!

Stay TIGHT ON GUY as a montage of semi-improvised drunkenness and antagonism unfurls:

He annoys the BARMAN--

He makes friends with an extravagantly dressed oddball--

He pushes around a couple of the younger drinkers--

The Barman tells Guy he has to leave.

GUY  
Piss off.

BARMAN  
No you've been warned haven't  
you? You can finish that one then  
that's it.

Guy necks the last, SMASHES the pint glass on the floor,  
storms behind the bar to where Barman is opening the till.  
Pushes him aside, pulls wads of notes out.

GUY  
Gonna stop me? Gonna stop me are  
ya, big man? Eh?  
(throws the money in his face)  
There, av yer fuckin' money ya big  
fuckin' prick. Fuck off.

INT. LATE NIGHT GREASY SPOON DINER--NIGHT

The place is full with 2am drinkers sobering up on fry ups.

Guy takes a mouthful of fried matter. Under the table he  
pours a good glug from a hip flask into his black coffee.

WAITRESS (O.S.)  
Oi.

Guy looks up--caught out, by the unidentified woman we've  
seen in snatches throughout, lying in bed, fingering his  
scars. Late 30s, tired, no nonsense--this is MAEVE. One arm  
is loaded down with dirty plates.

(CONTINUED)



MAEVE

Can't have drink in here, we haven't got a licence.

GUY

It's just a wee top love.

MAEVE

We haven't got a licence, you wanna get us shut down?

GUY

Come on.

The big table of lads are getting raucous.

MAEVE

Look, don't give me a hard time please, we haven't got a licence, I'm not trying to be difficult.

(to other group)

Oi! Behave yourselves or you're out, all of you.

GUY

I've poured it now.

MAEVE

(beat)

Alright drink that, but if you do it again you'll have to go.

GUY

Alright.

MAEVE

I mean I'm not trying to be difficult.

GUY

Yeah.

MAEVE

We've not got a licence.

Guy watches her as she continues piling dirty plates one-handed, chides the noisy lads as she passes, keeping them in order. There's definitely something about her...

Then something catches his eye:

ENTERING, a SCRUNGY MAN in a filthy hoodie, sketchy as hell, hands stuffed in hoodie pouch, hesitating in the doorway-- pushed in by a couple of other scrungy looking characters--

(CONTINUED)

He looks jittery, unsure-- he shuffles inside, bobbing his head, lips moving as if he's psyching himself up. Guy watches.

The noisy lads continue their noise, volume rising. Maeve huffs, shakes her head--she's gonna have to kick them out. She sees the scrungy man.

MAEVE

Grab a seat love, I'll be with you  
in a sec.

She heads back behind the till, wiping her hands on her apron, and when she turns around--

The guy's there, with a knife clutched in his shaking hand.

SCRUNGY MAN

(quietly)  
Just gimme the mo--

Before he can finish, Guy FLATTENS him from behind!

A garbled screech and BLOOD spatters the floor. Chairs go flying, SCREAMS and shouts. The scrungy man's down, Guy on top of him, pinning him.

Guy looks up at Maeve, who hasn't moved a millimetre since she saw the knife: locked in a trauma reaction.

GUY

Call the police love.

WAVE SOUND rises...

EXT. BEACHSIDE HUT, THAI ISLAND--EVENING

Close on Guy, smoking a joint, taking in a symphonic sunset.

Youths & couples enjoy the waters. Guy: alone on his porch.

EXT. LATE NIGHT GREASY SPOON DINER--NIGHT

Guy smokes, watches, as paramedics patch up the mugger. A police officer finishes taking Maeve's statement.

For a moment Maeve isn't sure what to do. Then she sees Guy.

EXT/INT. GUY'S BUILDING--NIGHT

CLOSE ON Maeve, standing outside Guy's front door as he jiggles the key. She holds her coat bundled in her arms.

After a moment the door opens and she follows him into the

DARK & MUSTY STAIRWELL

He says something we don't catch.

MAEVE

Huh?

GUY (PRE-LAP)

He gonna be alright?

EXT. LATE NIGHT GREASY SPOON DINER--NIGHT

Maeve shrugs.

MAEVE

I dunno. Yeah, probably.

He sucks on his fag, offers her one.

MAEVE

I'd take a drag.

He offers her the one from his mouth, she takes it, sucks.

MAEVE

Fuck me. Never stop wanting them do you, the filthy little bastards.

She hands it back.

INT. GUY'S FLAT--NIGHT

CLOSE ON Maeve, walking through Guy's front door.

Dark--a lamp is turned on O.S., glowing one side of her face. She takes her surroundings in.

GUY (PRE-LAP)

You ever had something like that before? The knife I mean.

EXT. LATE NIGHT GREASY SPOON DINER--NIGHT

MAEVE

Yes.

Silence.

GUY

Got brandy back at mine. For the nerves.

MAEVE

I don't drink.

Beat.

GUY

Bit boring, innit?

MAEVE

Yup. But I'm an alcoholic.

INT. GUY'S FLAT--NIGHT

Maeve watches as Guy takes his jacket off. Hangs it on a hook. Takes hers.

GUY (PRE-LAP)

Good for you then. How long you been off it?

EXT. LATE NIGHT GREASY SPOON DINER--NIGHT

MAEVE

A year. Well, eleven months. It'll be a year in a couple of weeks.

GUY

Hard?

MAEVE

It's fucking boring.

They share a laugh.

MAEVE (CONT.)

But. It is what it is.

Guy nods, and they fall silent. The sounds of the paramedics, police, the nearby drunks fill the soundscape.

(CONTINUED)

A paramedic closes the ambulance doors. Guy looks at Maeve...

The lines of her neck... the loose strands of hair blowing in the breeze... she pushes them out of her face...

The SEA SOUND is there, under the breeze...

GUY

Come on. I'll make you some hot water and dried leaves, you'll love it.

MAEVE

(beat)

G'wan then.

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)

Well this is quite the little shithole you've got here.

INT. GUY'S FLAT--NIGHT

MAEVE

I think it's actually smaller'n mine if that's possible.

GUY

I like to be able to touch all four walls at any one time.

He pour himself an enormous brandy.

MAEVE

For the nerves?

He takes a mouthful.

LATER, sitting at Guy's kitchenette table.

GUY

Maeve - that Irish?

MAEVE

(doing an accent)

Scottish.

GUY

(amused)

Excuse me?

She slaps his arm.

(CONTINUED)

MAEVE  
(accent)  
Scottish! Ahm a wee Glasgow  
lassie.

GUY  
Oh yeah?

MAEVE  
(switching accent)  
Except on my ma's side, she's from  
Belfast so she is.

GUY  
And you grew up in?

MAEVE  
Chelmsford.

Guy laughs, a good one--Maeve smiles at having provoked it.

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)  
I have these nightmares.

LATER, closer:

MAEVE  
Teeth rotting out of my head and  
that.

GUY  
Well, you're quite the flirt aren't  
you.

MAEVE  
(Betty Boop voice)  
Gee, I'm awfully sorry. Would you  
perhaps like to take all my itty  
bitty clothes off me, you big  
strong boy?

Guy eyes her a moment. Puts down his drink. Shifts closer  
to her. Leans in and begins to undo the top button of her  
shirt.

She lets him. And the next.

MAEVE  
What you doing?

GUY  
Seizing a moment.

(CONTINUED)

MAEVE  
 (amused)  
 I mean I wasn't--

GUY  
 Shush.

MAEVE  
 Don't shush me.

LATER, pre-dawn hours, an upside down view through a window: a stripe of aquamarine sky, the sound of one or two birds. Breeze rustling through bare coastal trees.

Maeve's lying with her head on Guy's shoulder, eyes open. Guy's are open too, staring up and back, out the window.

She nestles closer into him.

He regards her for a moment, as if that movement into him has real significance.

We begin to hear the sound of POURING RAIN...

EXT. BEACHSIDE HUT, THAI ISLAND--EVENING

Monsoon rain strobes over the sea like a spell.

Guy pulls his drying clothes from the railings around his hut's porch, takes them

INSIDE

The Thai Girl is lying on his bed, curled up, not asleep. She watches him as he hangs the clothes around the room.

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)  
 Wakey-wakey. Time to wake up.

INT. GUY'S FLAT--PRE-DAWN

**SECOND ACT GUY**, with his neater hair and rugged beard, is sitting at his kitchenette table, staring at:

An UNIDENTIFIED MAN, curled up and asleep on Guy's sofa.

He's staring at this man with a face of stone: absolute unblinking blankness, as if something inside him has been unalterably broken, and this man on his sofa is responsible.

The WHINE of a boiling kettle becomes a SCREAM.

(CONTINUED)

The man shifts, but doesn't wake.

Mitch appears, barefoot & yawning, switches off the kettle.

LATER

We hear the shower. Steam curls from under bathroom door.

MITCH (O.S.)

Ready?

Guy's sitting at the table, staring at the bathroom door.

GUY

Yep.

Mitch regards him a moment. He knows something's up.

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)

Hey. Wake up!

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--MORNING

A t-shirt lands on Guy's sleeping face, waking him.

MAEVE

I'm raiding your cupboards, you want anything?

Guy struggles to get his bearings.

MAEVE

Not an early bird, eh?

GUY

There's, um... there's bread I think.

MAEVE

Ooh, *bread*? You fancy bastard you. Where?

GUY

Cupboard.

MAEVE

You a coffee or tea man?

GUY

Coffee. Other cupboard.

(CONTINUED)



MAEVE

Aw. And it was going so well.

Sound of LAUGHTER rolls us into--

INT. BAR, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

Guy and Maeve in a cool little pub, leaning on the bar.

**(Guy's hair is neater, his stubble beardier--over the next few sequences he'll gradually morph into SECOND ACT GUY.)**

They're raising their voices to be heard.

MAEVE

No it isn't!

GUY

Of course it is!

It's a trendy place -- lads in flat caps, fairy lights, strawberry beer.

MAEVE

Oh, fine then, of course it is. If you say so sir!

GUY

I'm not being--

MAEVE

Sir yes sir! Guy knows best, sir!

Two kids with guitars strapped to their backs push past, bump Maeve -- she spills a bit of her drink over her hand.

MAEVE

Oi!

She gestures -- what the hell?

MAEVE

Fuckin manners on some people.

GUY

Here.

He leans down, licks the drink from her hand. She cracks up, pulls her hand away.

(CONTINUED)

GUY

Wait, it needs a kick to it.

He sticks his fingers into his pint, flicks beer onto her hand, goes in for another lick.

MAEVE

(laughing)

No! My hand doesn't drink!

LATER, the tightly packed space in the rear of this pub, watching the open mic. The place is jam-packed.

The performers are the guitar kids who bumped past Maeve. They're playing a very confident, pretty awful head-bobber.

MAEVE

Fuh kin ell.

Maeve laughs, hits him.

GUY

Keep it on the inside.

MAEVE

I wish they would.

The lads reach for the song's climax, harmonising with stage-school timing and zero soul. Maeve rolls her eyes.

MAEVE

C'mon, they're fine.

The lads bring to song to its end, to enormous cheers.

MAEVE

Come on, you can do better'n this.

He shrugs--maybe.

MAEVE

Go on then, up you get.

GUY

Alright, mouthy. God knows what you're like when you've had a drink.

The host has taken the mic, shepherded the boys off, is pulling on his guitar, about to do a song of his own.

(CONTINUED)

MAEVE

Hey! Over ere! Got one ere for ya!

GUY

What you doing?

She hits Guy, pushes him up toward the stage.

MAEVE

G'wan, do it. He'll do it!

Some in the crowd are cheering him on, some chuckling.

GUY

What are you doing?

MAEVE

Go on!

Beat--the host isn't sure what to do. Chuckles from crowd.

HOST

Up to you big fella. You coming up?

Beat. Guy looks at Maeve, grinning, enjoying every moment of this. He gives in, heads to the stage. Light cheers.

MAEVE

Wooo!

HOST

Alright, wanna do one song? Two?

GUY

I dunno. One.

The host hands Guy his guitar--Guy pulls strap over head.

HOST

Alright, give it up, ladies and jellyspoons, for Guy!

More applause and whoops as Guy settles himself in front of the mic, and then...

...silence. He blows into the mic cautiously.

GUY

Check check. Okay.

Crowd members are looking. Maeve's eyes fixed on him, maybe just starting to wonder if this was a good idea.

(CONTINUED)

He starts strumming... a few light cheers...

GUY  
No, hang on...

He leans down to the amp, fiddles with some dials.

The crowd's uncomfortable. Maeve worrying a touch more.

CLOSE ON Guy's hand, raising the gain. The HUM intensifies.

He stands back up, faces the crowd. Takes a breath. He's ready now.

He SMACKS out the opening notes of some dark, tremulous, idiosyncratic blues-influenced end-of-the-world thing.

GUY  
(singing)  
*Oh my lover--*

It's 'Oh My Lover' by PJ Harvey. His voice isn't bad. Low and breathy. Sincere.

(NOTE: All specific songs can be changed, catered for the talents of the actor-performer playing the part of Guy)

GUY  
*Don't you know it's ah-al-right--*

Maeve's not finding it funny anymore. Impressed.

GUY  
*You can love him-- and you can love  
me at the same time--*

He's no superstar, he just... *means* it. Every word.

GUY  
*Much to discover-- I know you don't  
have the time--*

Those in the crowd who were talking and clinking have stopped to listen. Guy belts out these low bluesy notes, bending the string, skewing the notes.

GUY  
*Oh my sweet thing, oh my honey  
thighs-- give me your troubles,  
I'll keep them with mine--*

Faces in the crowd: taken off guard, impressed, immersed.

INT. GUY'S FLAT--MORNING

Back to Guy and Maeve, morning after their first night, toast & tea & coffee. Guy's face puffy, hair skew-whiffed.

MAEVE

So, shall we agree never to see each other again?

GUY

(chewing)

Alright.

She frowns--isn't quite sure how to take that.

GUY (CONT.)

Or, you know... I was thinking we could see each other five or six more times. Couple of lunches, couple of dinners. Ten or twelve cups of tea for you--

MAEVE

Thirty or forty quadruple brandies for you?

GUY

Couple more orgasms each.

MAEVE

Oh you think I had one do you?

GUY

Either that or you're epileptic.

She slaps his arm.

INT. BAR, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

Back into the open mic. Guy bashes out more of those bending, skewed notes.

GUY

*What's that colour, forming around  
your eyes? Waltz my lover, tell me  
that it's alright --*

The song merges with--

EXT. BEACH BAR, THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

The Thai house band at this beachside joint, rollicking out a Tinglish version of Bad Moon Rising.

THAI SINGER

*Ah see a bad moon a-lising-- Ah see  
tubble on-a-way--*

Guy's drunk, on the makeshift dancefloor, dancing with the Thai Girl we saw earlier. The bar blurs around him, their bodies close.

Her face is blank, impassive, as she shimmies against him. Denzil is nearby, cheering him on.

DENZIL(PRE-LAP)

You like whatchoo see eh?

EARLIER

Guy, less drunk, eyeing the Thai girl from across the bar. Denzil nudges.

DENZIL

Eh, you like her? No worries bru,  
she's on me -- you get me the next  
one, eh?

His mate cracks up. The girl is staring back at Guy.

BACK TO

The dancefloor, shimmying. Guy wipes his face--drunk.

THAI SINGER

*Don go out tun-nigh-- coz is boun  
to tay your lie--*

INT. BAR, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

A different bar, another open mic -- Guy's hair a little neater, beard a little more developed.

A dreadlocked whiteboy plays Bad Moon Rising. The tubthumping full band Thai version bleeds over into this one-man, electro-acoustic version:

DREADLOCKED SINGER

*There's a bad moon on the  
rise! Whoooo!*

(CONTINUED)

Guy & Maeve in the crowd, Guy's arm around her, swigs from a pint, leaning on guitar case. Maeve leans her head into him.

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)  
What's this?

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--DAWN

In bed, naked, dozing. It's the moment we glimpsed earlier: Maeve inspecting Guy's scars. Finger tracing white rips.

GUY  
It's a scar.

MAEVE  
Oh thanks smartarse.

GUY  
Well. You get to a certain age,  
you pick a few up don't you.

She runs her finger around his shoulder: there are three or four just here. Crescent moons.

MAEVE  
How'd you get this one?

GUY  
I was attacked by a tiger.

She joke-sighs: 'come on.'

MAEVE  
This one?

GUY  
Panther.

MAEVE  
This one?

GUY  
Erm... daring daylight robbery.

Beat. Maybe she's aware of the truth in that one.

MAEVE  
This one?

GUY  
Mexican stand-off.

(CONTINUED)

She grows quiet, looking at all the places in which he's been hurt. He rolls her onto her back, moving on top of her.

GUY  
How about you, eh? Where are yours?

She closes her eyes, smiles, as he runs his hands over her, looking at her body, nuzzling her flesh with his brow.

GUY  
No appendectomy? No panther attacks?

She sighs pleasantly.

MAEVE  
Maybe one or two.

He kisses her shoulder, her collarbone.

GUY  
(muffled, mouth pressed to her)  
I'll kill 'em.

MAEVE  
(amused)  
What?

GUY  
(pressing hard, more muffled)  
Ah said ah'll gill'em!

On her laugh--

INT. BAR, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

Guy's taken the stage--we catch the end of his applause, Maeve cheering. A packed crowd in this little back room.

GUY  
(into mic)  
Nothing more shit than some old white cunt stealing a blues song, right? I'll try to make it not shit.

Chuckles, smattered claps.

Guy, beer bottle for a slide, gain turned up, plucks the opening of 'Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground.'

(CONTINUED)



He begins to hum and moan from his throat.

The crowd eat it up. Including Maeve.

As Guy hums and moans we begin to hear the sound of WAVES...

EXT. BEACH THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

Wide on the dark beach. Guy and the Thai Girl stumbling from the beach bar, distant figures. Followed by Denzil & crew.

We continue to hear Guy's song and the waves.

EARLIER

HALF-SPEED: sunlight flaring as palm leaves brushed aside.

The leaves shift in overpowering light, a silhouetted hand.

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--NIGHT

CLOSE ON the Thai Girl as she enters, behind staggering Guy.

Denzil smacks her butt, pushes her in.

She watches as Guy sits in on bed, rubs his drunken face.

INT. BAR, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

CLOSE ON Maeve, taking in Guy's performance.

Pride, growing affection, maybe a hint of understanding: she's seeing Guy's pain.

CLOSE ON Guy: moaning, humming, picking.

The sound of pub clamour begins to rise, voices, glasses...

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)  
Are you having another?

INT. PUB, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

Another pub, this one busier, Guy and Maeve leaning over a high table as Maeve finishes her tonic water. Guy nods.

(CONTINUED)

MAEVE

Same?

GUY

Yeah.

She takes the last mouthful, regards him a moment.

MAEVE

How long you been playing? Your whole life?

He shrugs -- yeah. She takes that in.

MAEVE

Why an't you done anything with it?

GUY

I, um...

(maybe he doesn't know himself)

It just wasn't the main thing.

A moment of silence sits: something not being said.

So she kisses him on the cheek and heads to the bar.

CLOSE ON Guy. He's not smiling exactly... but something is happening to his face... A peacefulness working its way in.

Maybe he even closes his eyes for a moment...

And opens them, watches Maeve from behind. Leaning at the bar, waving at the barman, making her order.

Just watches her, just as simple as that. And he allows his eyes to emptily scan the bar... the other couples on other tables, the friends chatting...

Until his eyes lock on something familiar, sitting at the rear of the pub, between a couple of men:

**SYMMONS. His bald fleshy head.** And at the exact moment that Guy's eyes lock onto him--

--his eyes lock onto Guy.

And in that moment, everything changes.

Guy looks away for a moment.

Just a moment, just a beat, a beat and a half, of pretending he hasn't seen him. That he can keep sitting here and nothing bad will happen. That everything hasn't changed.

(CONTINUED)

And then he's up.

GUY  
(slipping hand under her arm)  
We gotta go.

MAEVE  
What?

GUY  
Gotta go, come on.

MAEVE  
I've just ordered.

GUY  
Cancel those mate, sorry.

And he's pulling her away.

MAEVE  
What are you doing?

GUY  
I'll explain, but we gotta go.

MAEVE  
Um, alright? Get off my arm.

GUY  
We gotta go.

MAEVE  
I'm going, you don't have-- my  
coat!

GUY  
I'll come back for it.

We can HEAR approaching footsteps behind, speeding up.

SYMMONS (O.S.)  
Oi you fuckin--

Just as Symmons is closing in, Maeve through into the little vestibule between the inner & outer door (relative safety)--

--Guy picks up a bottle we didn't even see--

--and turning he SMASHES it into Symmons' face!

The two guys who'd been one step behind Symmons flinch back as Guy aims the smashed and jagged bottle end at them:

(CONTINUED)

GUY  
FUCK OFF!

He waves it at them, pushing them back --

Maeve, in the vestibule... well, how would you react?

Guy eyes the two men for a long beat...

Then he **THROWS** the bottle end at the floor, shattering what was left of it, and turns on his heel--

If we hadn't noticed, we're just seeing that **the barman is the BEARDED MAN from the dream image of the crowded gig.**

He's now on his walkie-talkie, calling for security.

EXT. STREET--CONTINUOUS

Maeve is outside the main door, lost in shock, when Guy--  
--paces out of the door, grabs her arm.

GUY  
Come on.

She flinches away, numbly. He grabs more firmly.

GUY  
Come on.

He tugs and she falls into step alongside him. He's quick-marching away from the pub, Maeve just keeping up.

She's silent... numb... going along with him...then--

She **TUGS** her arm away, darts across the road. Guy tries to follow--*beep!*

A car--he has to pause, hold up a hand. He runs, catches up, but she pulls away:

MAEVE  
Get the fuck away from me.

Still quick-marching, he tries again:

GUY  
I'm--

MAEVE  
Get the fuck away from me.

(CONTINUED)

She's pacing ahead, not looking at him. He doesn't have the words to answer, so he just keeps pace.

Looking at her, no words. Quick-marching down the street.

MAEVE

(quieter, almost to herself)

Get the fuck away from me.

They both keep walking. And walking.

And with their footsteps still reverberating...

INT. GUY'S FLAT--MORNING

CLOSE ON Guy, watching the steam curl out from under his bathroom door.

MITCH (O.S.)

What's the time?

Guy doesn't respond -- he's fixed on the steam.

MITCH (O.S.)

Oi, space cadet -- time?

GUY

Five.

MITCH (O.S.)

Alright. Twenty mins. Get coffee on.

Slow zoom into door... we can hear movement within...

GUY (PRE-LAP)

I'm not a good man. I'm a villain.

INT. MAEVE'S FLAT--DAY

CLOSE ON Maeve, her face, taking Guy in.

GUY

I am what I am, you know?

Maeve regards him a moment. We hear the sound of FOOTSTEPS overlaid, heavy PANTING...

EXT. BRIGHTON STREET--NIGHT

TIGHT ON Maeve, quick-marching, out of breath.

MAEVE  
(muttered)  
Get the fuck away from me.

Guy is at her elbow, out of frame and focus, trying to keep up with her, to grab her arm -- she pulls away.

MAEVE  
(muttered)  
Get the fuck away.

He grabs hold of her arm.

MAEVE  
Get OFF!

We can hear Guy saying something. Maeve STOPS. Faces him.

Stay tight on Maeve's shoulder, and we see Guy, a few inches away, looking at her. Emotion, tension, fight hormones.

They just stare at each other, panting.

INT. MAEVE'S FLAT--DAY

MAEVE  
You are what you do.

GUY  
Yeah, okay.

He shakes his head, takes out a cigarette.

MAEVE  
Not inside.

EXT. BRIGHTON STREET--NIGHT

Maeve stares at Guy. Maybe she's not sure what to do.

Maybe her lip starts to go, just a little.

Maybe he reaches a hand to console her, and she flinches.

MAEVE  
Don't fucking touch me.

(CONTINUED)

GUY (O.S.)  
Okay.

MAEVE  
Don't.

GUY (O.S.)  
Okay.

A long beat. Wind whips her hair. She sees something O.S.

MAEVE  
Christ, look at your hand.

She starts to sob, big deep heaving sobs--

INT. BATHROOM, MAEVE'S FLAT--NIGHT

A nasty gash on Guy's hand leaks watery blood as it's held under the running tap, Maeve's hands cradling it.

GUY (O.S.)  
Pffff. Aah.

Skirts and knickers hang from a wall-mounted rack. A tiny, damp-speckled bathroom, only big enough for one.

MAEVE  
Is there any glass in it?

GUY  
No.

She riffles through a toiletry bag.

MAEVE  
Gotta make sure.

LATER

She wraps gauze around the dried, cleaned hand.

Guy watches her as she does.

LATER STILL

Guy lies awake in bed, bandaged hand. He's looking at Maeve, asleep next to him. She opens her eyes.

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)  
Have you heard of Royston?

INT. MAEVE'S FLAT--DAY

Guy shakes his head.

MAEVE

S'a shitty part of Glasgow. My dad was from there, born and bred and that, and he was funny, and he wasn't a shrinking violet, so, you know, people knew him, they liked him--big scary people liked him. So he... he sort of... fell in with 'em I guess. He was a fixer. He knew a lot of people, he got things done. I'm pretty sure he had people killed My mum took me away, down to Chelmsford, when I were little. But he'd show up now and then.

She falls silent.

MAEVE

I used to wonder if I was like him.

GUY

Are you?

A long quiet moment.

MAEVE

Yes and no.

(beat)

You smashed a bottle over someone's head right in front of me.

GUY

He would've--

MAEVE

I know.

(beat)

I know what you are. I wasn't born yesterday. It doesn't suit you. You should do something else.

Guy looks at her.

It's such a simple thing, someone believing in you. But in his entire life, no-one's said it to him quite like that.

(CONTINUED)



GUY  
I don't know how to do anything  
else.

MAEVE  
Yeah you do. Course you do. Don't  
be stupid. Course you do. So do it.

INT. BAR, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

...and Guy's under stage lights, picking out this tremulous  
tune, letting the feedback hum elongate and spread out.

And on a car door SLAM--

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET--MORNING

RASCHID, strapping Algerian roofer (40s), is unloading  
equipment from his van.

RASCHID  
Guy?

He greets Guy with a handshake.

GUY  
Yes mate. Raschid right?

RASCHID  
Yes, nice to meet you my friend,  
nice to meet you. You're early.

GUY  
Yeah well I found the place easier  
than I thought so--

RASCHID  
No is good, is good.

EXT. BACK GARDEN, SEMI-DETACHED HOUSE--LATER

Guy's pulling hi-vis overalls over his clothes.

RASCHID  
So today we gonna apply the, ah...  
the, ah... the--

He makes a hand gesture.

(CONTINUED)

GUY  
The undersarking?

RASCHID  
Yeh, undersarking, yes - we gonna... uh... apply the undersarking to the... rafters, and then we gonna start to lay the slate. You lay slate before?

GUY  
Yeah, I know the basics.

RASCHID  
Good! Good, okay, that's good, because sometimes you know you get someone and they don't know shit!

He laughs, big and warm -- Guys softens.

LATER, on the ROOFTOP. One side of the gabled roof is exposed to the rafters. Raschid leads Guy along a thin strip of scaffold. Guy looks down--a dizzying drop.

RASCHID  
So is gonna go from here -- here you can see, look, is gonna go from here, and uh... and have to be not totally tight--

GUY  
Little bit of slack, right?

RASCHID  
Well but not slack really, not so much, jus like--

GUY  
Just like a little--

RASCHID  
Jus a little--

He makes a hand gesture.

RASCHID  
Very little... loose. But not even loose, jus not tight, you know? Like imagine is like a t-shirt, you don't want it to be like sexy t-shirt, you don't want it to be like... like *baggy* t-shirt, you want jus like normal t-shirt, you know?

(CONTINUED)

LATER

On the rooftop, Guy pulls the strip of undersarking along the rafters.

GUY  
Like this?

RASCHID  
Looser, little bit.

Guy adjusts the material.

GUY  
This?

RASCHID  
Yes, good.

LATER

The sun glows over Guy's shoulder as he hammers nails into the joists. He's sweating. He wipes his brow.

RASCHID (PRE-LAP)  
Look, look. You see?

LATER

Raschid is holding up a tile of slate.

RASCHID  
Re-claimed slate. Is beautiful,  
no? Always reclaimed slate, the  
man-made slate is shit. Is  
shit! Dog shit! Real slate is...  
look, she is beautiful.

The thrum of a train going over a bridge...

INT. TRAIN--DAY

Guy sitting by the window, looking at the evening sunlight falling over the rooves of Brighton.

The thrum of the train begins to meld with the sound of THE SEA...

EXT. BEACH BAR, THAI ISLAND--EVENING

Dusk falling over the island, people lazing on loungers, on floor cushions.

Guy's nursing a bottle of beer, Denzil across from him, wearing big shades and an obscene t-shirt.

DENZIL

Nah I can tell bru, I can tell. I spent three years in England. Fucking shithole.

Guy looks around, at the groups of young people, old couples, lounging, drinking.

DENZIL (O.S.)

But I can tell. You're from down south, right?

His attention flashes back to Denzil.

DENZIL

Not London. You're from, like... Brighton. Yeah. You're a fuckin' Brightoner. Right?

Guy eyes Denzil: leaning in, smile fixed on his face, something a bit too keen about him.

DENZIL

Am I right?

INT. TRAIN--DAY

And we're back on the train, Guy staring out the window. He notices something:

Two BEARDED MEN a few seats away, eyeing him and saying something to each other.

One of the men approaches.

Guy tenses himself, ready for something...

BEARDED MAN #1

Hey--your name's Guy, right?

Guy doesn't respond--just eyes him back, waiting.

(CONTINUED)

BEARDED MAN #1  
 From the open mic, at the Bee's  
 Mouth? We saw you there the other  
 night, you killed it man.

And now he sees the GUITAR CASE that other bearded man is  
 resting his arm on.

BEARDED MAN #1  
 It is you right?

GUY  
 (snapping out of it)  
 Yeah, sorry. Yeah. How you doing.

BEARDED MAN #1  
 Good man, good. I don't know if  
 you're playing with anyone at the  
 moment but we're actually looking  
 for a guitarist.

The TH-THU-THUD of a drum rolls over us...

INT. REHEARSAL ROOM, BRIGHTON--DAY

A muscular DRUMMER in his 30s is warming up, doffing the  
 snare, tonking the hi-hat.

RECEPTION

Guy enters, guitar bag on his back, following Bearded Man  
 #1, who we'll now call the SINGER-GUITARIST.

SINGER-GUITARIST  
 I mean we've had probably, what...  
 about five months of jamming?

GUY  
 Right.

SINGER-GUITARIST  
 So I mean we're pretty solid  
 already, but obviously whoever we  
 bring in is gonna, you know--

GUY  
 Yeah, yeah.

SINGER-GUITARIST  
 Is gonna, you know... is gonna  
 bring their sound into the mix.  
 (to receptionist)

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SINGER-GUITARIST (cont'd)  
Alright, I think we're in room six?

RECEPTIONIST  
Band name?

SINGER-GUITARIST  
Red Road.

## REHEARSAL ROOM

A fuzzed up bass sound FLOODS the room, as the Singer-Guitarist and Guy enter.

Bearded Man #2 is the bassist -- he greets Guy and the Singer-Guitarist. Warmth, handshakes, etc.

SINGER-GUITARIST  
(to drummer)  
This is Guy, bloke from the Bee's Mouth.

The Drummer eyes Guy a moment -- half-stands from his drum stool, reaches out a hand. He gives no verbal greeting as he shakes Guy's hand, as if to say: who the fuck are you?

Another man, KEYBOARDIST, enters, gripping a sandwich in his mouth.

SINGER-GUITARIST  
Oi Al -- this is Guy. Guy, Al.

KEYBOARDIST  
(mouthful)  
Awright mate.

Guy nods hello -- slightly unwelcoming vibes.

SINGER-GUITARIST  
Alright so we'll just crack through a couple and see how we all get on, yeah?

GUY  
Yeah -- can I get a cable?

BASSIST  
In the crate there.

Guy unzips a beautifully knackered old telecaster, pulls the strap over his head.

LATER

(CONTINUED)

A song's up and running: Drummer chugging,  
pt-TAT-pt-TAT-pt-TAT, Bassist laying a thrumming bassline,  
Singer-Guitarist feathering out some shimmering chords.

Guy's watching the Singer-Guitarist's hands, frowning,  
trying to click in to the song's rhythm.

He adds a couple of power chords.

Singer-Guitarist shakes his head, says something inaudible.

GUY  
(roaring)  
What?

The Singer-Guitarist slows down a little, demonstrating the  
chord pattern, where Guy's meant to come in.

The Drummer's watching Guy -- exchanges a look with the  
Bassist: 'this bloke's not getting it.'

Guy tries again, brow furrowed, sluicing out his chords.

The Singer-Guitarist nods, encourages him: 'that's it.'

The song motors along. Guy half-feeling it, looking unsure.

Drummer shaking his head, biting his lip, thudding the beat.

SINGER-GUITARIST  
*In the absence of your loving... I  
took a trip towards a circle in the  
sky...*

Close on Guy's face: he knows he's blowing it.

SINGER-GUITARIST  
*But the circle proved elusive...  
just a figment, just a fantasy of  
mine...*

They plough on into a perfunctory middle eight.

The Drummer yells something at the Bassist. Guy sees it --  
can't make it out -- but the Drummer looks unimpressed.

Fuck it -- Guy approaches the Singer-Guitarist --

He yells something we can't make out --

Starts adjusting the Singer-Guitarist's chord pattern: 'try  
this... like this...'

The Singer-Guitarist goes with it, adjusts: 'like this?'

Guy nods, encourages him.

The song shifts. Guy nods, getting into the new rhythm.

Drummer and Bassist eyeing him, curious.

Guy SLAMS IN on the 3, behind the beat, skewing the melody.

Bassist raises his eyebrows: 'Ooh, not bad.'

Singer-Guitarist nods, nods, watching Guy.

Guy throws in a skewed, off-kilter minor chord.

Singer-Guitarist breaks out into a grin: 'Yes!'

Drummer throws out a huge fill, they shift up a gear.

Keyboardist watches, nods, earplugs in, eating his sandwich.

LATER

Another song, a meatier, angrier song.

Guy's rolling out a four-power-chord chainsaw routine, Sonics-esque, in front of the Drummer, directing him.

Drummer watching him, nodding, adjusting his pattern.

Guy lets the pattern flow, Singer-Guitarist riffs, sings:

SINGER-GUITARIST

-----

Guy leans into the second mic, adds a backing vocal: opening his throat and straining for a high note.

The Keyboardist joins in with a phantasmagoric chord sequence, shimmering along underneath the guitars.

SINGER-GUITARIST

-----

Guy adds another harmonised part --

And as the song heads into the bridge it ramps up, with a Television-esque run, Guy's guitar and the Singer-Guitarist's countering each other, the bass echoing, the Drummer getting meatier still...

And the song carries over into--



INT. PUB GIG, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

A packed, sweaty room above a pub. Maeve's in the audience, stage right, mind being blown. The song is a cover of The Neckbones' Taxi Driver-inspired 'You Can't Touch Her'.

SINGER-GUITARIST

*They can't touch her, can't even  
see her...*

It's a tiny stage, the band members almost bumping into each other, sweaty faces.

SINGER-GUITARIST

*They can't feel her, 'cos I'm  
watching over her...*

Guy bashes out the main riff.

Maeve's squeezed in, by the stage, being shunted and shifted by the enthusiastic, head-bobbing, moshing crowd.

Sweat flies from Guy's hair, a SEA-GREEN stagelight flares.

SINGER-GUITARIST

*I see her walking in the city... in  
her new dress and she's really  
looking pretty... but I know things  
are not what they seem... 'cos I  
know that life is just a dream...*

And the clink of GLASSES, the sound of VOICES rises--

INT. PUB, BRIGHTON--DAY

And the music dissipates. Guy and Maeve and Mitch, sitting around a table, laughing. Mitch wipes a laughter tear.

MITCH

Oh my days. Jesus Christ. Right, I  
need another drink, right fucking  
now.

MAEVE

You do know it's lunchtime?

MITCH

(checks his watch)  
So it is. Triple absinthes? Yeah?

(CONTINUED)

GUY

Suit yerself mate.

(points at his empty Guinness)

Oi'll stick wi' de drink of my  
fathers.

MITCH

Wimp. And for madame?

MAEVE

I could stomach another juice.

MITCH

Ah go on, you can av one can't ya?

MAEVE

Fraid not.

MITCH

Just a little one! Just a little  
triple absinthe!

Laughs.

MAEVE

No, I don't drink Mitch, at all. I  
haven't touched a drop in over a  
year, I'm not gonna start now. I  
like you an all, you seem nice,  
but... you're not the one to turn  
me back to drink I'm afraid.

MITCH

Well I've barely tried av I. You  
aven't seen the full extent of my  
persuasive skills.

GUY

Behave yourself you.

MITCH

(salutes)

Sir yes sir!

Laughter.

MAEVE

(getting up)

And I think it's my round isn't it?

MITCH

Nah don't be sill-- don't be  
silly! Not avin you get a fucking

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MITCH (cont'd)  
round in an you avin fucking  
cranberry, ere y'are.

He holds out a twenty.

MAEVE  
No it's my round.

MITCH  
Take it!

MAEVE  
(putting on rough voice)  
Put yer money away sunshine,  
orwight? S'my treat.

She gives him a laddy wink and heads to bar. Mitch laughs,  
enjoying her.

MITCH  
Well she's a fuckin diamond in't  
she.

GUY  
She is.

MITCH  
Fuh kin ell. You've done alright  
for yourself there. Nah, nice one,  
like her. Could use one like er  
meself.

GUY  
Get yer own.

MITCH  
Fuck off.

He throws a peanut, joshing. But: face shifts--tone change.

MITCH  
Listen. I gotta talk business.

GUY  
Alright. Later?

Mitch looks over to the bar -- Maeve is ordering.

MITCH  
Nah better do it now.

Guy can see Mitch is tense.

GUY  
Alright. What's up?

MITCH  
That job, the Ladbrokes. You gave  
Symmons a smack on the nose.

GUY  
He earned it.

Mitch shakes his head.

MITCH  
Wan't Symmons' job.

GUY  
You said it was.

MITCH  
Yeah well I was told it was wan't  
I.

GUY  
So whose was it?

This is the crux -- Mitch eyes Guy.

GUY  
Whose was it?

MITCH  
Waghorn.

A beat as that sinks in.

The absolute worst name Guy could have heard.

GUY  
Symmons hasn't got fuck all to do  
with Waghorn.

MITCH  
Nah, it was the other cunt.

Guy eyes the bar: Maeve's being handed the drinks.

MITCH  
He was iz fuckin cousin or summink,  
I don't know.

GUY  
(taking it in)

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

GUY (cont'd)  
I did the fucking job man, I did  
it. I just gave the idiot a smack  
on the nose.

MITCH  
S'Waghorn mate.

No more needs to be said.

Guy watches Maeve waiting for her change, chatting nicely  
with another customer, laughing.

GUY  
So?

MITCH  
So ee's gonna come down, in a  
couple weeks. Ee'll av some job,  
you gotta do it. That's it. You'll  
earn a bit, not much. You toe the  
fuckin line and... ee'll be  
alright. Symmons dun't mean fuck  
all to im, ee just wants ya to kiss  
iz ring dun'ee.

Maeve's coming back, three pints on a tray.

GUY  
Fuck.

MITCH  
Yeah.

Beat.

MITCH  
Listen--

But before he can get an apology out--

MAEVE  
(in rough cockney voice)  
Right, ere y'are gents, get your  
gobs on these you twats, and I'm  
gonna put my feet up and enjoy my  
fuckin cranberry, and I don't wanna  
'ear any fuckin jokes about  
cystitis, right?

She sits down with her pint of juice, pleased with herself  
-- Mitch grins, laughs despite himself.

(CONTINUED)

MITCH

What're you, frustrated comedian?

Guy tries to smile.

MAEVE

Yeah something like that.

SEA SOUND rises as we stay tight on Guy, a light flares--

EXT. SEA, THAI BEACH--DAY

Guy floats on his back, eyes closed in powerful sunlight.

He blinks, tries to crack his eyes open.

They stay cracked, screwed up in the harsh light.

CLOSE ON

The emerald water around his semi-submerged hands...

Toes half out... Shimmering light playing on the water...

HIGH ANGLE, Guy's floating face looking up, into camera, eyes beginning to open more, getting used to the light...

The light washes the screen, flaring the corners to white...

And as the sea sound mixes with the WHINE of a kettle reaching boiling point we

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. GUY'S FLAT--PRE-DAWN

Guy staring. Maybe we get a hint of steam behind him, from the kettle we can hear BOILING O.S.

And we hear a DOOR OPEN O.S.

A NAKED MAN emerges from the bathroom, toweling his head.

At HALF-SPEED he pulls the towel away, revealing his face. An early-30s face, hard and bitter. This is WAGHORN.

He stands in the doorway, big and muscular, steam tumbling.

WAGHORN

D'you get rid of the knife?

Long beat, Guy holding his eye contact.

(CONTINUED)

Not many people hold eye contact with Waghorn. Guy does.

GUY

Yeah.

Long beat -- Wags eyeing him right back.

WAGHORN

Get me a coffee.

Hard beat.

GUY

(deadpan)

One lump or two?

Wags pulls the towel from around his neck, standing there stark bollock naked -- points a threatening finger at Guy.

WAGHORN

Stop being a cunt.

Long beat of unwavering eye contact.

The big naked man trying to assert his authority.

Guy not giving in.

WAGHORN

Go on.

Finally...

Guy gets up, moves to make the coffee.

Waghorn, nude & bullish, watches Guy. He towels his hair.

CLOSE ON

Guy's face, pouring coffee into a mug, milk, sugar...

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)

What you doing?

GUY (PRE-LAP)

Seizing a moment.

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--NIGHT

And we're back to the night they met, Guy undressing Maeve.

MAEVE  
(amused)  
I mean I wasn't--

GUY  
Shush.

MAEVE  
Don't shush me.

He looks at her, amused smile--enjoying teasing each other.

GUY  
You're a stroppy one aren't you.

MAEVE  
'Stroppy'?

GUY  
Like to let me know who's boss.

And the warmth goes out of the moment.

MAEVE  
Don't be like that.

She pulls back from him a bit.

GUY  
Like what?

She shakes her head. Her guard has come up.

GUY (CONT.)  
Like what?

MAEVE  
Like that. 'Stroppy'. I'm not a  
little girl.

GUY  
(genuine)  
No, I wasn't--

Suddenly she's like a different person.

MAEVE  
Is that how it is is it?

(CONTINUED)



GUY

I wasn't--

MAEVE

You think you can just take my  
clothes off me as and when, have  
your way? Alright.

(spreads her arms out wide)

Go on then.

Guy isn't quite sure what to say. They look at each other.

A long moment. Until--

GUY

(quiet, sincere)

Sorry.

And that changes something in her. Not what she expected.

Not what she's been used to. Maybe her eyes water up, a bit.

She puts her arms down, isn't sure what to do with herself.

MAEVE

Jesus.

Rubs her face, laughs to herself. Guy watches, quiet.

She isn't sure what to say for a moment. Then--

MAEVE

(this is hard for her to say)

I've had a pretty hard life.

Guy nods. Maeve stares into space, thinking what to say...

...but nothing comes. She chubs a sad smile at Guy.

GUY

Me too.

She nods quietly. Silence.

They sit there in the silence, neither sure what to say.

MAEVE

What're you thinking right now?

GUY

Thinking?

She nods. He takes a moment, to find the honest answer.

(CONTINUED)

GUY (CONT.)

That I don't want you to leave.

Maeve takes that in.

GUY (CONT.)

Do you wanna leave?

She thinks a moment.

MAEVE

No, think I'm alright.

They share a little tension-breaking semi-laugh.

A little bit of warmth returning.

LATER

In bed, lying near each other, maybe their hands touching.

As feedback and a hi-gain guitar sound rise...

INT. PUB GIG, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

Another gig, Guy adjusting the settings on his amp.

We're with the band, tiny stage, cam handheld, and out beyond the singer the small room is pretty packed.

The Bassist yells to Guy--Guy nods--belts out a chord.

Crowd cheers. Bassist nods, clicks in with Guy.

SINGER-GUITARIST

(to crowd)

Alright, we've been Red Road.

Guy and Bassist syncing into an intro. Drummer joining.

SINGER-GUITARIST

This is our last one tonight, hope  
you like it.

The Drummer throws out a big fill, and Guy and the Bassist shift into their verse parts, and the beat hits, the Singer-Guitarist adds some rhythm chords--

--and we're right there, on the tiny stage, right in the middle of these guys building this rollicking hybrid, part blues-rock, part post-punk, part motown--

(CONTINUED)

SINGER-GUITARIST  
(singing)  
-----

Close on Guy, sweaty, getting into it, letting it flow...

WAGHORN (O.S.)  
They're menna do the banking every  
Monday morning.

INT. BRIGHTON PUB--DAY

Close on Guy and Mitch, listening.

WAGHORN (O.S.)  
S'bang in the South Lanes, takes a  
shit ton a cash, twenty grand on a  
good week, s'rammed every weekend.

Now we see Waghorn. He chucks back a 3rd of his pint in one.

WAGHORN  
And it just so appens that I've got  
a wickle bird oo's been in there  
getting friendly with the staff.

CROSSCUT WITH

INT. THE BLACK LION, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

A scruffy older guy, WAGHORN'S LITTLE BIRD, is sitting at  
the bar, laughing with a member of the barstaff.

WAGHORN (V.O.)  
And my wickle bird as told me that  
the manager's fucked off on  
holiday, gone travelling round Asia  
for two months, and she's left the  
place in the 'ands of the assistant  
manager.

We see the ASSISTANT MANAGER, knocking back shots on the  
backbar, other staff cheering him on.

WAGHORN (V.O.)  
An ee's a fuckin twenty-five year  
old alky in training, an ee's lazy  
as fuck, an ee an't done the  
banking. An't done it!

CLOSE ON the Assistant Manager, drunk, carrying the till  
tray to the cluttered, mess-filled office, wiping his face.

(CONTINUED)

WAGHORN (V.O.)

Bank closes their business window  
at 12pm, ee's up raiding the whisky  
shelf an knocking back jager bombs  
with his barmaids til dawn, he's  
never up in time to get it  
done. Ee's just let it fuckin sit  
there.

CLOSE ON THE SAFE as he stuffs the day's take in--it can barely fit, a dozen plastic wallets stuffed with cash in there. Thousands and thousands of pounds.

He looks at it, thinks about doing something about it.

Then a voice calls to him from O.S.

ASSISTANT MANAGER

What?

(beat)

What?

(beat)

Yeah.

He closes the safe.

BACK TO

Waghorn's Little Bird, listening to a young Barman telling him about the Assistant Manager, and how lazy he is.

The little bird nods, nods.

WAGHORN (V.O.)

So there's two an an arf weeks  
takings in there right now, maybe  
fifty grand.

BACK TO THE PUB

Guy and Mitch listening, nodding.

GUY

That's not bad.

WAGHORN

No it's not, but it's not all is  
it. Cos what's the day after  
tomorrow?

Guy and Mitch shrug.

Waghorn points his thumb at the wall. Guy and Mitch look:

(CONTINUED)

Rainbow bunting.

WAGHORN (O.S.)  
Gay pride innit.

CLOSE ON Waghorn.

WAGHORN  
Biggest weekend of the year for  
pubs in this town. This one'll take  
thirty grand probably. Fridee an  
Saturdee are gonna be huge, they  
won't finish 'til 4am. So come  
Sunday morning...

He knocks back the remaining half of his pint, sits back in  
his chair. He's muscular, and he's firm, and he fills every  
space he's in, and he's doing that right now.

GUY  
Seventy, eighty grand.

WAGHORN  
And oo's in charge of it?

GUY  
A 25-year old alky in training.

WAGHORN  
Oo's lazy as fuck. An ow d'you get  
in the safe?

CUT TO

The Assisant Manager, swinging the set of keys that he keeps  
on a chain attached to his belt loop.

GUY (V.O.)  
He's got the key.

WAGHORN (V.O.)  
An where's he live?

CUT TO

Waghorn.

MITCH (O.S.)  
In the pub?

WAGHORN  
An what security they got?

(CONTINUED)

MITCH  
CCTV?

WAGHORN  
And does it work?

CUT TO

The younger Barman laughing, drinking, as he shows Waghorn's Little Bird the blank screen of the CCTV monitor.

MITCH (V.O.)  
No?

BACK TO

WAGHORN  
Nope.

MITCH  
Alarm?

WAGHORN  
And oo's got the code?

BACK TO

Waghorn's Little Bird, watching the drunk young Barman, as he tries to tap in the code. But he's drunk, gets it wrong.

The Little Bird steps in.

WAGHORN'S LITTLE BIRD  
Slowly, slowly.

The Barman chuckles, takes a breath, slows down...

The Little Bird watches him tap in the code...

5... 4... 4... 6...

BACK TO

GUY  
You do.

Waghorn makes eye contact with Guy.

Just a beat of something... Before he nods.

WAGHORN  
They got a couple'a cameras working  
in there but they're old an' grainy  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

WAGHORN (cont'd)  
as fuck, you pull a scarf over yer  
mug an they can't see fuck  
all. The main fing's avoiding the  
one's on the street, but we know  
where the blind spots are. They'll  
pick up the car, but we'll dump it,  
crush it, long as we ain't silly  
they ain't gonna have fuck all to  
go on.

GUY  
How about your little bird?

WAGHORN  
Going back to Belfast Sunday  
morning. No-one ere knows fuck all  
about im.

Long beat as Guy works out how to say what he's about to  
say. Then:

GUY  
Listen. I never had any plans to  
work with you. I'm part-time.

WAGHORN  
Din't used to be.

GUY  
I shouldn't have taken the Symmons  
job. I needed the cash, but... I  
can't fucking stand Symmons, and  
that cousin of yours is a moron.

WAGHORN  
(beat)  
Second cousin. And family's  
family.

GUY  
I know. I shouldn't've done the  
job, no-one forced me, but I did  
it, and I smacked Symmons' hand,  
which he deserved... so I owe you.

WAGHORN  
Yep.

GUY  
But I don't do jobs where civilians  
get their cheekbones caved in in  
front of their little girls.

(CONTINUED)

Maybe Wags' eyes tighten.

GUY  
I ain't doing that kind of job.

Beat.

WAGHORN  
You're doing what I say.

GUY  
No. I do the job. No-one gets hurt.  
That's it.

Long beat as they hold eye contact.

The sound of THE SEA, and heavy sleeping breaths--

INT. GUY'S HUT, THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

Guy opens his eyes.

Blinks twice, tries to take in his surroundings.

He's still drunk, and his room is dark.

Lying on a floor mat, curled up, is the Thai Girl.

She's still fully clothed, and seems to be asleep.

Guy watches her. Her eyes fluttering under their lids.

He sits up. Rubs his face. Looks out of his window.

A clear, bright night, moonlight glimmering on the still sea, palms rustling ever so slightly.

Trying to stay quiet, he stands, looks down at the Girl.

He sits down next to her. Her mouth is slightly open, lips moving ever so slightly in her sleep.

Guy pulls the thin blanket from the bed, and lays it gently over her body. He stands, walks--

OUTSIDE

He stands on the hut's porch and surveys the beach. A yellow Andaman moon and sweep of darkness.

There's a figure in the dark, way off. Guy watches:

It's some DRUNK MAN, staggering along the sand.

(CONTINUED)



He staggers toward the sea, stops as it splashes his feet.  
Shouts something into thin air. Staggers back, to the side.  
Looks in Guy's direction.

CLOSE ON

Guy, stoic-faced, watching.

A LONG-LENS IMAGE

of this distant, dark figure, looking back.

The sound of PUB CLAMOUR rises: VOICES, GLASSES--

INT. BAR, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

After a Red Road gig. It's packed, noisy. Guy's leaning his ear close to the lipsticked mouth of a TEENAGE GIRL.

GUY

What? I can't hear you!

The Girl, who's with a similar-looking friend, is obviously paying Guy a compliment (verite, improvised).

Maeve's sitting with the other band members, watching him.

GUY

No that's very nice, ta very much.

Drummer hands Guy a fresh beer...

GUY

Nice one.

And a shot of tequila.

GUY

Oh really?

Drummer clinks Guy's shot glass with his, and knocks it back. Guy does too.

GUY

Ahhhhh!

The Teenage Girls laugh, enjoying him. Maeve watches.

LATER

Tight on Guy, drunk, the world beyond him swirling.

(CONTINUED)

Maeve is at his shoulder, saying something.

GUY

What?

She says something again -- again we barely hear it.

Someone O.S. says something to him, makes him laugh. He smacks the O.S. person, playful.

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--DAWN

Maeve sits up in bed, looking at Guy, asleep next to her, his back to her, curled up against the wall.

She's not quite sure what to think.

EXT. BRIGHTON HOUSE--DAY

Guy and Raschid are lugging slate from the van.

RASCHID

Come on, come on.

He grabs a load of slate from Guy's arms, impatient -- stacks it with the rest.

Guy's still pulling the next load from the van.

RASCHID

Come on!

Guy frowns -- unsure what's with him.

Raschid claps the dust from his hands: CLAP--CLAP--CLAP--

ROOFTOP

Raschid's kneeling by the lowest rafter, laying tile.

RASCHID

Three more.

Guy kneels by a stack of slate.

RASCHID

Ho! Three more!

Guy looks at him -- what's with him?

He picks up the top three slates, but the top one falls apart in his hand--it's broken into two pieces.

(CONTINUED)

Guy picks another one, leaves the broken one, but--

RASCHID  
Ey? What's this?

GUY  
Broken one.

RASCHID  
You break it?

GUY  
Well one of us did. Or they sold it  
you broken.

Raschid looks at him down at him, standing over him.

RASCHID  
I'm paying you third of my pay, for  
what? Huh?

Guy stands up. Even standing, Raschid towers over him.

GUY  
Wind your neck in.

RASCHID  
What?

GUY  
Calm down. Wind your neck in.

Raschid looks at him for a long, testy beat...

Then shakes his head, picks up the three unbroken slates,  
heads back to the spot where he was working.

Guy watches Raschid: dark rings under his eyes, all tension  
and anger--a different man.

The sound of LIVE ROCK MUSIC--

INT. BAR, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

Back to the bar, and a new band starting up.

Guy slanting and sliding through a crowd, dazed, drunk.

The band are getting into it: fuzzy hi-gain guitar.

Guy grabs the head of his Singer, play-bites his scalp.

(CONTINUED)

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)  
What's going on?

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--MORNING

Guy's lying in bed, shirtless, hair skew-whiffed, smoking.

MAEVE (O.S.)  
What's going on with you?

He shrugs.

Maeve's standing by the bed, looking at him, in baggy t-shirt and underwear. He's not making eye contact.

She sighs, looking out the window.

Pulls off her t-shirt, puts on her bra, starts dressing.

Guy watches her, her back to him:

The pretty curls of hair at the back of her neck...

The way her side doughs as she bends...

He stubs out his cigarette, lies back on the bed...

And we get his UPSIDE DOWN view of the window, the sky, a seagull passing, it's flight inverted...

INT. CHAIN PUB, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

The THUMP-THUMP-THUMP of commerical dance music in a packed chain pub, and we're tight on

WAGHORN

Drunk and dancing, bumping and grinding with a group of 40- and 50-something women.

Guy watches, leaning on a table nursing a pint.

Mitch is next to him, talking (inaudible).

Guy is totally focused on--

Waghor, HALF-SPEED: grinding, bumping -- roaring, wiping his face -- gorilla-walking back towards us, eyes on Guy.

(CONTINUED)

WAGHORN (PRE-LAP)  
Ow old was you when you started,  
eh?

LATER

WAGHORN  
Thirteen, fourteen?

Guy shrugs. Mitch, beyond them, is dancing with the ladies.

WAGS  
Used to do a lot din't'cha? Bank  
jobs, post office, bookies?

GUY  
Never did a bank.

WAGS  
I heard you was an 'orrible cunt.

Guy eyes him.

GUY  
I was.

WAGHORN  
Not anymore though eh?

Wags shifts closer to Guy, knocking an empty glass, slips a hand round Guy's head.

WAGHORN  
Listen cunt. You're my boy. Right?

GUY  
(uncomfortable)  
Yeah.

WAGHORN  
You're one of my boys, right?

Waghorn kisses Guy on the side of his head -- cackles.

WAGHORN  
(necks his pint)  
Come on then!

He pulls Guy over toward the dance floor.

HALF-SPEED MONTAGE

Bodies shifting, the women cheering, Guy trying to pull away, Mitch pulling him back, Waghorn closing his eyes...

The sound of the SEA rises...

INT. BEACH HUT, THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

Guy, on the porch, smoking. He hears a noise from inside.

Looking, he sees the shadow of the Thai Girl moving.

INSIDE

She's curled on the floor, waking up, disoriented. She startles as she sees Guy in the doorway.

GUY  
(in Thai)  
It's okay.

She frowns, unsure.

GUY  
(in Thai)  
You can sleep.

She stands, moves toward Guy's bed and begins to pull her top over her head.

GUY  
(in Thai)  
No, no.

He stops her.

GUY  
(in Thai)  
Don't want. You can sleep.

THAI GIRL  
(in Thai)  
Your friend paid me already.

He encourages her to the bed as he backs away, straightens the floor mat out and lies down on it.

The Thai Girl, not sure what to think, sits on the bed. Andaman moonlight traces one side of her face.

CLOSE ON

Guy, eyes closed, hands behind his head.

(CONTINUED)

THAI BAR GIRL (O.S.)  
Why do you speak Thai?

GUY  
I used to live here.

Distant ANGRY VOICES begin to rise...

EXT. CHAIN PUB, BRIGHTON STREET--NIGHT

In SLOW-MO a PINT GLASS arcs and tumbles through the air...

It glints against the black sky...

Before it smashes silently on the pavement.

A CROWD OF MEN rush and stumble at HALF-SPEED through the chain pub's doorway.

Grappling, stumbling -- someone's leg goes, he slips and falls, another stumbles over him --

We hear the shouts and grunts muffled and slowed --

INSIDE

In the flash and strobe of the disco lights we catch splices of the conflict:

Headlocks--hands grabbing faces--punches thrown --

Waghorn bouncing on his toes and shouting 'COME ON' --

Mitch pushing people away and trying to keep the peace --

Two BOUNCERS with their hands full --

And Waghorn has homed in on one man --

And someone's coming for Guy, Guy fending him off --

And Guy sees Waghorn and the man he's grappling with stumbling into the darkest corner of the pub --

And as Guy shrugs off his aggressor we shift back to

FULL SPEED

And the DEAFENING ROAR of voices overpowers us --

And Guy runs into the DARKNESS --

To see an oblique, hidden image of Waghorn --

(CONTINUED)

BLOODY KNIFE in hand --

STABBING and STABBING and STABBING --

We hear SQUEALS and WHINNIES from the poor victim...

As Guy freezes, helpless...

Waghorn rising from his victim, bloody handed...

Pulling his bloody shirt off he GRINS at Guy...

Grabs Guy and hustles him away, Guy looking back at --

The shadowed mass of the victim, writhing in the darkness.

CLOSE ON

Guy, HALF-SPEED, looking at:

Waghorn, eyes glinting, panting.

EXT. SIDE STREET--LATER

Waghorn, quick-marching, pulls Guy's jacket over his naked torso.

Bundles up his bloodied shirt, shoves it into Guy's hands.

WAGHORN

Get rid.

Guy, numb, in shock, looks at the bundle. Mitch is quick-marching in tandem, also shocked into silence, unsure.

INT. GUY'S FLAT--LATER

Waghorn sleeps on the sofa.

Guy sits at the kitchenette, watching him.

A moment we've seen before -- now in context.

Mitch is sitting at the table too, and he's staring at Guy, as if he knows what's going on in Guy's head...



INT. GIG VENUE GREEN ROOM, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

Guy sitting on a stool in the cluttered upstairs office-cum-green room of this small venue.

Around him, the other band members blur, chat, drink, smoke.

Guy stares.

A bandmate says something to Guy from O.S.

GUY

Yeah.

Bandmate says something else -- Guy nods--

BAR

Packed bar, music loud. Guy's trying to order from the barman, barely audible.

But shots come his way. Three, all in a row.

He says an inaudible thank you, pays. Takes a deep breath.

Knockes them back: one, two, three.

Down the other end of the bar, the BEARDED BARMAN (who we saw in an earlier dream image, and who saw Guy bottle Symmons) is eyeing Guy, trying to place how he knows him...

And as Guy turns and pushes back into the crowd--

MAEVE (PRE-LAP)

Hey, wait--

INT. GUY'S FLAT--DAY

--Guy's turning away from Maeve.

MAEVE

Wait!

GUY

What?

She's following him.

MAEVE

Will you look at me?

Guy turns, looks at her. She takes him in a moment.

(CONTINUED)

GUY

What?

MAEVE

I want to know what's going on with you.

Off Guy's face, and the CHEERS of a crowd--

INT. GIG VENUE, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

SINGER-GUITARIST

(on mic)

Thank you, free city of Brightonia,  
yer beautiful d'you know that?

Cheers. Guy plugs his guitar in -- FEEDBACK SCREECHES!

SINGER-GUITARIST

(on mic)

Jesus! Our guitarist ladies and gentlemen.

The Drummer glares at him.

DRUMMER

Oi! Sort it out mate!

Guy reacts.

GUY

Oh yeah?

The Singer-Guitarist is focused on the crowd:

SINGER-GUITARIST

We're gonna do a few--

GUY

(over him)

TWO THREE!

And he SMASHES into the opening hook of the first song!

The band, wrongfooted, curse and stumble into their parts. Guy's glaring at the Drummer, mad-eyed. Drummer mouths 'the fuck?' The Singer-Guitarist fumbles into his first line.

SINGER-GUITARIST

-----

INT. GUY'S FLAT--DAY

GUY

I don't want to do this anymore.

Close on Maeve's brow-furrowed face.

Just staring -- taking him in.

GUY

This, I don't want to do this  
anymore.

She hasn't made a sound, moved an inch.

GUY

You, I don't want to be with you  
anymore. This isn't what I want.

MAEVE

(quiet)

What's going on?

GUY

I don't want to do this anymore.

MAEVE

What's going on?

Guy shrugs, exasperated.

GUY

I don't want you anymore.

Long beat.

MAEVE

Tell me what's going on.

GUY

I don't want you anymore! I don't  
want to be with you anymore!  
Okay? You're asking me what's  
going on, that's what's going on, I  
don't want you, I don't want this,  
just go, just leave now, I don't  
want this.

He begins grabbing items: clothes, her bag, etc.

GUY

Here, take this manky old t-shirt,  
and this hairspray, and this

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

GUY (cont'd)  
fucking scrunchie, and go,  
alright? Because I'm done, I'm  
done with whatever this is, it's  
done, go.

He opens the flat door, tosses the bag out into the hall,  
holds the door open. A passing neighbour says something.

GUY  
(to neighbour)  
FUCK OFF!

He turns back to Maeve, gesturing to the open door. She  
hasn't moved: just looking at him.

After a moment, she walks away from the door, and sits down  
on the bed, facing Guy.

GUY  
GO!

She doesn't move, just stares at him.

After a beat, he disappears into the hall, comes back with  
her bag, dumps it on the floor by the door.

GUY  
Please. Go.

Maybe she's let slip a few tears.

MAEVE  
Tell me what's going on.

Guy punches a cupboard--the door splinters--Maeve flinches.

Guy stands over the sink, trying to catch his breath.

Maeve watches him.

After a few moments, Guy moves to the kitchenette, sits. He  
looks at the floor, panting.

MAEVE  
What's going on?

GUY  
(looking at the floor)  
I don't care about you. I was just  
using you for sex and I'm done with  
you now.

Maeve takes that in.

(CONTINUED)

MAEVE  
What's going on?

GUY  
Stop saying that.

MAEVE  
Tell me.

He looks right into her eyes...

As if he's about to tell her the real deal...

What's really going on...

But...

GUY  
I want you to leave.

He said that right into her eyes. Right into her heart.

She lets that sit a moment. And another.

Takes a breath. Pats her thighs.

Stands. Walks over to her bag.

Walks to the still open door and leaves. Guy watches her go.

HALLWAY

We hear footsteps O.S., hear the front door open and close.

Guy appears, goes to the front door, opens it.

OUTSIDE

It's a grey, drizzly afternoon, and we follow Guy as he runs to the edge of the entranceway, to the top of the exterior stairs, looks off down the street --

Sees Maeve getting smaller, not looking back.

And the SQUEAL OF FEEDBACK, the THRUM of MUSIC rises...

INT. GIG VENUE, BRIGHTON--NIGHT

And we're TIGHT ON GUY, mid-song, goin through the gears.

Bridge part leading to chorus, throwing himself around, the image blurred, bumping the drum kit, the bassist--

(CONTINUED)

Into a feedback-screeching, punk-ish, remedial solo, that he plays as if trying to take the skin off his hands--

He knocks the Drummer's hi-hat flying--

And he's holding this screeching note, bending and vibrating it, and beyond him we can see the dim, shadowed crowd--

CLOSE ON

The face of the Bearded Barman near the front of the crowd--

The dream image we saw in the opening, half-speed--

Looking at Guy, and *seeing* him--recognising him--

Guy looking back, off the stage now, in the heaving bodies of the crowd--pushing through--

And the Bearded Barman is moving away from him, mouthing something--

And Guy can't get through the bodies, but he's trying, pushing--

The Barman disappearing, the crowd and the shadows swallowing him up--

A YOUNG BOY

is standing on the bar, free pouring shots to a cheering crowd, the image weird and dream-like, half-speed--

GUY

still pushing through the crowd, desperate--

THE BOY

pouring liquor into revellers' mouths--

GUY

being overwhelmed by the crowd, shoulders squeezing him almost out of frame--

THE BOY

is the boy we saw in the opening. We see that image again:

*DREAM IMAGE*

*CLOSE ON the freckled face of the boy staring straight into camera... a look of terrible shock...*

*CLOSE ON GUY, caught in some terrible act, staring back...*

*Light FLARES beyond the boy, becomes...*

## EXT. BRIGHTON STREET--NIGHT

The orange flare of a streelight. We hear RUSTLING, see--

## GUY'S HANDS

stuffing Waghorn's blood-covered shirt under the bin-bagged contents of a streetside wheelie bin.

## WAGHORN'S HANDS

wiping clean his knife, tucking it into his jeans.

And now we're tight on Waghorn, over his shoulder, sound distant, mixed with the SOUND OF THE SEA... LAPPING WAVES...

As Waghorn makes his way toward the glowing yellow lights of an ALL NIGHT DINER.

## WAGHORN

In ere, c'mon.

Guy sees where he's headed. **Maeve's diner.**

## GUY

What you doing?

## WAGHORN

Grub.

Through the windows, Guy can just make out Maeve, working.

## GUY

We need to get off the street, old  
bill'll be--

## WAGS

Checking every diner? Fuck  
off. We're eating.

He makes for the diner. Guy has to do something.

(CONTINUED)

GUY

The food's shit, there's a better place down the road.

WAGS

I'm going ere.

Mitch shrugs, follows Wags.

What does Guy do? Leave them to Maeve, or go in after them?

INT. DINER--CONTINUOUS

Maeve's busy taking an order when she hears the door open, and looking up sees Waghorn enter, followed by Mitch.

A moment later she sees Guy entering behind them.

Guy doesn't acknowledge her. Waghorn and Mitch sit at a table. Guy joins them.

Mitch sees Maeve -- looks at Guy. Guy shakes his head, subtly and firmly: 'say nothing.'

Guy's sitting opposite Waghorn and Mitch. Waghorn is looking at one of the laminated menus.

WAGHORN

The fuck is all this shit, eh? Oi!

He yells too loud -- Guy tenses.

WAGHORN

We getting some service are we?

Guy's whole body tenses as Maeve approaches, eyes on him.

MAEVE

Don't shout please, I was serv--

WAGHORN

What?

Maeve starts -- Waghorn's glare is intimidating, and he's in full-on intimidation mode.

MAEVE

I was serving someone else.

WAGHORN

Oh right.

Horrible beat, as Waghorn eyes Maeve, up and down.

(CONTINUED)



GUY  
Just or--

WAGHORN  
What?

GUY  
Just order.

WAGHORN  
I am ordering.

He's eyeing Guy hard too. Too hard. And maybe Guy's starting to get what he's doing.

WAGHORN  
What's in your full English.

She's looking at Guy. What's she to make of this? Maybe her eyes are watering.

WAGHORN  
Oi! What's in your full English?

MAEVE  
Don't say oi to me pl--

WAGHORN  
You what?

MAEVE  
Don't be rude to me please, I'm not being--

WAGHORN  
Is that what I'm being?

MAEVE  
I'm not being rude to you.

WAGHORN  
What's in your full English?

MAEVE  
Two rashers of bacon, two sausages,  
beans, fried or scrambled egg,  
mushrooms, toast.

WAGHORN  
And a coffee.

She writes his order down.

(CONTINUED)

MAEVE

Do you want fried or scrambled egg?

WAGHORN

Which way do you like 'em darlin'?

MAEVE

(beat)

How do you want them?

WAGHORN

Fried.

She looks at Mitch. Mitch avoids her look.

MITCH

Same.

She writes down his order. Then she looks at Guy.

Guy, avoiding her eye, silently shakes his head.

WAGHORN

G'wan, av something.

GUY

I'm fine.

WAGHORN

Av something.

Guy returns Waghorn's stare: a long, hard beat.

GUY

Coffee.

Maeve begins to leave.

WAGHORN

Ask him how he takes it.

She turns back. Looks at Guy.

GUY

(eyes on Waghorn)

Black.

WAGS

(eyes on Guy)

Milky for me ta.

Maeve looks at Mitch.

(CONTINUED)

MITCH  
(sheepish)  
Black.

She casts another look at Guy. Still he refuses to look back. His eyes fixed on Waghorn --

And Waghorn's on him.

Maeve heads back to the kitchen.

WAGHORN  
(eyes fixed on Guy)  
What a fuckin' ugly old cunt.

Guy doesn't blink -- not for a second.

MITCH  
What, er? She's alright.

WAGHORN  
No she's not.

MITCH  
You've gone blind mate, she's a nice one. Even put up with you.

WAGHORN  
What's wrong with me?

MITCH  
You're being a stroppy cunt that's what's wrong wi' you.

He and Guy are still holding unwavering eye contact.

Maeve enters with a tray of coffees. As she nears:

WAGHORN  
No you're right Mitch, I've misjudged er.

Maeve puts their coffees on the table.

MAEVE  
Here you go.

Wags eyes her body.

WAGHORN  
I think she'd do after all. Got the shape asn't she? Bit of strength in her thighs.

GUY

Alright.

WAGHORN

Yeah she is alright, I wouldn't say no. Whatchoo reckon darlin, wanna take me out back, get a load of my full English?

She looks at Wags.

MAEVE

If you're gonna be rude you can leave.

WAGHORN

Who's being rude?

She looks at Guy.

MAEVE

(quietly)

Get out.

WAGHORN

You what?

MAEVE

Get out.

WAGHORN

When I've ad my full English.

GUY

Let's go.

WAGHORN

(very loud)

SIT DOWN!

Roared so loud the plates in the kitchen are rattling.

Maeve has frozen up now, like she did when she saw a knife.

Waghorn takes a gulp of his coffee.

WAGHORN

This coffee's 'orrible, get me another one.

MAEVE

Get out.

(CONTINUED)

MITCH  
(tentative)  
Come on Wags--

GUY  
(standing)  
We're leaving.

WAGHORN  
I an't ad my coffee yet. Ere y'are  
darling, ere's my money up front--

He pulls the front of Maeve's jeans and STUFFS a twenty pound note down into her crotch --

She SMACKS HIM in the face instinctively, very hard --

And he KNOCKS THE COFFEES FLYING as he LEAPS AT HER --

Throttling her --

Guy wrenches one arm from her --

Mitch the other --

They drag him backwards --

WAGHORN  
(uncontrollably furious)  
Fuck off you horrible cunt! You  
fuckin horrible old cunt! Fuck off!

Kicking tables, customers scurrying, plates flying --

Until they're out of the door --

OUTSIDE

Shoving him back, closing the door --

Waghorn PULLS HIS KNIFE OUT --

GUY  
(deadly serious)  
Put that away.

A long, horrible beat, Wags holding the knife out...

He viciously STABS THE AIR, grunting as her does, once, twice, five times, ten times.

(CONTINUED)

MITCH

Old bill's gonna be ere in about  
thirty seconds you fucking lunatic,  
put yet cock away and let's go, eh?

Guy eyes Waghorn...

As he pants, coming down from his rage high...

Laughs, manic. Pockets his knife.

WAGHORN

Come on 'en.

And with that he turns and strides away. Mitch shrugs at  
Guy, follows.

CLOSE ON GUY

Staring. Dead-eyed. Blank-faced.

Making a decision.

INT. GUY'S FLAT--MORNING

CLOSE ON Guy, watching the steam curl out from under his  
bathroom door.

MITCH (O.S.)

What's the time?

Guy doesn't respond -- he's fixed on the steam.

MITCH (O.S.)

Oi, space cadet -- time?

GUY

Five.

MITCH (O.S.)

Alright. Twenty minutes. Get the  
coffee on.

Slow zoom into the door...

We can hear the person inside moving around...

And the SOUND OF THE SEA begins to rise again...

CLOSE ON BLACK WATER

Rushing beneath us-- Moony glimmers on the surface foam--

Flashes of shimmering light in the dark-- The wake of  
whatever vessel is bearing us--

CLOSE ON

Guy, sitting on the side of this vessel, Andaman night and  
ocean breeze all around him, staring into the distance...

It begins to rain...

GUY (PRE-LAP)  
(in Thai)  
I used to live here.

THAI GIRL (PRE-LAP)  
(in Thai)  
Where? In Bangkok?

GUY (PRE-LAP)  
(in Thai)  
No. Right here.

INT. BEACH HUT, THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

Guy is lying on the mat, maybe his eyes are a little watery.

GUY  
(in Thai)  
Very close.

THAI GIRL  
(in Thai)  
You had a Thai girlfriend?

GUY  
(in Thai)  
No. French. Wife.

THAI GIRL  
(in Thai)  
What happened?

GUY  
(in Thai)  
She died.

Guy stands, goes to the window, stares out.

(CONTINUED)

The Thai Girl watches him, looks at her hands, not sure what to say.

GUY  
(switching English)  
I was trying to keep her safe,  
but... I ended up getting her hurt.

EXT. BOAT OFF THE ISLAND'S SHORE--NIGHT

CLOSE ON Guy, staring ahead, the wind ruffling his hair.

And the Thai Girl sitting behind him on the boat's edge, watching him.

Rain strobing over them, over the sea, turning heavy...

Monsooning into the water's surface...

INT. BEACH HUT, THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

CLOSE ON Guy, staring out the window.

DISSOLVE into

THE BLACK WATER

rushing by, glimmering in the moon, exploded by the rain...

It goes on and on, dark and endless, rushing by...

Until the sound of the water begins to meld with FOOTSTEPS,  
MUTTERED VOICES... SOUNDS OF MOVEMENT...

INT. HALLWAY, GUY'S FLAT--DAWN

Wordless, Guy, Mitch and Waghorn zip their jackets up to their necks, pull baseball caps down low over their brows.

Guy watches Waghorn, zipping his jacket up--

OVER THE FLESH OF HIS THROAT

Time slowing for a moment--

The material of his jacket folding itself over his flesh--

And then they're quick-walking to the front door, Waghorn carrying a familiar SEA-GREEN SPORTS BAG...

The same one Guy almost dropped in the sea in the opening...

(CONTINUED)



OUTSIDE

They walk quick, single file, hunched. The first dawn-light is beginning to blue the edges of the sky.

INT. CAR--DAWN

Mitch driving. Guy in the passenger seat. Waghorn in back. Guy looks in the rearview mirror--Waghorn's eyeing him...

WAGHORN

Time?

MITCH

Five forty.

The car travels through the empty streets of central Brighton. The leftovers of Pride are apparent: rainbow bunting, wasted stragglers, trash everywhere.

WAGHORN

(re: side road)

Park it there.

Mitch makes a sharp turn, hands working the wheel.

WAGHORN

Right there.

The car comes to a stop--manoeuvres back--into the space.

Waghorn pulls his collar up, hat down. Guy does the same.

Waghorn opens his door, the other two follow suit.

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--DAWN

Guy and Maeve in bed, partially clothed. We're tight on them, as Maeve cracks an eye, looks at Guy from very close.

She snuggles closer. Guy cracks an eye, strokes her hair.

MAEVE

(sleepy)

This is nice.

GUY

Yeah.

They kiss. She strokes his face. Runs a finger along the bristles of his beard, his jaw. Kisses his chin.

(CONTINUED)

She reaches down, we stay tight on their heads/faces, as she pulls his t-shirt up. It gets caught on his chin.

MAEVE

Oops. Sorry.

GUY

Be gentle.

They chuckle softly, kiss. Guy wraps an arm around her, turns them so they're on their side.

He slides two hands either side of her face, his fingers in her hair, and looks into her eyes. She looks back.

They stay there a moment looking at each other...

Until a peaceful, genuine little smile turns the corners of Guy's mouth. Another kiss.

Guy's hands rummage out of shot, pull Maeve's t-shirt up and over her head.

We stay tight on them, on their faces, their closeness, as they undress each other.

EXT. BRIGHTON STREET--DAWN

TIGHT ON GUY from behind, quick-walking, following Mitch, and ahead of Mitch there's Waghorn leading the way.

They turn into an alley that runs behind a parade of shops.

Up ahead, we see Waghorn signal, and remove his baseball cap to pull on his BALACLAVA.

Mitch does the same. Guy follows: off comes the cap, and on goes his **GREY BALACLAVA** (seen in previous flashbacks).

The cap is stuffed in his jacket, and out comes

A HAMMER

And then he's running, and we're staying tight on him, balaclava'd and running, an image we've seen before--

And he's clambering over a fence--hopping a wall--down to ground level--

ALLEYWAY

Into a patch of darkness.

(CONTINUED)

WAGHORN (O.S.)  
(hushed)  
Wait!

Guy stops.

Silence. We can hear Guy's breathing, Mitch's breathing O.S.

A car engine... Getting closer...

Passing... Getting distant.

And we're off again, trotting--into some kind of yard--clambering over another fence, Mitch offering a hand--

Heaving up and over--and suddenly we're at

THE BACK DOOR OF A PUB, BEER GARDEN

And Waghorn is at the back windows, peering in.

He looks for a long moment. Then stands up, reacting.

MITCH  
(hushed)  
What?

He gestures for them to look.

THROUGH THE WINDOW

We see that the pub is a state, streamers and confetti, dirty glasses, fallen bunting.

A CLUSTER OF BAR STAFF & THEIR FRIENDS are passed out asleep on the sofas, table littered with empties and full ashtrays.

MITCH  
Fuck.

Waghorn takes the situation in.

WAGHORN  
(to Guy)  
You keep 'em quiet.

GUY  
Call it off man.

WAGS  
Keep em quiet or I'll keep em quiet.

GUY

Wags--

Waghorn pulls a metal DOORSTOP from his jacket, wedges it into the crack in the door, just above the lock.

GUY

Oi - we need to leave it--

But before he can finish, Waghorn KICKS--

INT. THE BLACK LION PUB, BRIGHTON--CONTINUOUS

--THE DOOR IN!

With a splintering of wood it FLIES OPEN, and Waghorn is STRIDING across the floor of the pub.

The alarm is BLEEP - BLEEP - BLEEPing.

A couple of the still-drunk, fast asleep REVELLERS have opened their eyes at the noise.

Guy and Mitch enter too, closing the door behind them -- Wags is at the alarm control, tapping in the code.

GINGER BARMAID

Oi--

The alarm control beeps at Wags -- the code's not working.

Guy, no option, strides over to the Revellers, hammer out.

GUY

(firm)

Stay there.

GINGER BARMAID

Jesus Christ.

The other Revellers start waking, reacting. The machine rejects Wags' code again.

WAGHORN

Fuck!

The bleeping intensifies--how long until the alarm goes off?

The woken Revellers are in shock: exclaiming, reacting.

(CONTINUED)

GUY  
Shut up. Shut up.

Wags STRIDES back over.

WAGHORN  
You!

He grabs a pretty BLONDE BARMAN in a tutu and glitter make-up by the crook of the arm, YANKS him up and DRAGS him.

The others scream/react.

GUY & MITCH  
Shut up!/Mouths shut!/etc.

WAGHORN  
Turn it off!

The poor lad is shaking, being DRAGGED to the control panel.

BLONDE BARMAN  
(in shock)  
What the fuck? What the fuck?

BLEE-BLEEP! BLEE-BLEEP! The alarm's about to go off...

WAGHORN  
TURN IT OFF!

With shaking fingers the poor Blonde Barman gets the code tapped in, presses UNSET. The bleeping stops.

BLONDE BARMAN  
Jesus--

Wags SHOVES and PUSHES him back over toward the others.

Guy's leaning over the group of Revellers, trying to keep them under control.

Blonde Barman trips and stumbles, tumbles badly, limbs flying and head HITTING the bar.

The Revellers react -- screams, gasps.

Wags pulls Blonde Barman up by his hair, SLAPS him hard.

WAGHORN  
Stop wailing you fucking vermin!

He SLAPS him again, full force.

REVELLERS  
No!/Stop it!/ etc

GUY  
Shut up! Sit down!

Guy and Mitch force the others to sit back down on the sofas, threatening them with the hammers.

Wags DRAGS the terrorized Blonde Barman over to them, throws him at the feet of his friends. They console him.

WAGHORN  
Ow many upstairs?

REVELLERS  
What?/What is this?/etc.

Wags SMASHES a pillar with the hammer -- a light fixture explodes. Screams, curses.

WAGS  
Ow many upstairs!

Guy assesses them quickly.

GUY  
You.

He's pointing at the Ginger Barmaid.

GUY (CONT.)  
Get up.

Though shaky and terrified, she's the most together of the lot -- there's a resoluteness under her terror. She stands.

GUY  
How many people upstairs?

GINGER BARMAID  
Three. No--four. There are four.

GUY  
Go get em down here. If it takes more than sixty seconds people are gonna get hurt. Understand?

She nods.

GUY  
Go.

She makes for the stairs.

(CONTINUED)

MITCH  
(to Guy)  
Phones.

GUY  
Oi!

She stops at the stairs.

GUY (CONT.)  
Bring their phones. If there're  
more people than phones--

GINGER BARMAID  
I'm on it.

She disappears up the stairs.

An eerie silence--panting, whinnying from the Revellers. A  
Hippy Barmaid checks the Blonde Barman's scalp.

HIPPY BARMAID  
(to Guy)  
He's *bleeding*.

WAGHORN  
So?

Beat.

GUY  
Where are your phones? Put em on  
the table, now, all of you.

They look at each other, unsure.

MITCH  
NOW!

They react, fumble for their phones.

Wags paces, animalistic, panting under his balaclava,  
tensing his grip on his hammer. Eyeing Guy.

Gradually, four phones are placed on the table.

GUY  
Take the batteries out.

Shaky handed, the Revellers do as told.

UPSTAIRS

The Ginger Barmaid yanks a phone from a wall charger --

(CONTINUED)

Finds another on a bedside table --

She shakes a still-drunk friend, slaps his face, he groans:

SLEEPY BARMAN

What?

GINGER BARMAID

This isn't a joke, we're in the  
middle of a break-in, there are  
three men with hammers--

DOWNSTAIRS

Wags walks up to the clock hanging over the bar. He watches  
the second hand ticking down. Tosses the hammer in his hand.

CLOSE ON

Guy, his eyes visible through the balaclava.

Wags STRIDES over to the base of the stairs. Looking up:

WAGHORN

TEN SECONDS! Ten!

He WHACKS the wall with the hammer! Plaster scatters.

The Revellers react/gasp/oh-my-God etc.

WAGHORN

Nine!

Whack!

WAGHORN

Eight!

Whack!

UPSTAIRS

SLEEPY BARMAN

Jesus fucking Christ!

GINGER BARMAID

Come on!

She's pushing the sleepy, confused BARMAN and his  
GIRLFRIEND in their underwear out to the staircase.

DOWNSTAIRS



WAGHORN

Six!

Whack!

WAGHORN

Five!

Whack!

TOP OF THE STAIRS

The SLEEPY COUPLE see Wags, react: 'fucking hell/Jesus!'

WAGHORN

Get down ere!

UPSTAIRS

The Ginger Barmaid searches through jean pockets for the last phone -- nothing --

WAGHORN (O.S.)

Four!

Whack! The final phone spills out of a jacket pocket -- she grabs it, leaps to her feet --

STAIRCASE

And she's running down the stairs.

WAGHORN

Three! Two! One!

And she passes him, down the last step, on the one.

The terrorized Late Sleepers, in their underwear, join the others, shuffling, scared, in shock, still a bit drunk.

GUY

Sit down.

He points the hammer at a space on the floor.

The Late Sleepers do as they're told. Tears, shaking hands, mutterings, shushes. Ginger Barmaid puts the 4 phones on the table with the others, starts taking out their batteries.

One of the Late Sleepers, UNDERWEAR GIRL, is in skimpy knickers and loose, revealing vest top. Wags is eyeing her. She sees this, shifts closer into her BOXER-CLAD BOYFRIEND.

Mitch is counting the phones. Counting the people.

(CONTINUED)

MITCH  
Only got eight.

GUY  
What?

MITCH  
Eight phones, nine o' them.

GUY  
Who hasn't handed their phone over?

GINGER BARMAID  
I got the four from upstairs.

HANDSOME LAD  
I don't have a phone.

His girlfriend, NECKBEADS GIRL, is next to him.

NECKBEADS GIRL  
It's true he doesn't.

GUY  
Bollocks, put it on the table.

HANDSOME LAD  
No honestly, I don't like phones, I  
don't have one.

Wags GRABS him, lifts him up, drags him--

NECKBEADS GIRL  
No, he doesn't have one!

GUY  
Sit down!

Guy pushes her back down. Wags drags the Handsome Lad over to another table, pulls out his hand and slaps it on the table, holds the hammer high.

WAGHORN  
WHERE'S YOUR PHONE!

HANDSOME LAD  
I haven't got one!

Wags WHACKS the table next to his hand!

WAGHORN  
WHERE'S YOUR PHONE!

HANDSOME LAD  
I haven't--

Wags SLAMS the base on the hammer's handle into the back of the Lad's hand! Not as bad as a full hammer hit, but bad.

Screams, cries, etc.

HANDSOME LAD  
It's in my shoe!

Guy checks through the shoes--shakes out a phone.

GUY  
Got it.

Wags SHOVES Handsome Lad to the floor. Neckbeads Girl runs to him. Guy removes the battery from the final phone.

REVELLER GIRL  
You've broken his hand!

GINGER BARMAID  
Shut up.

Wags approaches the group.

WAGHORN  
Which one's assistant manager?

The group look at each other.

GINGER BARMAID  
He's not here.

Oh dear.

GUY  
Don't do anything silly.

GINGER BARMAID  
No really, he crashed at his girlfriend's place last night.

Mitch and Wags react.

GUY  
Where's his girlfriend's place?

GINGER BARMAID  
Few minutes away, off East Street.

Mitch can't hide his frustration. Wags is eyeing Guy, like: 'alright then, if you think you're so smart, fix this.'

(CONTINUED)

Guy takes a moment.

GUY  
Put your battery back in your  
phone.

She nods, starts reassembling her phone.

GUY (CONT.)  
He'll be asleep?

She nods.

GUY (CONT.)  
You're gonna call him until he  
answers, and you're gonna tell him  
there's been a break-in and that  
you need him here now, with his set  
of keys, and you're gonna make sure  
he's heard you, and then you're  
gonna hang up. Say it back to me.

GINGER BARMAID  
Break-in, need him here now with  
his keys.

GUY  
And hang up.

She nods, does something with her phone.

GINGER BARMAID  
Contacts are loading.

Some Revellers are looking at her with hostility, like 'why are you helping them?' The injured Lad is crying softly.

NECKBEADS GIRL  
(crying)  
I think you've really broken his  
hand.

Wags had been miles away, staring at the scantily clad girl. He snaps out of it, walks calmly over to Neckbeads Girl and SLAPS HER hard in the face, so hard it knocks her flying.

Guy's head snaps around to look. Wags calmly walks back to the spot he was in, resumes his position.

GINGER BARMAID  
Um... you want me to...?

(CONTINUED)

GUY

Yeah.

She presses a button -- we hear the phone ringing.

WAGS

Put it on speaker.

She does as he says. We hear the ringtone filling the room.

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)

(muffled, groggy)

Ghg..... shit...

Sounds like he's dropped the phone.

GINGER BARMAID

Max?

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)

Gmhmf... yeah? Sas?

GINGER BARMAID

Max, I need you to be awake right now, are you awake?

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)

What is it?

GINGER BARMAID

Are you awake?

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)

....gnmgh...

(voice gets a bit louder)

I'm awake, what's the deal?

GINGER BARMAID

We've had a break-in.

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)

What?

GINGER BARMAID

We've had a break-in and I need you--

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)

Fuh kin ell--

GINGER BARMAID

We've had a break-in and I need you here in five minutes,

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

GINGER BARMAID (cont'd)  
understand? Five minutes, I mean  
it.

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)  
Yeah, no, hang on--

GINGER BARMAID  
I need you here in five minutes  
with your keys, this is serious,  
okay?

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)  
What's--

GINGER BARMAID  
Five minutes, with your keys. I've  
gotta go.

ASSISTANT MANAGER (ON PHONE)  
Hang on--

She hangs up.

GUY  
Good job.

She sits back down, relieved--a Reveller puts an arm around  
her, another mutters some criticism, is told to shut up.

Guy approaches Wags.

GUY  
So when he gets here?

WAGHORN  
We'll meet him at the door.

Guy steps closer.

GUY  
This lot are scared  
shitless. No-one needs to get  
hurt. We get the money and bolt.

Wags takes this in for a long beat. We can hear the injured  
lad weeping, his Girlfriend shushing him.

WAGHORN  
You think you're so much smarter'n  
me don't'cha. Think you're  
smarter'n everyone.

A silent beat, the two balaclava'd faces inches apart.

(CONTINUED)

We hold and hold on this beat. Both men assessing each other, neither giving an inch.

MALE LATE SLEEPER (O.S.)

Hey - excuse me?

Mitch had wandered behind the bar, nosing around, looking for he-doesn't-know-what. He heads back to the Revellers.

MITCH

What?

MALE LATE SLEEPER

(re: his girlfriend)

She needs the toilet.

MITCH

Tough luck.

PYJAMA-CLAD GIRLFRIEND

I really need it.

MITCH

Piss yerself.

Back to Guy and Wags. Tension still there. Guy breaks away first, wanders to the injured Lad and his crying Girlfriend.

GUY

Show me.

They hold up his injured hand. Purple, shaking, swollen up.

GUY

You'll live. Behave yourselves and it'll be over soon.

Wags has wandered behind the bar. He picks up a glass, picks out a bottle of rum, pours himself a large one.

Gravitates back toward the skimpy underwear girl.

Eyeing her, he pulls the bottom of his balaclava up over his chin to reveal his stubble-surrounded mouth, and, still eyeing her, necks the rum. Aaaaaah.

She shifts uncomfortably into her boyfriend.

The boyfriend tightens his grip on her, but can't hold eye contact with Wags.

(CONTINUED)

WAGHORN

Oi.

She won't look at him.

WAGHORN (CONT.)

Oi, Victoria's Secret.

She looks at him.

WAGHORN (CONT.)

Ever had a real man?

The boyfriend plucks up the courage:

BOXER-CLAD BOYFRIEND

Please leave her alone.

Wags' eyes flash.

BOXER-CLAD BOYFRIEND

Please.

GINGER BARMAID

Shut up Ross.

Wags eyes the Ginger Barmaid. And the Boyfriend.

WAGS

Stand up.

The Revellers mutter protest: no / please / etc.

WAGS

Stand up. Come on.

The Boyfriend shakes his head.

UNDERWEAR GIRL

I don't want him to.

He looks at her.

UNDERWEAR GIRL (CONT.)

Please.

WAGS

Alright. You stand up then.

She does, standing before him, semi-naked--but the Boyfriend pulls her back down, stands in front of her.

(CONTINUED)



BOXER-CLAD BOYFRIEND  
 Alright? There.

The girl stays standing too, just behind the boyfriend.

GINGER BARMAID  
 (to Wags)  
 Come on man.

WAGS  
 Shut up.  
 (to Boyfriend)  
 Take them off.

He points the hammer at the lad's boxers.

UNDERWEAR GIRL  
 Why?

WAGS  
 Shut up.  
 (to Boyfriend)  
 Off.

After a beat he takes them off. Stands there NAKED. Wags takes the lad's boxers, walks over to the bar, tosses them in the bin. Walks back to the sofas where the nude boy and the semi-nude girl are standing.

Wags looks at them a moment.

WAGHORN  
 Alright, sit down then.

Confused, terrorised, they sit back down, the lad trying to cover himself up, the Underwear Girl trying to help.

Mitch shakes his head, on the fringe of the situation. Guy peering out the front windows. He's seen something.

GUY  
 This is him.

He and Mitch jog over to the front door. Wags takes up a position just inside the door -- Mitch on the other side -- Guy stays by the window.

POINT OF VIEW SHOT THROUGH THE WINDOW

shows a drunk/hungover guy in an oversize hoodie fumbling with keys as he approaches: the ASSISTANT MANAGER.

Guy nods -- get ready.

(CONTINUED)

TIGHT ON Wags on one side of the door, as through the slatted blinds we see the silhouette of the Assistant Manager reaching the doorway, fumbling the keys.

We hear muffled swearing. He seems to find the right one, jiggles it into the lock. The door opens --

ASSISTANT MANAGER

Sas?--

As soon as his head pokes around the door --

Wags GRABS him around the neck--YANKS him in, Guy SHUTS and LOCKS the door--

Mitch helps Wags DRAG him down to the floor--DRAG him along the floor, away from the front windows--Gasps and yells from the Revellers--

GUY

(marshalling the Revellers)

Shut up, sit down! Down!

TIGHT ON Asst Manager, on the ground, bundled up against the bar, two balaclava'd psychos all over him--pure terror.

WAGHORN

Keys!

ASSISTANT MANAGER

What?

Wags SLAPS him.

WAGHORN

KEYS!

ASSISTANT MANAGER

Alright, alright!

He fumbles the keys from his pocket. Mitch picks them up.

WAGHORN

Safe key!

ASSISTANT MANAGER

It's not-- it's behind--

WAGHORN

What?

(CONTINUED)

ASSISTANT MANAGER  
It's behind the till! It's behind  
the till!

WAGHORN  
Get it.

Wags DRAGS him to his feet, SHOVES him behind the bar.

The panicked Asst Managers scrabbles through the pots and  
holders that are dotted around the till and backbar area.

WAGHORN  
Come on!

ASSISTANT MANAGER  
It's here somewhere, I left it  
right here.

GINGER BARMAID  
Calm down, just take a sec and  
think.

WAGHORN  
Shut up!  
(to Assistant Manager)  
You've got til the count of  
ten! One!

ASSISTANT MANAGER  
(more frantic)  
I can't see it!

GINGER BARMAID  
Max, calm down!

WAGHORN  
Two!

Assistant Manager is starting to sob.

ASSISTANT MANAGER  
It should be here!

WAGHORN  
Three!

Ginger Barmaid goes behind the bar, pushes Asst Manager  
aside, lifts the till drawer, runs her hand in all the gaps.

WAGHORN  
Four!

(CONTINUED)

GINGER BARMAID  
What the fuck did you do with it?

ASSISTANT MANAGER  
I put it here!

WAGHORN  
Fucking five!

GINGER BARMAID  
You're meant to keep it on you!

ASSISTANT MANAGER  
It should be here, I don't know why  
it's not here!

Wags, losing his patience, STORMS behind the bar, GRABS the Assistant Manager by the hair, DRAGS him forwards --

SHOVES his head down against the bar, raises the hammer.

WAGHORN  
WHERE IS IT?

ASSISTANT MANAGER  
(a mess)  
I don't--I don't--

WAGHORN  
WHERE IS IT!

GINGER BARMAID  
(pleading)  
He doesn't know! He doesn't know!

GUY  
Cut it out!

WAGHORN  
WHERE IS IT!

GINGER BARMAID  
We can find it! We'll find it!

GUY  
Oi!

Guy SHOVES Wags's shoulder, jolting him. **He looks at Guy...**

Yanks the Asst Manager up to his feet, pushes him up against the wall--SLAPS him hard. SLAPS him hard again. THROWS him to the floor, where he crumples, limbs jellied.

(CONTINUED)

GINGER BARMAID

Look. Things go missing, it happens all the time--everyone was shitfaced last night, it's normal. We'll find it, things always turn up.

GUY

Listen. All that's happened so far is he's got a cracked hand and he's been slapped around. It's gonna get a lot worse if you don't find that key, you understand?

Guy holds eye contact a moment... nods: okay, off you go.

GINGER BARMAID

Jay, Sam -- here, now.

HIPPY BARMAID and a TATTOED BARMAN look up from the sofas.

GINGER BARMAID

Now!

LATER

A HALF-SPEED CAMERA slips across Guys' eyes, striking green, eyeing:

Wags: the deep rivets in his brow, eyes panning across to:

Underwear Girl, under someone's jacket on the sofa, leaning on her humiliated, naked Boyfriend.

Beyond them, the Ginger Barmaid and Hippy Barmaid and Tattooed Barman are turning the backbar upside down.

HALF-SPEED, Wags stands, walks towards the sofas. Guy watches.

As Wags' walk speeds up to normal pace.

The Underwear Girl and the naked Boyfriend watch his approach.

WAGHORN

(to Underwear Girl)

Go help 'em.

She isn't sure what to do, doesn't want to go, can't answer.

(CONTINUED)

WAGHORN

Go on.

She shakes her head. Wags calmly sits down opposite them.

WAGHORN

Don't make me angry sweetheart.

Reluctantly, encouraged by the Boyfriend, she stands, walks over to the bar, trying to cover herself with her hands.

Wags stares at the naked Boyfriend. Guy is watching from across the room.

Wags reaches out to the naked Boyfriend with the end of the hammer, poking him with it--in the chest, under the chin.

Then he stands, and we follow him back over to the bar area. He passes Mitch, leaning on a chair.

MITCH

We gotta be moving mate.

Wags ignores him heads to the bar, to Guy.

WAGHORN

Time?

Beat as Guy holds Wags eye contact. Checks his phone.

GUY

Six-fifty.

Wags nods.

WAGHORN

You lot av got five more minutes.

Ginger Barmaid has the glass washer pulled out, shelves emptied, the other two on their knees, searching.

GINGER BARMAID

We'll find it.

Wags saunters over to watch the Underwear Girl, who is tentatively looking through shelves.

WAGHORN

Oi. Take your knickers off.

She looks at him, looks at Guy.

WAGHORN

Take em off.

GUY

No.

Wags looks Guy.

GUY

Wind your neck in.

Underwear Girl is frozen, unsure what to do--Ginger Barmaid and the other Revellers also waiting, scared.

Wags looks at Guy a long moment... then steps over to the bar stool where the Asst Manager is leaning, recovering.

Wags YANKS him off the stool, RAMS his head into the side of the bar. Screams, etc.

Guy moves, but Wags holds the hammer out, threatening.

GUY

Cut it out!

WAGHORN

You wanna tell me what to do do ya?

He SWINGS the hammer into the Assistant Manager's gut -- WHOOMPH. Screams, cries, etc.

WAGHORN

You wanna tell me what to do?

UNDERWEAR GIRL

Fine, fine, I'll take my fucking knickers off, fine!

Angry, shaky, she steps out from the bar and takes her knickers down, stands there naked below the waist, angry-crying and shaking like a leaf.

UNDERWEAR GIRL

Okay? Happy?

Guy PULLS the stricken Asst Manager away from Wags, sets him on the floor, a yelping heap, blood streaking down his face.

Revellers go to comfort him, to comfort the half-naked Girl.

GINGER BARMAID

(holding up the key)

I found it.

The Underwear Girl convulses with angry sobs.

UPSTAIRS

CLOSE ON the safe door opening to reveal STACKS upon STACKS of cash contained in clear plastic cash bags.

Guy lets it sink in. A momentous amount of cash.

He begins to stuff it into the SEA-GREEN SPORTS BAG.

TIGHT ON

the bulging bag, as it's carried down the stairs...

Into the pub... handed over to...

WAGHORN

who makes no acknowledgement of happiness or satisfaction, simply accepts the bag, glances at its fullness.

THE REVELLERS AND THE LATE SLEEPERS

are gathered around the sofas, looking up at us with terrorized faces.

Asst Manager's face horribly swollen and bloodied, the Handsome Lad cradling his broken hand, the Boyfriend of the Underwear Girl comforting her, still naked himself.

Waghorn looks them over.

WAGHORN

Woss time?

MITCH

Nearly seven.

Waghorn walks over to the pub's front windows.

We stay with Guy, looking at the group. The group, looking at him. He's unable to apologise. All he can do is look.

Waghorn peers through the blinds, returns.

WAGHORN

Right. Where's your cold cellar?

GINGER BARMAID

(indicating)

Down there.

(CONTINUED)



WAGHORN

Alright, up you pop. Stand up.

The traumatized group stands.

WAGHORN

Key?

The Ginger Barmaid works a key off her fob, tosses it.

WAGHORN

In.

GINGER BARMAID

(re: Underwear Girl &  
Boyfriend)

Can they cover up?

WAGS

No.

Guy can't help but shake his head at this. Maybe Mitch sees,  
and eyes him: 'careful.'

The group shuffle to a doorway behind the bar, down stairs.

Waghorn approaches Guy.

WAGHORN

We'll get the cash and the car back  
up to London, dump the car with one  
of my breakers. You can find  
somewhere to kick your feet for a  
few weeks, 'til the rozzers drop  
it.

GUY

Mm hm.

WAGHORN

Cheer up son. Perfect job this.

He claps Guy on the shoulder.

DOWN IN THE COLD CELLAR

the group are assembling, between the kegs, shivering.

From the top of the stairs:

WAGHORN

Get cosy children, yer gonna be in  
ere for the next little while. And

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

WAGHORN (cont'd)  
in case any of you feel like  
helping out Old Bill--

Leans into the hallway, RIPS a paper rota from a pinboard.

WAGHORN  
(holding up the rota)  
--names and numbers, right  
ere! Right?

And with that, he SLAMS the door closed, locks it, CHUCKS  
the key across the bar.

WAGHORN  
Back way, look sharp.

He STRIDES over to the back door. Guy and Mitch start to  
follow. Mitch nudges Guy.

MITCH  
Oi. Keep it together, right?

GUY  
I'm fine.

Wags OPENS the back door, holds it open:

Guy's PoV, half-speed, floating camera, making for the  
doorway, as Wags PULLS OFF his balaclava...

CLOSE ON

Wags, eyeing us as we pass him...

CLOSE ON

Guy, removing his balaclava, eyeing Wags back...

THE SEA

Broad, marbled blue-green, foaming at the peaks. It's  
spitting rain, breezing wind. The waves break on the  
groynes, on the pier struts.

VERY WIDE ON A SLEEPY SIDE STREET

Their white Kia nestled between other cars at the far end.  
We hear the SOUNDS OF THE DAWN, the breeze, the gulls.

Wags, a distant figure, emerges from a side alley at a clip.  
Followed by Mitch. Followed by Guy.

(CONTINUED)

They quick march across the empty road, baseball caps back on and tops zipped up, hiding their faces. Wags makes it to the distant car, gets in the passenger seat. Mitch gets in the driver's seat. Guy arrives, gets in the back.

Camera continues to move slowly in, centering on the car, still small in frame.

We begin to hear noises. Muffled shouts.

Something being hit. Hit again. Muffled swearing.

INSIDE THE CAR

WAGHORN

Fucking start it!

MITCH

It's not starting!

WAGHORN

Fucking start it then!

MITCH

Look!

Mitch jiggles the key in the ignition -- lights flicker on and off, but there's no power.

MITCH

It's dead!

WAGHORN

Fuck off!

Wags SMASHES the dashboard.

MITCH

Ow is it dead! You were menna get a new one!

WAGHORN

Shut the fuck up you fucking cunt.  
(eyeing Mitch)

You wanna start somefing, eh? Maybe you did this. Mutiny job. Fuck me from the inside. Eh? Eh?

Guy, in the back, takes a moment. Then:

GUY

Alright, call Jimmy, out in Peacehaven, he can get it towed, he

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

GUY (cont'd)  
can take it to your breaker to have  
it crushed.

Wags eyes him, unsure.

GUY  
Pub doesn't open 'til twelve,  
right? Kiddies won't be out of  
there 'til then.

MITCH  
What do we do?

GUY  
Split up. You take the bus, we take  
different trains, meet in London to  
dole out the cash. One of Wags'  
places. You still got that building  
behind Victoria?

WAGHORN  
Yeah.

GUY  
Meet there.

Wags turns around to look at Guy.

GUY (CONT.)  
Or we sit here and wait for the AA.

Long beat.

GUY  
(to Mitch)  
Give us your hammer, I know a place  
we can dump 'em.

Mitch hands it over.

MITCH  
Why do I get the fucking bus?

WAGHORN  
Shut up.

## DESERTED BEACHFRONT

The empty seaside promenade in the early morning breeze. Guy and Wags, small figures again, emerge from a side street.

Guy trots across the empty road, leading the way. Wags follows.

## CLOSE ON GUY

trotting down a stone staircase to beach level.

GUY  
(calling behind him)  
Down here.

Wags is following. Guy leads him

## UNDER THE PIER

A dim, mossy spot, right under the pier's rusted struts. The entire beachfront is empty, this spot dim and secluded.

We HEAR the amplified groan of the wind.

*Guy's breathing is shallow... His chest rising and falling... He squeezes the hammers he has held in both hands, handles up sleeves, hammer-heads in palms.*

Wags, gripping the well-stuffed SEA-GREEN SPORTS BAG, his own hammer in his other hand, handle-up-sleeve, looks at the rusted metalwork, the dripping pier belly.

GUY  
(gesturing)  
Here.

Guy CROUCHES down by an OUTFLOW PIPE. He pulls a cluster of beach pebbles from it's mouth. SHOVES one hammer deep inside its throat...

Wags watches...

He SHOVES the other hammer in after it... He STANDS.

GUY  
Stuff the stones back in when  
you're done.

Wags eyes Guy...

But CROUCHES down, not loosening his grip on the bag...

(CONTINUED)

And takes out his hammer, REACHES into the throat of the outflow pipe, trying to fit it in...

Guy, breath shaky, removes GAROTTE WIRE from his pocket...

Beyond them, a morning sky FLARES through the gloom, glowing the puddles and metalwork around them...

**Guy REACHES around Wag's neck from behind in a smooth movement and YANKS the wire against his throat--**

We hear a sharp INTAKE OF BREATH--

As Wags is HEFTED BACK, off balance--

Guy, teeth gritted, HEAVES him onto his belly--

TIGHTENS the garotte wire around Wags' throat--

KNEES his back to keep him held--

Wags fitting and STRUGGLING-- Knees spasming, KICKING--

Guy PULLING and PULLING the garotte wire with all his might-- Wags struggling-- Shifting like a cow in the slaughterhouse-- Guy almost loses his grip--

Blood on his fingers from where the wire is cutting into Wags' flesh-- And Wags still STRUGGLES and little strangled YELPS escape--

And he KNOCKS Guy off-balance--

And he SQUIRMS out from under his knee--

GASPING, eyes almost popping out of his head, he tugs at the garotte wire still bound around his throat--

But Guy's there again, YANKING it tight--

Re-asserting his grip--

And now Wags is on his back, eyes STARING up at Guy--

Who grits his teeth, and tries to keep him pinned--

Wags' EYES--

Fixed on Guy's--

And his kicks are beginning to soften-- His struggling becoming less fierce-- Guy's breathing is turning to panting, something on the verge of sobs--

Wags is dying, under his weight--

What's he doing? Is he making a terrible mistake? Is it too late? Can he reverse this?

Wags' lips are moving-- He's mouthing something--

Guy, almost weeping, redoubles his efforts, SQUEEZES--

As the SOUND OF THE SEA is there, rising in the background... The dawn light flaring on the GREY and SEA-GREEN paintwork...

And Wags, his life ebbing away, moving his lips... Mouthing words we can't make out...

He mouths them again... Guy can't make it out...

But we HEAR--

**Footsteps O.S.!**

Guy turns to see a dream image, wrought in real life...

*A boy, 10 or 11 years old, freckled, trotting down the last step and turning under the pier--*

*Freezing as he sees a man strangling another man to death.*

TIGHT ON

Guy, caught in guilt, dawnlight flaring behind him.

TIGHT ON

The Boy, his expression shifting from incomprehension into fear.

Everything slowed, Guy's whole life being defined, decided, ended in this moment of guilt.

And everything is frozen, in this terrible moment-- The moment we saw at the beginning of the film-- Until the Boy--

Turns--

Guy tries to call out--

But the Boy is running back up the steps--

And Guy looks at Wags: slit-eyed, tongue-lolled.

He has to do something -- the Boy has seen him, clear as day. He SCRAMBLES to his feet.

(CONTINUED)

*But--*

Turns back-- Grabs--

The SEA-GREEN SPORTS BAG.

EMPTY MORNING SEAFRONT

Seagulls gliding over shuttered nightclubs. The SOUND of the SEA mixed up with FEEDBACK HUM and a MOURNFUL GUITAR.

For a long moment, we're TIGHT ON the SEA-GREEN SPORTS BAG, bulging, stuffed, heavy, as it bobs and shunts.

Guy's running -- but all we see is the bag.

Slightly less than full-speed, shifting and bumping as he runs. And then--

We're behind the Boy, as he runs into the dawn sun. Sprinting down the empty streets.

Speed less than natural, camera shifting, somewhere between dream and reality: **we're chasing him.**

He runs and runs, arms flailing, as a kid's arms do. Looking back over his shoulder.

And now we see Guy, his torn up expression, his panting mouth, sprinting after the Boy. The Boy had a decent head-start, and is going full pelt.

Guy exhausted, old, worn out, struggling to make up the ground. Lugging the heavy BAG.

The Boy runs into the middle of the EMPTY ROAD, across the central meridian. Toward a side-street.

Guy follows.

SIDE STREET

And the Boy's running up the street, between parked cars, looking back...

Heading closer to humanity, normality, shops, passing cars...

And Guy's beginning to slow... Breath heaving... Panting...

Until he isn't running anymore...

And we stay TIGHT ON Guy, as he STARES off-screen...

(CONTINUED)



Letting the Boy escape. Giving up. Letting him go.

We stay on him, as he sucks in the air.

Rubs his face. Face in hands. Blood on fingers.

He spits on his hands, rubs them. Wipes them on his clothes.

The quick-drying blood brightens, smears.

#### THE SEA

shifts as if it's breathing.

Deep undulations. Muted dawnlight glimmering. Rain spitting.

#### BACK ON THE SEAFRONT

Guy cautiously heads back toward the pier. The seafront streets still largely empty -- for now.

He makes it to the railings over-looking the beach.

A hundred feet or so away from the pier, he leans over the beachside railing, craning for a view...

*In the distance, he can see a jogger CROUCHING by Wags' body, another on the phone.*

The body has been found. The deed has been done.

Guy takes this in.

And gradually, over this image we begin to HEAR sounds of movement... Breathing...

Bed-sheets... Quiet, intimate sounds...

#### INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--DAWN

And we're back to Guy and Maeve, in bed, 1st night together.

A moment we've seen before, as Maeve nestles closer to Guy, and Guy eyes her, moved, as if that movement is deeply significant. She shifts to look up at him--

Looks like she's about to say something--

GUY

What?

MAEVE

No, it's... nothing.

GUY

What?

MAEVE

(beat)

I don't know... you ever get that feeling, like... like, who are you? You're just some bloke I just met.

GUY

Well yeah.

MAEVE

Like what am I doing here.

(beat)

What am I doing here?

She pulls away from him.

GUY

Hey--

MAEVE

What am I doing? I don't know you.

She slides out of the bed, naked but for underwear, stands, wrapping her arms around herself.

GUY

So?

MAEVE

So? Who are you?

Beat.

GUY

What do you want me to say?

Beat.

MAEVE

I don't know.

She frowns at herself, seeming to lose the moment, sits down at the kitchenette table, head in hands.

(CONTINUED)

MAEVE  
God. God God God.

GUY  
What is it?

MAEVE  
Life's fucking weird.

Guy laughs, just a little. Maeve laughs, just a little.

GUY  
You're hard work aren't you.

She shrugs.

GUY (CONT.)  
Yeah, life's fucking weird. Life's  
shit and hard and horrible and  
weird. Come back to bed.

She considers this... stands, returns. Sits next to him.

GUY  
My name's Guy. I'm a washed up old  
fuck, and I'm almost always alone.

MAEVE  
Are you a good guy, Guy?

GUY  
No.

Beat.

GUY (CONT.)  
But I haven't given up trying yet.

Maeve takes that in. It seems to be enough. She slides back  
under the covers, nestles back up to him.

MAEVE  
What do you want? From life?

Beat, as he thinks about it.

GUY  
I dunno. You?

Beat, as she searches for the honest answer.

MAEVE

To be loved.

Tips her head back, looks through the window upside down.

MAEVE

It's raining.

GUY

It does that.

Beat.

MAEVE

It's nice.

CLOSE ON

the rain, impacting against the window, pre-dawn light...  
the sound rising in volume, morphing into...

EXT. THAI ISLAND--NIGHT

Monsoon rain, machine-gunning the sea, and the little boat  
delivering Guy and that Thai Girl back to the beach.

In WIDE SHOT we watch as the boat attempts to deliver them.  
Getting as close as it can to the beach. The Thai Girl  
covering her head with her hands.

Guy slips some money to the boat's driver, jumps off into  
the sea -- knee deep. The RAIN smashing down on him, on the  
sea's surface. He holds his hands out for the Thai Girl.

As she takes his hands he LIFTS HER --

And CARRIES her --

To the shore, lets her down.

And now we're CLOSE ON Guy, from behind, over his shoulder,  
as he and the Thai Girl trot up the beach, toward his HUT.

Guy pauses --

The Thai Girl looks back at him.

THAI GIRL

(distant, in Thai)

What are you doing?

(CONTINUED)

We're behind Guy, as he tips his head to the skies, takes the rain on his face (NOTE: the rest of this sequence should play out in one unbroken shot).

We can hear his BREATHING deepen for a moment...

And then with one DEEP BREATH...

He's walking up the beach. To the hut. The Thai Girl is holding open the door for him.

He goes inside. We stay outside, with the Thai Girl.

She seems to be waiting for something.

We can hear, buried deep in the SOUND of the RAIN, the THRUM of a cheap motorbike's ENGINE O.S.

And then a VOICE O.S. Footsteps O.S. approaching...

And a THAI MAN walks past the Thai Girl, into the hut...

And for a moment there's silence. And then, under the white noise of the RAIN, we hear:

A GUNSHOT-- See a FLASH--

Another GUNSHOT and FLASH--

...and silence.

The sound of something FALLING. Slumping.

More silence. The Thai Man emerges.

Slips something to the Thai Girl, exits frame.

We stay on the Thai Girl, the same frame, as she moves into the doorway, and looks into the hut. We don't see what she sees -- just her expression.

After a long moment... she walks away.

Cam turns ever so slightly, revealing, in the distance, what looks like DENZIL sitting on a motorbike. We see the Thai Man get onto an adjacent motorbike.

He starts its engine, peels away, up the muddy beachside road, into deep background of the now layered shot. The Thai Girl is walking towards Denzil.

We see some movement in the roof, still in frame: A GIANT GECKO, it's eye glowing, scuttles out onto the wall.

As the Thai Girl gets onto the back of Denzil's motorbike. The gecko presses itself into the wall, hunting a mosquito.

Denzil kickstarts the motorbike, and peels away, following the Thai Man, whose rear lights we can see in the gloom.

We hear a DOOR SLAM--

EXT. BRIGHTON HOUSE--DAY

Maeve shields her eyes from the post-rain SUN GLARE, as she locks the front door to her run-down building.

BRIGHTON STREETS

She walks in a hurry, troubled -- maybe she's been crying. The NOISE of the streets getting to her.

She passes POLICE TAPE cordoning off some kind of crime scene. A police van, a POLICE OFFICER directing the public.

DINER

She gets to the diner, finds her keys, jiggles the door -- it sticks -- she huffs, jiggles -- the door opens --

But HITS something.

She looks down. Frowns.

Picks something up.

She flicks the lights on, closes the door. Striplights flicker on above her. The chairs are all upended on the tables -- she takes one down, sits.

She's holding a PACKAGE. A well-stuffed envelope.

She opens it. Pulls out a WEDGE OF CASH.

A few grand at least. She looks at it.

Lets it sink in a moment.

Begins to cry.

To sob.

Until she's overcome.

Doubled over.

Just managing to stop from wailing.

(CONTINUED)

Moaning.

She tries to stop herself.

Suppressing it.

Calms.

Looks at the money again.

At the heavens.

Shakes her head.

Wipes her face.

Stands up.

Looks at the front windows.

Through the glass, the day is progressing -- people passing,  
normality.

She looks down again at the money.

END

## 6. Unconventionality in Practice: A Critical Reflection on A *Reverie*

### 6.1 Introduction

Earlier chapters in this project have: made the argument that modern screenwriting handbooks have contributed to the development and ubiquity of a restrictive single model for cinematic storytelling, Conventional Monoplot (chapters one, two and three); explored the meanings created when the screenwriter follows the Conventional Monoplot model (chapters one and two) and the implications that has for film culture (chapter three); and sought to define the alternative meanings that might be created if the screenwriter diverts from that model in a number of observable and quantifiable ways (chapter four).

Dancyger and Rush's concept of restorative three-act structure (2002) has been used alongside models from Gulino (2004) and Aronson (2010) to inform the identification of the Conventional Monoplot model and its roots in prominent modern handbooks (Field; Vogler; McKee; Yorke) and to identify the unconventional models listed in chapter four. Work by Menne (2019), Ross (2011), Schatz (1993), King (2002) and Comolli and Narboni (1969) has informed the proposition that the Conventional Monoplot emerged to service the value system of the rapidly corporatizing American film industry of the New Hollywood era, and that its dominance has contributed to a homogeneity of meaning in anglophone film culture, with film narratives that challenge the dominant ideology pushed to the cultural fringe. The aim has been to offer a practical framework for unconventional practice in the screenplay, underpinned by an ideological argument for its necessity. The practical elements of that framework are contained within the Conventional Monoplot



model itself, the taxonomy of potential models in chapter four, in the creative portion of the project (*A Reverie*) and the explication of that work which will be offered in this chapter.

## **6.2 Aims & Methodology**

*A Reverie* has been written to ‘activate’ (Batty and Waldeback, 2012: xxvi) the knowledge created in the previous chapters, exploring how such knowledge can form the basis for unconventional practice in screenwriting. The unconventional modular structure (Cameron, 2008; Buckland, 2009), noted in chapter four and observable, in differing forms, in Christopher Nolan’s *Following* and *Memento* and Lynne Ramsay’s *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, has been used, with a particular emphasis on how the model is able to recreate the subjective psycho-emotional experience of trauma (Pheasant-Kelly, 2015; Desilets, 2017) and subvert the restorative effect inherent to Conventional Monoplot (Dancyger & Rush). This chapter will examine and reflect on that practice, and in doing so offer one possible methodology for unconventional practice, with a particular focus on meaning creation. It will contribute to answering the project’s central research question: what unconventional narrative structures are available to the screenwriter, and how can they enable the screenwriter to produce meanings not available in the Conventional Monoplot?

The “how” is important: this project is focused on the activation of knowledge, the utility of knowledge to the practicing screenwriter. Batty and Kerrigan (2018) argue that creative practice research ‘demands that the creative work is either *the result of research* and therefore performs the research findings.... or is used as a *site for systematically gathering reflections on the process* of doing/making, in order

to contribute knowledge to the practice of doing/making' (7) (original emphasis). Kerrigan advocates for conducting artistic research 'from a practitioner's perspective' (2018: 11) with knowledge creation focused on the researcher's observation of their own actions whilst making their artwork, whilst Berkeley (2018) underscores the value of understanding and quantifying 'the process of structuring a screenplay from the perspective of the practitioner' (33). For this project, the practice portion has been created to both perform the research findings as a result of the research *and* to create a site from which systematic reflections on the process of doing/making can be gathered. It 'performs' one possible version of the creative results reached by the screenwriter refocusing their practice on the limitations of the Conventional Monoplot model and the potential meanings offered by other models, and offers a site from which a methodology for that unconventional practice might be extrapolated. This chapter then aims to perform that extrapolation.

In order to contextualise *A Reverie* the reflection will flow from analyses of *We Need To Talk About Kevin* and *Following*, both of which were analysed and referred to extensively for guidance and inspiration during the writing process, and as such this structure represents an accurate reflection of the creative process and a key aspect of the proposed methodology: application of pre-existing narrative models calibrated to prioritize meaning creation. Sections 6.4 to 6.7 will focus particularly on how I examined these two models closely during the development process, interpreting their techniques and the meanings created by those techniques, before applying similar techniques in *A Reverie*.

Batty & Kerrigan argue that research can be '*gathered* by creative means and/or *expressed* through creative artefacts', focused on 'gaining new knowledge about creative *processes and practices*' (9) whilst Berkeley, paraphrasing Bourdieu,

notes ‘the need to consider a logic of practice that is distinct’ from other areas of research (2018: 33). Batty & Baker describe the screenplay as ‘a research artefact’ and ‘a result of a unique creative practice research methodology, comprising various methods and techniques that include the act of writing and/or reflecting on that writing’ (2018: 75). It is hoped that *A Reverie* in combination with this chapter will provide that practice-oriented new knowledge, focused on utility to the practicing screenwriter.

### **6.3 Utilizing Conventional Monoplot in an Unconventional Methodology**

Although this project has focused largely on criticising the limitations and ubiquity of the Conventional Monoplot model, it does not propose that the model has no use to the unconventional screenwriter—indeed this chapter will aim to show in part that the Conventional Monoplot model can be a useful feature of an unconventional methodology. The project agrees with Aronson’s view that all successful unconventional approaches are rooted in the patterns laid out in the conventional model (2010), and with Lee (2013) that many of the most successfully radical screenplays use many of the traditional techniques whilst diverting in limited but impactful ways, as can be seen, for example, in *No Country for Old Men*, the first unconventionally structured narrative examined in this project—a narrative which follows the Conventional Monoplot model faithfully until a schism in its third act. This chapter will seek to demonstrate then that the model can be useful as a development tool in a consciously unconventional project, as long as it is used judiciously, with awareness of its limitations and the techniques which the screenwriter can apply to move away from and beyond it.

## 6.4 Meaning Creation & Modular Structures

Chapters one and two discussed in detail, with particular reference to Dancyger and Rush's notion of restorative structure (2002), the comforting effect of the Conventional Monoplot; how such a linear, progressive, unified model implies an ordered world wherein fates, however tragic or heroic, are revealed as predetermined, and all actions become inevitable and meaning-laden parts of the whole upon the resolving action of the dramatic climax. Such a structure, however, is also allied to a particular engagement with *time*, in which time is knowable, reliable and largely progressive.

In the 1990s a different form of narrative gained popularity, emerging in parallel with the digital revolution, the rise of the personal computer and the internet, particularly in American independent film—a form which not only displayed a far more complex relationship between experience, consciousness and time, offering what has been termed a 'database aesthetic' (Cameron, 2008: 1) reflecting the shifts of consciousness experienced in the wake of technological revolution, but which also seemed to indicate that time itself had become a significant subject for the filmmaker. In many ways, and similarly to the literary works of twentieth-century modernists such as James Joyce, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Virginia Woolf, these were 'tales about time' (Cameron: 4). Cameron's authoritative study of modular narratives describes stories 'divided into discrete segments and subjected to complex articulations' which 'foreground the relationship between the temporality of the story and the order of its telling' (1). Significant examples include David Lynch's temporally schismatic *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive*, Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu and Guillermo Arriaga's profoundly fractured *21 grams* (2003) and, the modular urtext, Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, with its famous and highly

impactful reverse timeline. Whereas the typical Hollywood narrative would tend to focus on 'chronology, clarity and forward movement' (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson in Cameron: 4), modular films 'create their narrative effect by structuring the *syuzhet* [plot] in radically achronological, elliptical or repetitive ways' (4).

In doing so, such films effect a disorientation, 'imped[ing] the audiences' efforts to establish causal, spatial and temporal relations within the story' (4), and whilst some films seem to use this approach to create a distanced, analytical effect, and still others seem designed to present a challenge to the viewer in the manner of a mind-game or puzzle film (Buckland, 2009), some narratives have been able to leverage this breaking down of linear temporality to expressionist effect, representing the subjective workings of a traumatised mind, 'involv[ing] the spectator' in what Poulaki rightly calls 'a different type of meaning-making' (2011: 432).

### **6.5 Modular Structure & Meaning Creation in *We Need To Talk About Kevin & A Reverie***

Lynne Ramsay's adaptation of Lionel Shriver's novel begins with a slow zoom into an apparently insignificant white curtain fluttering in an open doorway, the slightest of barriers guarding a portal into some unknown night and, though the audience does not yet know it, a significant and deeply traumatic event. A resonant, affecting thrumming sound that we may not be able to consciously identify as garden sprinklers fills the soundtrack. As the camera floats toward this portal, and what may lie beyond it, the first cut propels us from night to day, from absence to presence, and an orgiastic high angle image of many bodies writhing and jostling together in some affected, half-speed, gore-inflected reverie. The tomatina festival. Semi-clothed revellers splash in shin-deep rivers of blood-red tomato pulp. But while their

faces are carved in apparently joyful rictus, the oneiric slow motion and the foreboding score, with snatches of panicked voices buried deep in the mix, create a deeply unsettling feeling. We meet our protagonist, Eva, carried aloft by revellers, like a crowd-surfer, or a coffin, her body, and particularly her abdomen, covered in the gore-like pulp. A second shift brings us to something more wakeful, as another version of Eva literally wakes on her sofa in some disordered house, her face a mask of torment, and we have been introduced to the three timelines through which Ramsay's narrative will progress: timeline A, the last of the three to be introduced, creating this "waking from a bad dream" feeling, in which present day Eva struggles with the aftermath of a traumatic event; timeline B, the second to be introduced, and which will account for the majority of the film's second act, in which a past version of Eva progresses inexorably towards this traumatic event; and timeline C, the first to be introduced, creating a sense of foreboding and inevitability, which shows the traumatic event itself and the moments immediately leading up to it.

The sequence at the tomatina festival, a striking symbolic diversion which will not be returned to, initiates a visual motif which will recur throughout the narrative. The linking of blood-red colouring to the traumatic event around which the narrative revolves (Eva's son's carrying out of a high school massacre) is clear, however Ramsay also uses this colour to highlight the lingering traumatic impact of these events on Eva and her psyche, whilst also contrasting repeatedly red hues, red lights, red objects and red substances with yellow objects and substances. In the first scene of timeline A, Eva wakes into a strikingly, overtly stylised red hue. Light from the window is tinted red, red patches cover her face—significantly—like something from an antiquated music video. The gore-like imagery of the tomatina festival—which was... a dream? A memory? Something in between?—has lingered

into her waking life, stained her brow, her temples. In this striking red-hued morning, the camera settles on a half-eaten omelette—thick, full, yellow, and draped in red ketchup. As the narrative progresses, yellow becomes linked to positive, happy aspects of Eva's life pre-trauma—to posters from her previously thriving travel business, and particularly to her young daughter, who seems to provide the happy, simple kind of life that traumatic events involving her son have robbed from her.

The narrative progresses, shifting between these three timelines, often with unmarked flashbacks, creating a sense of temporal discontiguity, so that it is not always immediately clear what is present and what is past, a common trope of the modular narrative, 'as if going back in time involved leaping or slipping from one thread of a spiral to another' (Cameron: 50). Sean Cubitt, in *The Cinema Effect* (2004), points to how modular narratives enable the protagonist to 'come to terms with their destiny' (239). If Eva has a destiny, it is signified by Ramsay's opening image, that of the curtain floating over an open doorway onto some unknown night and whatever it contains, returned to at several points throughout. Desilets notes the juxtaposition in the film's first edit, of this floating curtain and the writhing bodies of the tomatina festival, and how this juxtaposition 'compounds these temporalities... but the relationship between these two images turns out to be excruciatingly ironic' (2017: 4). Whilst the festival seems to promise 'orgiastic social participation', what lies beyond the curtain and the open doorway is loss, death, 'total alienation' (4). The curtain, in fact, is 'the film's image for the proximity of traumatic experience' (5). The film then opens, with its first image, in the presence of profound trauma; trauma that, the first edit tells us, can't yet be looked directly at. And as the narrative, like a traumatised mind, instead of looking at the traumatic event, disappears into memory, into reverie, that memory, seemingly a previously joyous and life-affirming memory

for Eva, is tainted by the sensory memories of the traumatic event: the sounds of the panicked crowd, of the vehicles of the first responders, and, of course, by the vivid, gore-like colour which carries over into the first scene from timeline A, lingering in the light from Eva's window, on her uneaten food, and on her own face. Desilets argues that 'the film invites us to read [Kevin's] crime as a traumatic event in Eva's life, an event of such terrible force that it transforms Eva's identity' (1), and that 'the concept of trauma places special emphasis on temporality, and, in its psychological interiorization, it frankly acknowledges the coincidence of placement and displacement as the temporal locus of identity' (1).

*A Reverie*, similarly, is structured around the lingering impact of a traumatic event on an isolated and traumatised protagonist, with the narrative segmented into three temporally discontinuous timelines, navigated through unmarked flashbacks, creating a palimpsestic temporal layering effect in which past and present are not clearly demarked, and in which visual cues, particularly colour and flaring lights, linger and bleed over from the traumatic timeline into other timelines, reflecting how the sensory impact of trauma comes to define the traumatised mind. This aspect of the screenplay 'performs' (Batty and Kerrigan, 2018: 7) a key aspect of the proposed methodology for conscious unconventionality: the close study of pre-existing unconventional models with a focus on the meaning they create and the possibilities for correlative practice and meaning creation in the screenwriter's own work.

Development of such creative correlatives represents a process of artistic invention (Bell, 2018) which necessarily must involve engagement of personal experiences and emotions through the artist's 'lateral mind' (Aronson, 2010: 5), which Aronson, paraphrasing Edward de Bono, defines as a 'very personal, associational, stream-of-consciousness thought process' (5). The lateral mind 'is



what is at work when we write about emotions or intuit clever links between disparate things' (5). My own process in the creation of *A Reverie* involved first identifying the aforementioned techniques used by Ramsay in *Kevin*, particularly the fragmentation of three separate timelines and the careful deployment of significant imagery and other sensory elements from each, before following subconscious writerly instinct (the 'lateral mind' approach which Aronson mentions) to discover images that felt emotionally compelling and consistent, and gradually discovering, led to some extent by those images, those three separate timelines:

**Timeline A:** post-traumatic event—Guy arrives on a Thai island, in hiding, traumatised by previous experiences, carrying a bag full of money.

**Inspiring images:** tropical light flaring and glittering on the sea, Guy stoic and resigned.

**Timeline B:** pre-traumatic event—Guy's life before murdering Waghorn.

**Inspiring images:** Guy rumpled and unhappy; drunk and making trouble; in bed happy with Maeve.

**Timeline C:** the traumatic event—Guy murders Waghorn.

**Inspiring Images:** the face of the boy staring at Guy; Guy running down an alley in a balaclava.

This creative process can be understood by the metaphor of walking down three dark corridors with a torch, each corridor representing one timeline, gradually illuminating each corridor and avoiding wrong turns—a process of 'investigation,

discovery and reflection' (Batty and Baker, 2018: 77) rooted in the interplay between my own 'lateral mind' intuition and my developed awareness of the techniques I wished to emulate, 'which is research' (77). Batty and Baker argue that 'investigation, discovery and reflection are indispensable components of any writing practice where we can learn about something more deeply *as we write about it*' (77) (added emphasis). My methodology involved using the parameters set by Ramsay's techniques in *Kevin* to guide that discovery: in the analogy of the darkened corridors, Ramsay's techniques are the torch, pointing the correct path towards my desired endpoint—an unconventionally structured screenplay, wherein one path (or one darkened corridor) has been segmented into three. The wrong-turns which this methodology allowed me to avoid might be seen as undesired structural models: the single-protagonist linear hero's journey; the double narrative flashback (Aronson, 2010); the double journey narrative (Aronson, 2010).

It is useful, then, to reflect on those emotionally-loaded images which I discovered through lateral brain-oriented writing during the development process and the timelines they led me to. There are four key images, which all appear as dream images in the opening three pages of the screenplay:

Extract 1.

*DREAM IMAGE*

*CLOSE ON the freckled face of a boy (10 or 11) staring straight into camera... a look of terrible shock...*

*CLOSE ON GUY (40), caught in some terrible act, staring back...*

*(p1)*

Extract 2.

*INT. GIG VENUE-NIGHT*

*Guy is pushing desperately through the crowd... Following a man...*

*We can't see the man's face, but he's looking back at Guy, pushing through the crowd as if he's fleeing...*

*Guy is desperate to catch up, but can't push through the bodies...*

*(p1)*

### Extract 3.

*DREAM IMAGE*

*We're in bed, looking at the face of AN UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN.*

*Late 30s, a look of warmth on her face. She's on her side, under the sheet, looking right at us.*

*Her mouth is moving, but we can't hear the words. Instead we hear the sounds of the sea, the background hum of guitar feedback.*

*(p1-2)*

### Extract 4.

*DREAM IMAGE*

*A man in a GREY BALACLAVA runs, panting, in dreamy slow motion, down some side street.*

*(p3)*

These images were the starting points, found by lateral brain writing and felt intuition, for the development of key sections of the plot. Image 1 was the starting point for the development of Timeline C, the timeline which occurs over a temporally brief time-span but which the protagonist flashes back to throughout, incorporating the traumatic event on which the narrative revolves. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin* this timeline contains Eva being alerted to the shooting at Kevin's school, rushing to the school and discovering that Kevin is the shooter, and returning home to find her husband and daughter dead. In *A Reverie*, this timeline contains the extended pub heist sequence, Guy's murder of Waghorn, the boy witnessing the murder and Guy's

pursuit of the boy. Image 2 was the starting point for development of the section of the narrative which forms the second half of the second act, what Thompson (1999) would view as the third in a four-part macronarrative structure, in which Waghorn's emergence has begun pulling Guy away from Maeve and his "way out" of the criminal lifestyle that troubles him, back towards a life of criminality. Image 3 was the starting point for the development of the relationship line, a part of Timeline B, focusing on Guy's relationship with Maeve. Image 4 was the starting point for the development of the heist sequence which leads to the murder of Waghorn, which forms the climax of Timeline B. I then developed Timeline A, the post-trauma timeline and the "present" of the story, attempting to emulate the structure that I had observed in *Kevin*: I had developed large elements of the past timelines which traumatised and troubled Guy, led by these images and their emotional qualities, and then needed, as in *Kevin*, to design a present timeline in which the traumatised Guy flashes back to memories of that traumatizing past.

### Linear representation of plot in *A Reverie*:

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Act

Guy, depressive and lonely, carries out an inadvisable robbery and sparks conflict with dangerous people; he meets Maeve, a recovering alcoholic, and they enjoy a tender and intimate night together that sparks a relationship

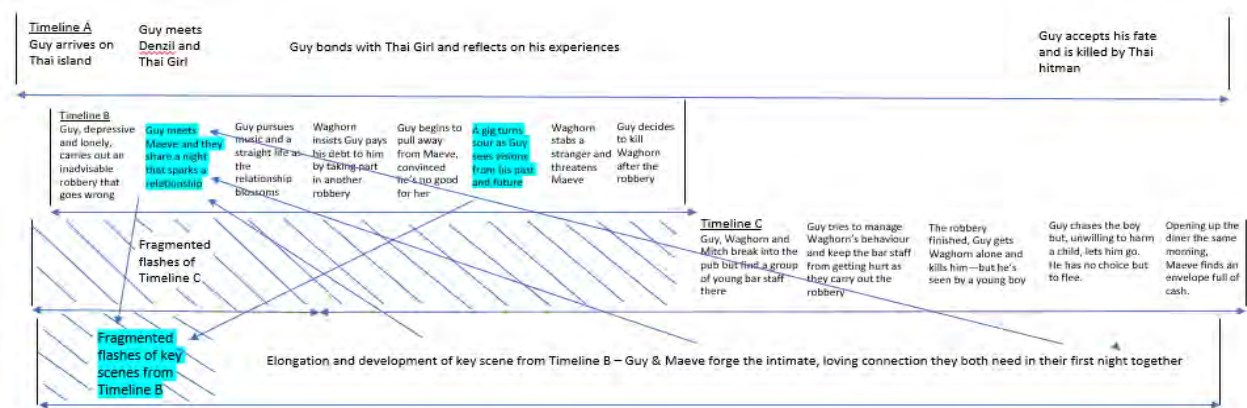
#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Act

Guy, inspired by Maeve, pursues music and a regular job, an exit from the criminal life, but the criminals from the earlier robbery, led by the imposing Waghorn, re-emerge and demand he make up for his earlier behaviour. As he's pulled back into criminality he loses hope and pulls away from Maeve. Waghorn's behaviour is violent and brutal—he stabs a stranger and threatens Maeve. Guy goes through with the robbery of a pub demanded by Waghorn, but kills Waghorn, putting an end to his violence. However he's seen by a witness—a young boy. He flees with the money, leaving some for Maeve.

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Act

Guy hides out on a Thai island. A South African befriends him—but he's there to identify him. A chaste relationship with a Thai bar girl gives Guy the chance to process some of his feelings and make peace with his fate before he's killed by a Thai hitman.

### Non-linear modular structure in *A Reverie*:



## 6.5 Sensory Fragments of the Traumatic Event and their Use in Transitions and Foreshadowing

Whilst *Kevin* starts with and returns to the image of the curtain, representing proximity to trauma, *A Reverie* starts with ‘the freckled face of a boy (10 or 11) staring straight into camera... a look of terrible shock...’ followed by Guy ‘caught in some terrible act, staring back’ (1). A further dreamlike image follows, that of Guy in a gig venue ‘pushing desperately through the crowd’ (1) as he attempts to follow a man who seems to be fleeing him. The script calls for these images to be accompanied by oneiric, extra-diegetic sound, ‘amplified guitar, gain and feedback, heard through a filter of time’ (1), each image bleeding into the following image with a flare of light. As Cameron notes, modular narratives often link ‘temporally discontinuous segments’ through ‘camera movements that provide the illusion of spatial contiguity—either by so blurring the shot that the transition is made invisible, or by making the transition on a common visual element, for example, a light’, creating ‘a disorientating sense of time’ (50):

Extract 5.

Gradually, the SOUNDS OF THE SEA overpower the music, with

OMINOUS STRINGS, and on a powerful FLARE TO WHITE...

*DREAM IMAGE*

*CLOSE ON the freckled face of a boy...*

*(p1)*

Extract 6.

*Light FLARES beyond the boy, and that GUITAR SOUND carries us into...*

*INT. GIG VENUE-NIGHT*

*(p1)*

Extract 7.

*Guy is desperate to catch up, but can't push through the bodies... A LIGHT FLARES in his eye...*

VOICE (PRE-LAP)

Hallo hallo?

*(p1)*

Fragmented and sensorily disorientating, much like the tomatina festival sequence in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, these images follow the form of traumatic memories: as Fran Pheasant-Kelly argues, such memories are effectively rendered as 'fragmented flashes' of an 'unreal nature', reflecting 'disassociation as a traumatic feature, allowing us to gain a sense of disassociative traumatic memory and its related confusion' (2015: 106). Other aspects of the traumatic event recur, impinging

on otherwise unrelated experiences: Guy, for instance, when first meeting Symmons, notices him play-strangling Fletch (5), the script calling for the moment to be rendered in oneiric slow motion, placing it in a temporal space between objective experience and subjective traumatized memory, and pointing forwards to the ultimate reveal of Guy's strangulation of Waghorn in the dramatic climax:

Extract 8.

CLOSE ON a man strangling another man at half-speed, fat pale hands around the throat.

TIGHT ON GUY as he and another man enter the café, also at half-speed, his eyes locked on the strangler.

(p5)

Extract 9.

Guy, breath shaky, removes GAROTTE WIRE from his pocket...

Beyond them, a morning sky FLARES through the gloom, glowing the puddles and metalwork around them..

Guy REACHES around Wags' neck from behind in a smooth movement and YANKS the wire against his throat-

(p119)

In extract 9 the light flare which has been used throughout to trigger the narrative's slipping from one thread of time to another (Cameron, 2008) occurs at the exact moment of the initiation of the traumatic event, signalling it as a sensory

element of Guy's trauma, making narrative sense of its role (observable in extracts 5-7) in the shifting from one timeline to another in addition to its stylistic function. In this sense, transitions have been written into the screenplay which smooth temporal schisms in such a way as to enhance the meaning created by the those temporal leaps: the cinematic representation of the psycho-emotional experience of trauma. Not only has time ceased to function in its historical traditional way (Desilets, 2017: 90), but sound, light and movement have been utilised to deliver that temporal breakdown in a way consistent with the experience of trauma (Pheasant-Kelly, 2015; McNally, 2003).

It was the discovery of the aforementioned images shown in extracts 1-4 (the boy staring at Guy; Guy pushing through a crowd in pursuit of someone; Guy and Maeve happy in bed together; Guy running down an alley in a balaclava) through lateral brain writing, and intuitive following of those images, guided by the techniques observed in Ramsay's work, that gradually illuminated the three darkened corridors that became *A Reverie*: the moment in extract 8, for example, where Guy notices Symmons play-strangling Fletch, emerged because I knew the traumatic event that the narrative was building towards (Guy murdering Waghorn by strangulation, in extract 9) and had observed and reflected on Ramsay's techniques—her use of fragments of the traumatic event, such as the sound of sprinklers in the opening scene, layered throughout the script and loaded with a sense of premonition, of foreboding, presented with an oneiric stylisation. I was therefore looking throughout the writing process for opportunities to show aspects of the traumatic event impinging on Guy's consciousness, as fragments of traumatic memories impinge on the trauma sufferer's consciousness (Pheasant-Kelly: 103).



## 6.6 The Traumatic Event and the Governing Image

Placing the image of the boy at the start of the film, directly following the title sequence, as with the placing of the image of the curtain at the opening of *Kevin's* narrative, denotes it as a governing image, a key to understanding all that follows, a key which will be returned to throughout and finally decoded and understood in the film's dramatic climax—a climax rooted around retelling the traumatic event in a clear, linear, wakeful form, as it was experienced, mirroring the process of reintegration which the treatment of trauma generally relies on (Pheasant-Kelly: 109). Many films return to their opening image or images at the dramatic climax and in the following epilogue scenes—*Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941), for example, not only returns to and finally decodes the meaning of Kane's last word, Rosebud, but also repeats the opening shots with an inverted camera movement: the slow track up Xanadu's barred fencing and 'no trespassing' sign repeated with a track down, whilst David Lynch's modular *Mulholland Drive* (2001) returns to and replays a portion of its opening car crash scene with a different character in the protagonist role as it builds towards its climax. Aronson (2010) argues that such an approach reinforces closure—a useful effect in any narrative but particularly in a complex and/or fragmented one, and particularly useful in reflecting the experience of trauma, and the way in which the traumatized mind is restructured and reordered by and around the traumatic event (Pheasant-Kelly; Desilets; McNally):

Extract 1.

*DREAM IMAGE*

*CLOSE ON the freckled face of a boy (10 or 11) staring straight into camera... a look of terrible shock...*

*CLOSE ON GUY (40), caught in some terrible act, staring back...*

(p1)

Extract 10.

Guy turns to see a dream image, wrought in real life...

*A boy, 10 or 11 years old, freckled, trotting down the last step and turning under the pier—*

*Freezing as he sees a man strangling another man to death.*

TIGHT ON

Guy, caught in guilt, dawnlight flaring behind him.

TIGHT ON

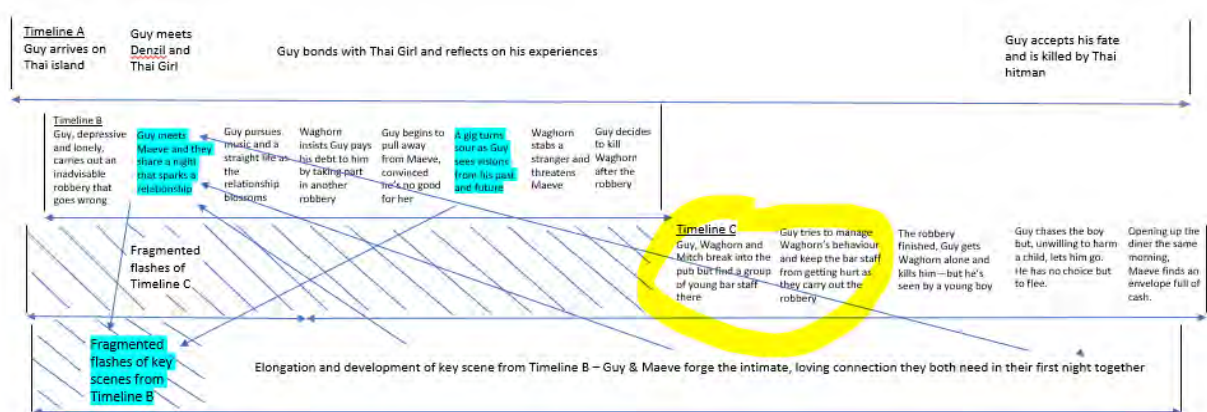
The Boy, his expression shifting from incomprehension into fear.

(p120)

Desilets states that 'trauma undoes [the] narrative economy of before and after. It denies the priority of the unwounded body by knotting subjectivity to the moment of wounding' (2017: 90). Trauma, essentially, undoes linearity: 'time ceases to unspool in its predictable historical way' (90). The trauma state, and the trauma brain, is better rendered by non-linearity. Traumatized brains flashback to 'the moment of wounding', re-experiencing sensory fragments (images, sounds, colours), until the point when the traumatic event can finally be understood in context and reintegrated into the trauma sufferer's consciousness and sense of self (Pheasant-Kelly: 103). If modular narratives provide the protagonist with the opportunity to 'come to terms with their destiny', then they are perfectly suited to traumatized protagonists, representing a tight connection between structure and the meaning it produces. Eva, in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, indeed 'appears deeply traumatized' (Desilets: 90) in timeline A, as she struggles to integrate the atrocity committed by her son both with her internal sense of self and her very practical external problems (finding a job, holding it down, existing in a town in which she is an

outcast, rebuilding her life in the aftermath of her husband and daughter's deaths). It is not until the climax of the second act that the fragments (visuals, events, sounds, colour) of the traumatic event finally resolve themselves into a coherent plot sequence, and it is only after this that Eva can face a notably less powerful Kevin and achieve a kind of acceptance. In this sense, Ramsay's narrative techniques can be seen as highly effective tools for meaning creation, representing the subjective psycho-emotional experience of trauma at the level of structure, reordering the narrative structure around the traumatic event instead of shaping the narrative to fit the traditional, causal, linear flow of narrative time familiar from the Classic Hollywood Narrative (Bordwell, 1985).

In *A Reverie*, a long climactic "heist" sequence brings the second act towards its conclusion, structurally mirroring such heist narratives as *Rififi*, *Thief*, *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and *Jackie Brown* (1997), in which the second half of the second act is largely devoted to the heist sequence, typically drawing to a close at the movement from second act to third:



Extract 11.

EXT. BRIGHTON STREET--DAWN

TIGHT ON GUY from behind, quick-walking, following Mitch, and ahead of Mitch there's Waghorn leading the way.

They turn into an alley that runs behind a parade of shops.

Up ahead, we see Waghorn signal, and remove his baseball cap to pull on his BALACLAVA.

Mitch does the same. Guy follows: off comes the cap, and on goes his GREY BALACLAVA (seen in previous flashbacks).

The cap is stuffed in his jacket, and out comes

A HAMMER

And then he's running, and we're staying tight on him, balaclava'd and running, an image we've seen before-

(p91)

At the climax of this sequence in *A Reverie* (118-119) protagonist Guy confronts antagonist Waghorn, exacting revenge for his violence and neutralizing the obvious threat he poses to all he comes into contact with by killing him:

Extract 12.

Guy, breath shaky, removes GAROTTE WIRE from his pocket...

Beyond them, a morning sky FLARES through the gloom, glowing the puddles and metalwork around them..

Guy REACHES around Wag's neck from behind in a smooth movement and YANKS the wire against his throat-

Wags' EYES-

Fixed on Guy's-

And his kicks are beginning to soften-- His struggling becoming less fierce-- Guy's breathing is turning to panting, something on the verge of sobs--

Wags is dying, under his weight--

(p119-120)

At this point, the remaining elements of the traumatic sequence form into coherence: the strangulation, the arrival of the boy, the image of the boy staring straight into camera, and of Guy staring back, caught in the worst act of his life: premeditated murder:

Extract 10.

Guy turns to see a dream image, wrought in real life...

*A boy, 10 or 11 years old, freckled, trotting down the last step and turning under the pier—*

*Freezing as he sees a man strangling another man to death.*

TIGHT ON

Guy, caught in guilt, dawnlight flaring behind him.

TIGHT ON

The Boy, his expression shifting from incomprehension into fear.

(p120)

The narrative has focused on Guy's inner need (Batty, 2009) to be "a good man", to live a good life, and his emotional and psychological anguish caused by the guilt of his criminal lifestyle. The traumatic point then occurs when, notwithstanding all the reason Waghorn has given Guy to neutralize his threat, Guy irreversibly breaks his own moral code, and is witnessed doing so by an innocent. In the subsequent sequences, Guy too seems to achieve a sense of peace and acceptance at the reintegration of these fragmented memories into coherent narrative, first allowing the boy to escape (p121), then going calmly towards the fate that awaits him in his beach hut:

Extract 13.

We're behind Guy, as he tips his head to the skies, takes the rain on his face (NOTE: the rest of this sequence should play out in one unbroken shot).

We can hear his BREATHING deepen for a moment...

And then with one DEEP BREATH...

He's walking up the beach. To the hut. The Thai Girl is holding open the door for him.

He goes inside. We stay outside, with the Thai girl.

She seems to be waiting for something.

We can hear, buried deep in the SOUND of the RAIN, the THRUM of a cheap motorbike's ENGINE O.S.

And then a VOICE O.S. Footsteps O.S. approaching..

And a THAI MAN walks past the Thai Girl, into the hut..

And for a moment there's silence. And then, under the white noise of the RAIN, we hear:

A GUNSHOT—See a FLASH—

Another GUNSHOT and FLASH—

...and silence.

(p126)

Perhaps he has known all along what would await him on this island, this medial space between the “life” of his previous existence in England and death once his actions had been successfully re-experienced and accepted. Similarly to how ‘sensory impressions that occurred during the trauma’ (McNally, in Pheasant-Kelly: 103) are used throughout to impact and impinge on other memories, the heavy rain in this sequence, highlighted in both visuals and sound directions, is prefigured in the previous scene, a loving and tender scene between Guy and Maeve, the final scene of their togetherness in the script, creating a sense of premonition:

Extract 14.

MAEVE

Are you a good guy, Guy?

GUY

No.

Beat.

GUY (CONT.)

But I haven't given up trying yet.

Maeve takes that in. It seems to be enough. She slides back under the covers, nestles back up to him.

MAEVE

What do you want? From life?

Beat, as he thinks about it.

GUY

I dunno. You?

Beat, as she searches for an honest answer.

MAEVE

To be loved.

Tips her head back, looks through the window upside down.

MAEVE

It's raining.

GUY

It does that.

Beat.

MAEVE

It's nice.

CLOSE ON

the rain, impacting against the window, pre-dawn light...  
the sound rising in volume, morphing into...

EXT. THAI ISLAND-NIGHT

Monsoon rain, machine-gunning the sea, and the little boat delivering Guy and the Thai Girl back to the beach.

(p124-125)

Where Ramsay uses colour (red) to signify the presence of trauma, and a contrasting colour (yellow) to signify the trauma-free life which Eva has lost, the script for *A Reverie* calls for colour to be used to signify the prospect of escape and relief from Guy's guilt-laden criminal life (sea-green), and to signify aspects, actions, characters or incidents which tie Guy inexorably to that life (grey). As with *Kevin*, this visual motif is established in the opening sequence: the first line describes 'SUNLIGHT ON A TROPICAL SEA-GREEN SEA' (1); as Guy makes his way towards the hut we see him carrying a significant 'SEA-GREEN SPORTS BAG' (2); as we

move back in time to Guy at a low ebb, he comes across a man ‘in a grey overcoat clutching a grey Louis Vuitton ladies’ handbag’ from which Guy lifts a ‘GREY PURSE’ (3); as previously noted, a fragment of the later heist sequence appears coded as trauma memory, showing an unknown man (Guy) in a ‘GREY BALACLAVA’ (3).

As the narrative returns to these significant objects—the sea-green sports bag, the grey balaclava—their significance is further elucidated to the viewer: the sea-green sports bag and its contents promises escape, freedom, the “good life” Guy desires (his inner need), whilst the grey balaclava is tied to the climactic and hope-destroying criminal action (the robbery and subsequent murder of Waghorn) which will lead to Guy’s downfall, emerging from his criminal nature (his flaw) and constituting his failure to achieve his inner need.

### **6.7 Modular Structure & Meaning Creation in *Following* & *A Reverie***

Christopher Nolan’s films are dominated by a preoccupation with time and how it is, or could be, experienced—from *Memento*’s reverse timeline to *Inception*’s layers of dream realities to *Tenet*’s (2020) reversed entropy and palindromic narrative structure, ‘foreground[ing] the relationship between the temporality of the story and the order of its telling’ (Cameron, 2006: 65). As Varma *et al* note this preoccupation, with its ‘embedded levels and circularity’, its ‘fragmentation, unreliability and incoherence’ (2015: 127), was already apparent in his micro-budget debut feature, *Following*.

*Following* begins with a series of fragmented close-ups: hands squeezing into latex gloves, opening a keepsake box, riffling through photos and jewellery, scored by a pounding/foreboding electronic score. As the box is closed the music shifts and we meet the protagonist, Bill, who, in voice-over, gives what he calls his ‘account of



what happened’, in what appears to be some kind of recorded confession, married to montage imagery of Bill lonely and isolated in inner city London. As Bill talks about how his loneliness led him to start following people out of apparently innocent curiosity another voice emerges, and we understand that he is speaking to some kind of authority figure—perhaps a police officer, and we begin to see him follow a man in a suit (Cobb), who turns and, for just a few frames, stares into the camera. Bill talks about how ‘the trouble started’ when he began breaking his own rules and selecting people to follow rather than following at random, and we see a physically different Bill, in a smart suit with short hair, waiting outside the home of a blonde woman (The Blonde Woman). We may not yet be aware that this physically different iteration of Bill is in fact from a different timeline. We’re then introduced to a third iteration of Bill, from a third timeline, again physically differentiated from the previous two iterations: still suited and short-haired but beaten up, bruised and bloodied, pulling a latex glove, like the one seen in the film’s opening image, from his mouth. We see this third iteration of Bill watching a man exit a bar—the same bar that the previous iteration of Bill had watched the Blonde Woman entering.

These three iterations of Bill will become the protagonists of three separate timelines, sections of the broader linear story segmented by the filmmaker and between which the narrative skips as the story develops, bookended by his “confession” to the police detective, creating ‘a series of disarticulated narrative pieces’ presented in a ‘radically achronological’ way (Cameron, 2006: 65).

**Iteration 1:** Bill as scruffy, lonely aspiring writer

↳ **Timeline A:** Bill meets Cobb and is inducted into criminality (1<sup>st</sup> Act)

**Iteration 2:** Bill as slick, confident yuppie-styled criminal

↳

**Timeline B:** Bill embraces criminality, finds confidence, begins a relationship with The Blonde Woman, develops a plot to steal from her gangster boyfriend (2<sup>nd</sup> Act)

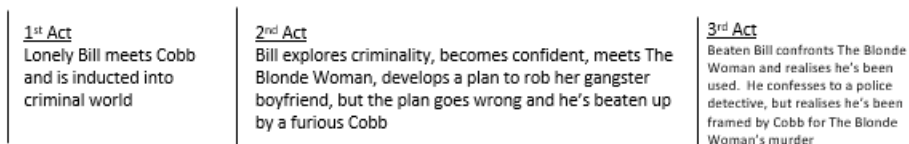
**Iteration 3:** Bill beaten and bloodied

↳ **Timeline C:** Bill is beaten up by Cobb and betrayed by The Blonde Woman (3<sup>rd</sup> Act)

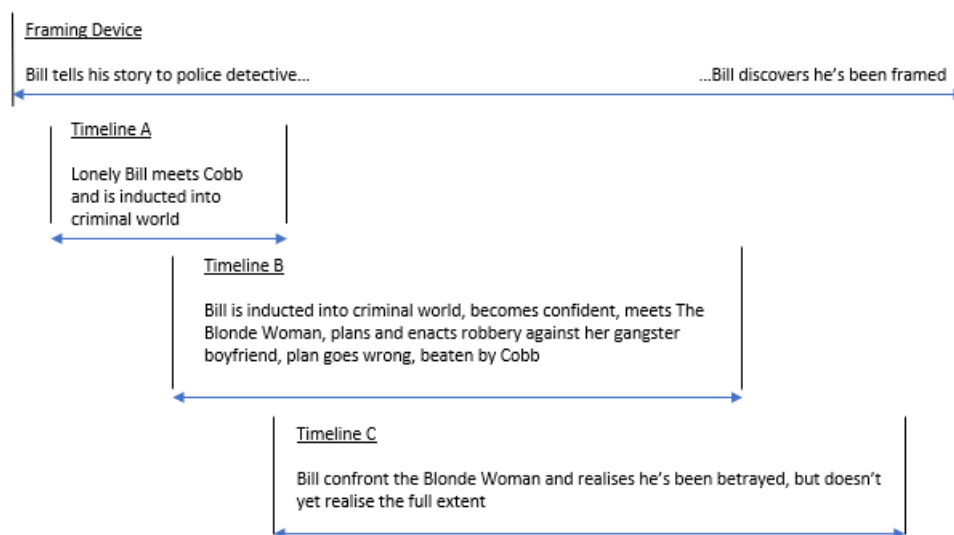
**Bookend Timeline:** Bill tells his story to a police detective and the full extent of his betrayal and framing by Cobb becomes clear

Abrupt temporal leaps shift us from scruffy loner Bill (what we might call First Act Bill) to confident burglar Bill (or Second Act Bill) to bloodied and beaten Bill (Third Act Bill), presenting us with narrative fragments which, like pieces in a puzzle, the viewer must mentally reconstitute. The differing appearances of the three Bills are used as 'an index of time' (Cameron: 59) to orientate the viewer and make the temporal leaps more clear (a similar approach is used in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*). The narrative then is separated into three concurrent timelines, with an additional bookend timeline (Bill's interview with the Detective) framing the story. Timeline A merges into timeline B at the end of the second act, when the scruffy Bill changes his wardrobe and cuts his hair, leaving timelines B and C to form the third act, with timeline B merging into timeline C at the climax of the first sequence of the third act, when Bill is beaten up by Cobb, explaining how he got his bruises:

**Linear representation of *Following's* plot:**



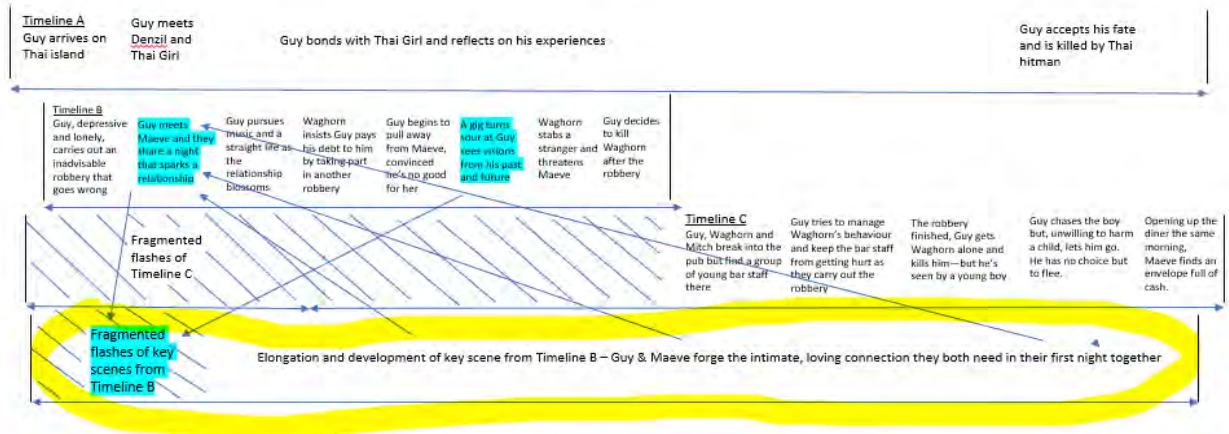
**Non-linear modular structure in *Following*:**



Varma *et al* note that ‘no causal link’ connects the disparate timelines on first viewing, leading the viewer to experience ‘doubt’ as they ‘attempt to comprehend the links between the scenes’ (129). The viewer is denied ‘the comfort of passive viewing’ and ‘must uncover the story along with the protagonist’, agreeing with David Foster Wallace’s assertion that ‘art flm[s]’ (1996) tend to be more viewer-active than commercial films. This creates the sense that the viewer is ‘dress[ing] in his garb and liv[ing] in his skin’ (Brislin, 2016: 200). The removal of causal linearity, in other words, inculcates not just a more active viewing experience but greater immersion, and as with *Kevin* the experience into which the viewer is immersed structurally recreates the psychological effects of trauma—again demonstrating how a reformulation of narrative techniques can shape the delivery of meaning to the audience. Ni Fhlainn (2015) describes Nolan’s cinema as centred on characters

who 'deceive, betray and are driven by the trauma of a memory or a deception which brings them to crisis points' (148), through which they might 'come to terms' (152) with their trauma—echoing Cubitt's observation about modular narratives offering their protagonists the chance to come to terms with their own destiny, as Eva finally does in *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. In *Following*, Bill's 'coming to terms' with his destiny is more cerebral than emotional, as the pieces of Cobb's manipulation fall into place and his fate is revealed. Nolan's focus is on plot machination more than character, as opposed to more character-oriented modular narratives such as *Irreversible* (2002) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) which offer less complex plot articulations despite their modular forms, allowing for a greater focus on character relationships and associated emotions.

Varma *et al* discuss the use of repetition in modular narratives, and how 'when chronology itself becomes the question, repetition, instead of having a deadening effect on the viewer, functions as a sign of familiarity for the viewer to look out for' (133). Repetition, they state, can be used 'to establish thematic unity through incremental addition' (133). In the script for *A Reverie*, repetition is used to incrementally build fragmented traumatic memory into coherent narrative, mirroring the experience of the traumatized brain, but also to increase and deepen emotional connection in the relationship plotline. Guy's first night with Maeve, in particular, is returned to and expanded throughout, progressively building depth, familiarity and intimacy, whilst the context of that first meeting is augmented by subsequent events and our developing understanding of Guy's character and experiences:



### Extract 3.

#### DREAM IMAGE

*We're in bed, looking at the face of AN UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN.*

*Late 30s, a look of warmth on her face. She's on her side, under the sheet, looking right at us.*

*Her mouth is moving, but we can't hear the words. Instead We hear the sounds of the sea, the background hum of guitar feedback.*

(p1-2)

### Extract 16.

#### INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--DAWN

This time we can hear the woman's voice. She's tracing scars on Guy's shoulders and torso with her finger.

GUY  
Erm... daring daylight robbery.

WOMAN  
This one here?

GUY  
Mexican stand-off.

(p10-11)

### Extract 17.

Maeve's lying with her head on Guy's shoulder, eyes open. Guy's are open too, staring up and back, out the window.

She nestles closer into him.

(p24)

Extract 18.

INT. GUY'S BEDROOM--DAWN

In bed, naked, dozing. It's the moment we glimpsed earlier: Maeve inspecting Guy's scars. Finger tracing white rips.

GUY

It's a scar.

MAEVE

Oh thanks smartarse.

GUY

Well. You get to a certain age,  
you pick up a few don't you.

She runs her finger around his shoulder: there are three or four just here. Crescent moons.

MAEVE

How'd you get this one?

GUY

I was attacked by a tiger.

She joke-sighs: 'come on.'

MAEVE

This one?

GUY

Panther.

MAEVE

This one?

GUY

Erm... daring daylight robbery.

Beat. Maybe she's aware of the truth in that one.

MAEVE

This one?

GUY

Mexican stand-off

(p32)

The intention is that the event of that evening and morning, of that intimate connection, should come to achieve a far greater resonance as it becomes linked

with the events that follow from it, whilst simultaneously creating the sense that, by the end of the narrative, Guy has achieved what he needed (intimate connection) even if that intimate connection was achieved chronologically near the beginning of the story and failed to last. This is a key aspect of the proposed methodology for unconventional practice and successful implementation of a modular structure: the use of non-linearity and repetition to increase emotional intensity through dramatic irony. As Cameron notes, Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* offers a striking example of this technique, with the story progressing chronologically backwards from the climactic murder to the rape that prompted it towards chronologically earlier scenes of peace and calm, 'ameliorat[ing] the horror we have already witnessed' (Cameron, 2006: 71). As the narrative gradually unfolds, 'the memory of the traumatic events in the middle of the film has faded somewhat, displaced by the memories of more pleasant, chronologically prior moments', and yet 'we cannot help but be reminded that this is not "real time"' (71). The film then concludes with contrasting emotions: the 'optimism and possibility' of a pregnancy, and the knowledge that it is 'doomed' (71). We know that the savagery and brutality in the character's future are unerasable, 'irreversible', and yet their extremely negative emotional quality has 'faded', replaced by tranquillity.

As Maeve and Guy's first night and early morning together is gradually revealed in fragments its impact is heightened by our knowledge of subsequent events. The intimate connection formed in that scene, and its loving emotional charge, is also able to 'ameliorate' more tragic plot developments that occur chronologically later in the story. By revisiting and exploring that moment in greater depth at the narrative's conclusion, for example, that moment is able to mediate the tragic quality of Guy's ultimate death and failure to achieve a lasting relationship with

Maeve:

Extract 19.

MAEVE

Life's fucking weird.

Guy laughs, just a little. Maeve laughs, just a little.

GUY

You're hard work aren't you.

She shrugs.

GUY (CONT.)

Yeah, life's fucking weird. Life's  
shit and hard and horrible and  
weird. Come back to bed.

She considers this... stands, returns. Sits next to him.

GUY

My name's Guy. I'm a washed up old  
fuck, and I'm almost always alone.

MAEVE

Are you a good guy, Guy?

GUY

No.

Beat.

GUY (CONT.)

But I haven't given up trying yet.

Maeve takes that in. It seems to be enough. She slides back  
under the covers, nestles back up to him.

(p124)

If Guy's primary goal was to create a relationship with Maeve, and his need was to feel that he was a good person, then the structure of the third act indicates partial success in both outer goal and inner need, despite the chronology of the story: Guy *did* achieve a loving, intimate relationship with Maeve, initiated on that first intimate night, it just didn't last; he did lose his own sense of morality by killing Waghorn, but there was a heroic aspect to this action (Waghorn was a threat to all he came into contact with) and Maeve, as her reaction to his gift of the money



indicates, may well have been left more convinced of Guy's goodness than Guy himself:

Extract 20.

She looks down. Frowns.

Picks something up.

She flicks the lights on, closes the door. Striplights flicker on above her. The chairs are all upended on the tables -- she takes one down, sits.

She's holding a PACKAGE. A well-stuffed envelope.

She opens it. Pulls out a WEDGE OF CASH.

A few grand at least. She looks at it.

Lets it sink in a moment.

Begins to cry.

To sob.

Until she's overcome.

Doubled over.

Just managing to stop from wailing.

(p127)

An ironic, bittersweet ending can be created when the protagonist either achieves their goal but fails to achieve their need (examples include *Memento*, *There Will Be Blood* [2007], *The Social Network* [2010], *Heat*, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* [2007]), or fails in their goal but through the act of pursuing their goal achieves their need (examples include *Broken Flowers* [2005], *Red Road* [2006], *Broadcast News* [1987], *The Apartment* [1960]). Such endings can create a more nuanced worldview, in which good and bad, success and failure, live side by side (McKee, 1999). The modular structure of *A Reverie* provides a more complex version of the ironic ending: due to the fracturing of the timelines, both

goal and need are both achieved *and* not achieved. The past of the relationship, in which closeness and intimacy were achieved, lives narrationally next to the chronological ending in which that closeness and intimacy has been lost. Guy has largely lost belief in his own goodness and so accepts death, whilst Maeve has largely retained her belief in his goodness (and, crucially, the final beat positions the viewer in Maeve's point-of-view, not Guy's). In this sense, the temporal leaps which define *A Reverie*'s narrative serve not just to increase narrational complexity but to increase emotional impact and engagement, quite differently to *Following*, in which the temporal leaps serve to emotionally distance the viewer and encourage a more cerebral, puzzle-solving response.

*A Reverie*, in this sense, is intended as a more heartfelt, emotional application of the modular form than is typical, more focused on character and emotion than plot or genre, in which the 'mood of temporal crisis' (Cameron, 2006: 65) which inflects modular narratives takes on a tenor of emotional crisis. Jacques Audiard and Thomas Bidegain's *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* (2005) was a key tonal reference point: a character-oriented, expressionistic crime drama in which character and emotion are given primacy. Iñárritu and Arriaga's *21 grams* offers a noteworthy example of how the modular form can be applied to more character-oriented crime-drama narratives, moving away from the cerebral, plot-oriented puzzle film (Buckland, 2009) narratives preferred by Nolan to a style of non-linear storytelling more self-consciously emotional and intimate.

## **6.8 Use of Genre Tropes in the Development Process**

*A Reverie* was developed and envisioned as an unconventional crime film, drawing on traditions from the international art cinema (Bordwell, 1979; Galt and Schoonover,

2010) and primarily influenced by those films, such as Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*, Andrea Arnold's *Red Road* (2006), Lynne Ramsay's *You Were Never Really Here* and Jacques Audiard's *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*, which draw on crime elements but sit far more comfortably alongside other films associated with art cinema and the international festival circuit than with more generic crime cinema. Independent British cinema from a social realist tradition, such as Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999), Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*, Ken Loach's *My Name is Joe* (1998) and Michael Winterbottom's *Everyday* (2012) was also an important reference point, as were international films with crime elements and/or thriller elements which also draw on social realist and art cinema traditions such as Lee Chang-dong's *Burning*, Krzysztof Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Killing* and Hirokazu Koreeda's *Shoplifters* (2018). Prominent British crime texts, such as *Get Carter* (1971) and *The Long Good Friday* (1980) felt tonally unrelated to the type of film I sought to create and had little influence. The potential for the crime film to reflect on issues of morality and challenge the 'official ideology' (Elliot, 2021) seemed key, but much of British crime cinema's context and traditions, such as the tendency to reflect on shifting urban environments and social conditions (Chibnall and Murphy, 1999; Elliot) and the influence of political figures like Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair (Elliot) felt unrelated to my creative aims.

A particular subset of crime narrative however, calibrated to address issues of masculinity and morality with a focus on the isolating impact of professional dedication, was important to *A Reverie*'s development—the expert protagonist narrative. Much has been written about how crime films post-WW2 addressed crises in masculinity (Clay, 1999; Chibnall and Murphy, 1999; Elliot, 2021; Pheasant-Kelly, 2015; Romney, 2010; Christiansen, 2014), focusing particularly on the problems of

'readjustment of returning ex-servicemen' (Clay: 51) and the loss of masculine identity forged in war-time. Little has been written however, beyond my own article (Neilan, 2014), about the tropes of a particular subset of crime narrative in which a rigidly expert but isolated male protagonist encounters an opportunity to form a loving emotional connection with a romantic partner and hence escape his isolation. In such films the protagonist is presented as an "ethical criminal", fiercely dedicated to his skillset and ethical code, and whilst his expertise and professionalism have enabled him to forge a lucrative life outside the normal bounds of society and the co-opted ethics of capitalist systems, they have equally isolated him and denied the opportunity for a nurturing family life. As previously mentioned, The urtext for this subtype of crime film is Jean-Pierre Melville and Georges Pellegrin's *Le Samourai*. Other prominent examples include Michael Mann's *Thief* and Nic Winding Refn and Hossein Amini's *Drive* (2011), and close study of these three texts informed the development of *A Reverie*.

In *Le Samourai*, protagonist Jef Costello (Alain Delon) lives an isolated life devoted to maximal efficiency in his criminal pursuits (car theft and contract kills), however when he is potentially identified during a job and his employer tries to have him killed Jef must go into hiding and develop a plan to take out the employer before he strikes again, encountering as he does so the opportunity to break free of his isolated existence and form an emotional attachment with Valérie (Cathy Rosier), the nightclub singer who can identify him. In Mann's *Thief*, protagonist Frank (James Caan), much like Jef Costello, is fiercely dedicated to maximal efficiency in his criminal pursuits (breaking into highly secure safes and vaults), but unlike Jef, Frank is depicted as a skilled worker gone rogue—a blue collar master of his tools, with the self-discipline and tenacity of the war veteran. His life is less isolated than Jef's (his

cover job involves running a used car business; he's capable of being personable, works with a trusted cohort, maintains a close relationship with a mentor; he's been recently married and is already dating Jessie [Tuesday Weld]) but he is emotionally isolated through his dealings with unsavoury characters and the necessity of living under the protection of a false identity, and we see early on through his burgeoning relationship with Jessie that his fiercely masculine mask hides a powerful desire for emotional intimacy and a wholesome family life. In *Winding Refn* and Amini's *Drive*, the protagonist only known as Driver (Ryan Gosling) is similarly living an isolated life dedicated to his expert driving skills, put to use both as a stoic, closed-mouthed getaway driver and as a Hollywood stunt driver. When he meets his neighbour Irene (Carey Mulligan), a sweet-natured mother-of-one with a husband in jail, he gets the opportunity to establish the intimate emotional connection and family life that he lacks.

Unusually, *Winding Refn* and Amini's film prioritises the relationship line rather than the action line until the midpoint: Driver's doomed relationship with Irene is foregrounded, underpinned and impacted by the action line which only comes to prominence after a midpoint sequence in which Irene's husband Standard is killed in an ill-fated armed robbery and Driver left to pick up the pieces. The result is a narrative in which Driver's attempts to protect Irene and Standard, and his involvement with Jewish gangsters Bernie and Nino, gradually pulls him away from Irene and a healthy family life and towards violence and criminality, even as he tries to act heroically. Resultingly the film's final movement, which emphasises the somewhat underdeveloped action line and in which antagonist Bernie is more active than the Driver, feels like something of an anti-climax, and less impactful than the film's first half, in which action feeds relationship line and Bernie and Nino play a

fringe role.

This would influence the development of *A Reverie*: I admired Winding Refn and Amini's focus on the relationship line, its narrative prominence, and the way the action line is used to serve the relationship line instead of the other way around. I felt this created an emotional depth and a tenderness that other examples of the expert protagonist narrative lacked, and that other films in Refn's catalogue lack—his cinema characteristically explores 'the traumas of masculinity' (Romney, 2010: 26), employing 'spectacularly troubled' (1<sup>st</sup> para) protagonists, who tend to spiral, as in *Bronson* (2008) and *Only God Forgives* (2013), to appalling blood-soaked denouements, whereas *Drive* displays a much warmer, more tender feel until it descends to graphic violence and cartoonish villainy in its final movement. I therefore sought to emulate the approach observable in *Drive*'s first and second acts, foregrounding the relationship line, but to maintain the relationship line's centrality even when the action line is necessarily drawing to its climax, seeking to avoid what I saw as a flaw in *Drive*'s structure. The non-linearity helped in this regard: even as Guy is caught up in the extended pub heist (pages 91 to 122) the bookending of that sequence with flashbacks to Guy and Maeve's first night together helps to maintain its connection to the relationship line. The subsequent scene in which Maeve and Guy talk about life and love (pages 122 to 125) in particular directs the audience to understand the previous heist sequence by its impact on Guy and Maeve, their relationship, their needs to be loved. In Winding Refn and Amini's narrative Irene is largely absent by this point—she does appear in two brief inserts, but is silent in both, affirming the sense that the relationship line has shifted to background, serving the foregrounded action line in a traditional way, quite differently to the narrative's first half.

In each of these narratives (*Le Samouraï*, *Thief*, *Drive*) the protagonist's devotion to highly skilled criminality and the ethical code which underpins their behaviour in the action line seals their eventual failure to achieve wholesome loving intimacy in the relationship line, yet also allows them to maintain a sense of heroism and pride: Jef's ethics require that he sacrifice himself to save Valérie; Frank's ethics require that he confront and defeat Leo, sending Jessie away in the process; the Driver's ethics require that he protect Irene and her son, even if that necessitates the use of brutal violence which he knows will unalterably alienate Irene. They are narratives, essentially, which explore dilemmas central to masculinity: the interplay of goal orientation and family life, and the differing attitudes and abilities required both to succeed in aggressive masculine working environments and to maintain loving familial relationships.

Frank and the Driver, particularly, are confronted with the impossibility of both defeating violent and aggressive forces of antagonism and maintaining a nurturing home environment. Both are placed in unwinnable dilemmas: they have rare and admirable levels of tenacity, bravery and both psychological and physical power, enough to overcome the forces which threaten their loved ones, but using those powers (rather than, say, fleeing with their loved ones) necessitates the loss of their relationships—a crime genre reimagining of the same dilemma faced by WWII conscripts, of the 'incompatibility of soldiering' (Bruzzi, 2005: 4) and family life. Masculinity in the war era was earned, if, as Norman Mailer remarked, 'you were good enough, bold enough' (in Bruzzi, 2005: 1), and those 'notions of manhood on the battlefield were markedly different' from the kind of masculinity that emerged and which could flourish in peacetime (Bruzzi: 1). Schatz (1997) notes a trend, postwar, towards depictions of 'despondent' men 'beset by post-war angst' (369) struggling to

find purpose and identity. The expert protagonist represents a kind of ill-fated solution to such despondency: he (and he is always male) has clear purpose and identity, but tied inexorably to his expert skillset—just as the wartime conscript found his purpose on the battlefield by performing his function with a mixture of bravery and precision. Like the conscript, his service, his heroism, his expertise comes at the cost of his family life. Neil MacAuley (Robert De Niro) and Vincent Hanna (Al Pacino) in Michael Mann's *Heat* are further examples of the expert protagonist, split across the divide of law—expert cop and expert thief, alternative formulations of battlefield officers, as evidenced by the fierce militaristic gun battle that occupies a key narrative position and by their famous midpoint diner scene, reminiscent of moments in *Band of Brothers* (2001) when Allied and Axis soldiers bond through mutual respect. That Mann's narrative ends with a gun battle, with the two characters united in mutual respect even as one kills the other, and with the loss of both of their intimate relationships, is no coincidence: the loss of family life at the narrative's end is at the heart of the expert protagonist narrative. Dedication to both expertise and an ethical system are non-negotiable, even at the expense of intimate relationships.

Appendix I shows the first outline, written in 2013, of the project that would eventually become *A Reverie*. US-set and generic, it was written as a creative exercise, an experimentation utilizing lateral brain writing techniques informed by the non-linearity I had observed (but not yet studied) in *Following* and the anti-hero characters of Andrew Dominik's *Killing Them Softly* (2012). The elements of this original outline that I was most interested in retaining as I transposed the idea to a British setting included: an expert criminal protagonist at a low ebb with a desire to leave the criminal world behind him and to be a morally good man; a relationship line



with a recovering alcoholic waitress, contrasting with his functional alcoholism; a blue collar world; and fragmented modular structure. I set about allying these elements with the elements of the expert protagonist narrative that I had identified: a male protagonist rendered sympathetic specifically through his expertise, dedication and ethical code; an opportunity for intimate connection; and the ultimate failure to maintain the intimate connection. This development methodology therefore foregrounds the primacy of the unconventional narrative model which the writer is seeking to employ and an application of techniques observed in relevant examples of that model, shaping relevant genre conventions and ideas for characters and plot incidents into that unconventional macrostructure.

### **6.9 Application of the Conventional Monoplot Model as Part of an Unconventional Development Process**

Appendix II shows an early outline of the British-set version of *A Reverie*, written in 2016, which formed a part of my application for this program of study. It demonstrates how I used the original US-set outline in conjunction with the Conventional Monoplot model to rapidly block out a basic macrostructure which would gradually develop into the screenplay submitted as the creative portion of this project.

The original US-set outline (Appendix I) was written before the Conventional Monoplot model had been developed, when my understanding of feature-length plotting was still developing. That outline was written largely by letting the characters “talk to each other” and discovering the story as they did through creative intuition, with the aim of creating a tight connection between characterisation and plot and letting ideas flow from emotion and the kind of ‘lateral mind’ techniques espoused by

Aronson (2010). Focusing on plot from an early stage can be somewhat distancing, 'tak[ing] the writer out of the project rather than into it' (Batty, 2013: 4). Television creator Beth Sullivan, quoted in Seger (1996: 230) and re-quoted in Batty et al (2017: 229), encourages her writing staff to be guided by the motto 'in through the heart and out through the brain,' a motto which resonates with my favoured approach to early project development: an initial focus on feeling, emotion and intuition, guided often by character interaction, before the more objective and logic-oriented shaping of plot. When outlining the British-set version however I applied the Conventional Monoplot model, and in doing so was able to quickly discover a broad macrostructure, a vessel into which I could pour the elements retained from the original, lateral brain-oriented outline, and those identified in the typical expert protagonist narrative, and in doing so begin to discover an effective way of shaping these elements.

At this stage however the narrative was still relatively linear. A close reading of the appended outline reveals that aside from brief flashbacks and flash forwards each of the macronarrative's eight sequences is largely contiguous. Discontiguity occurs through brief flashes of the traumatic incident that has disturbed Guy's psyche (the killing of Waghorn) which appear at the beginning of act 2.1 and 2.2, through a significant flashback at the start of act 3, and through a framing timeline which appears at the beginning of act 1, the midpoint and the end of act 3—what Aronson might call 'bookend' scenes (217). This more or less creates not a modular narrative but what Aronson calls a 'double narrative flashback' (304), in which the protagonist and/or the viewer is looking back at a troubled past which led them to a problematic present (examples include *Amadeus* [1984], *The Social Network* [2010] and *Michael Clayton* [2007]). Discontiguity between sequences then, in this early

outline, is quite limited, and within sequences is largely absent.

The earlier US-set outline has a greater level of discontinuity, both within sequences and between sequences, shifting consistently back and forth between protagonist Jerry (pre-cursor to Guy) and antagonist Cobb's first meeting, Jerry and Cobb's "heist" with secondary antagonist Gatland, and Jerry's relationship with Maeve, but lacks a coherent feature-length macrostructure sufficient to contain and deliver its interesting discontinuity in a compelling feature-length form (in addition to genre cliché, ripe dialogue and a lack of research). Despite the broad linearity of the UK-set outline, it contains within it the foundations for the non-linear script that would eventually emerge, beginning to follow the model set by Ramsay in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in which an isolated, traumatised character is looking back on the events in their life that led to their traumatisation, with the non-linearity reflecting the subjective psychological experience of trauma.

Emphasis on application of the Conventional Monoplot model at this stage then shifted the project towards a more linear mode, but allowed for an unfocused original idea to be broadened out to a feature-length scale, and to be shifted from an American setting to a British setting, amongst other significant changes, quite rapidly. Although some of the non-linearity of the initial outline has been lost the foundations have been laid for a more focused and expressionistic form of non-linearity to be further developed—with that development process guided, as previously outlined, by the unconventional narrative models presented in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Following*.

## **6.10 Summary: A Methodology for Unconventional Practice in the Screenplay**

This chapter has presented one potential methodology for unconventional practice in

the screenplay emerging from the knowledge created in chapters one to four and the practical knowledge created by chapter five. Some aspects of this methodology are applicable to a variety of unconventional forms, some specific to the modular form.

The aspects applicable to a variety of forms are as follows:

- Use of lateral brain writing techniques in early development.
- Application of the Conventional Monoplot model to rapidly shape a coherent feature-length narrative.
- Close study of pre-existing unconventional models with a focus on the meaning they create, and an application of relevant techniques, shaping the content discovered in the first two points into an unconventional form.

The methodological aspects specific to the modular form are as follows:

- Envisioning three visually distinct versions of the protagonist as three separate protagonists each leading a different timeline.
- Use of emotionally resonant images discovered through lateral brain writing techniques as starting points for developing those separate timelines.
- Use of repetition and progressive disclosure to reflect the subjective experience of trauma and the process of re-integration.
- Layering sensory elements of the traumatic event into earlier segments of the narrative to reflect the subjective experience of trauma.
- Revealing the traumatic event in its entirety at or near the narrative's climax to mirror the process of re-integration.

## 6.11 Implications of Research and Areas for Future Research

*A Reverie* was envisioned and developed as a viable low budget independent feature project for the British film industry. Since submission it has been published in full in the August 2021 edition of *Sightlines*, the online journal of the Australian Screen Production Education & Research Association (2021), and has attracted an executive producer—Samm Haillay of Third Films, producer of Duane Hopkins' Cannes-selected *Better Things* (2008).

It is hoped that the Conventional Monoplot model and the taxonomy of unconventional models might be adopted by development professionals in international screen industries as well as by teachers and students of screenwriting in higher education. I am currently developing a screenwriting “anti-handbook”, titled *Unconventional Screenwriting*, with editor Katie Gallof at Bloomsbury, which would aim to disseminate this work to a wide audience and facilitate its adoption in those industrial and educational arenas. An article based on much of the work in chapter one of this project was published in the November 2022 special edition of the *Journal of Screenwriting* (Neilan, 2022), and I have delivered two papers and one video-essay utilizing various elements of chapters one to four: at the Artistic Climates Conference 2020 at Kristiania University in Oslo; at the 2021 online Screenwriters Research Network conference; and at the 2022 Screenwriters Research Network Conference at the University of Vienna.

Necessarily there have been certain limitations put on this project to ensure a manageable scale of inquiry—for example, the project has not sought to explore non-anglophone poetics and how such poetics might shape international cinemas. This would be a valuable area for future research, and indeed is a future area for my own research: the video essay mentioned above examined narrative structures in

the work of Hou Hsiao-Hsien, and I have also contributed a chapter exploring narrative structure in the films of Asghar Farhadi and Iranian cinema more broadly for *The Bloomsbury Handbook of International Screenwriting Theory*, edited by Andrew Gay and Ann Igelstrom and due for publication in 2024.

The Monoplot model has already been a useful tool in my own creative work. It underpins *Journey Into Night*, an original feature screenplay which has been sold to US independent production company Dark Passage Films and is due for production in 2023, and influences many of the stories which form my hybrid novel *Stellify* (Neilan, 2022), published by Broken Sleep Books. I also used the Monoplot model in the writing of 'Ends', a modular short story which won 2<sup>nd</sup> place for short fiction in the Bridport Prize in 2017 and was praised by judge Peter Hobbs for 'rail[ing] against the neatness of the short story form even as it succeeds in it' (2017: 8), and which I subsequently used as the starting point for *Sleeper etc*, an experimental novella with many radical structural elements which is currently being sent to publishers.

I have also begun implementing the Monoplot and the taxonomy of unconventional structures in the classroom. I started a post as Lecturer in Screenwriting and Development at Edinburgh Napier University in August 2021, where I am programme leading and designing an online MA in Screenwriting with this research at its core. In early 2022 I delivered a module for Napier's face-to-face MA Screenwriting programme based on this same research, receiving excellent responses from the students, several of whom reported finding the Monoplot model very useful and the exploration of its ideological implications and the available alternatives illuminating. I would hope that this work might find a wide audience through publication with Bloomsbury, and impact on some level industrial

development processes and classroom practices in such a way as to mediate, even if in a very minor way, the long-established restrictive impact of the modern handbooks and, perhaps ambitiously, enable or support the making of the kind of unconventional feature films which Ross (2011) argues were delimited when the rapidly corporatizing Hollywood of the late 70s and 80s embraced blockbusterism.

### **6.12 Conclusion: Unconventionality in Practice**

As outlined in chapters one, two, three and four, unconventionality in screenwriting tends to involve adherence to a great many conventions with significant diversions at key points. The Conventional Monoplot model is of use to the screenwriter, this project argues, because it lays down a conventional model which the screenwriter may follow to produce a particular (restorative, familiar) meaning, or from which the screenwriter can divert, offering the opportunity to track unconventional practice by negative correlation. It has been argued that conventional narrative structure, embodied by the Conventional Monoplot, propagates a comforting, deterministic worldview, and that if the screenwriter wishes to divert from this worldview and create alternative meanings they must consciously approach their narrative design from the position of the convention-sceptic, focusing on meaning creation rather than convention adherence.

Diversion from Conventional Monoplot should occur whenever the screenwriter wishes to diverge from the restorative, comforting meaning it produces, and whenever the screenwriter wishes, to return to David Foster Wallace's ideas of the audience-lulling mainstream film and the teleological art film (1996), to create a more wakeful, audience-active viewing experience. Additionally, should the writer wish to draw attention to or comment on the conventional model, reframing the

viewer's relationship with and consumption of the model in a manner comparable to culture jamming (Carducci, 2006), diversion from the model should be considered. The taxonomy of unconventional structures in chapter four offers significant examples of screenplays which have diverted from the model and, in doing so, created alternative meanings. The intention has been to further understanding of the options available to the screenwriter, and the significance of those options.

Chapter one discussed the pressures exerted upon the screenwriter to follow structural conventions, both within higher education and industry. Ross (2011) argues convincingly that the iconoclastic narratives produced by Hollywood in the 1960s and '70s were enabled by the organizational structure of studios such as United Artists, in which small groups of cinephile executives had the freedom to invest in projects they valued on an artistic level, and how the corporatization at the executive level (Menne, 2019; Schatz, 1993; King, 2002) contributed to a conventionalisation of film narratives. This project has argued that screenwriting handbooks by the likes of Syd Field, Robert McKee, Christopher Vogler and John Yorke have also played a significant role in the conventionalisation of the screenplay, and through analysing critical consensus, box office data and Academy Award data, the conclusion was drawn that mainstream American cinema has undergone a significant conventionalisation since the emergence of Field's *Screenplay*. Ross, Thompson (1999), Conor (2012; 2014), Macdonald (2013), Maras (2009) and others point to a limiting effect of the handbooks and their associated knowledge on screenwriters, and hence upon the meanings created by film narratives. It is hoped that this project might add to the ground-breaking work of Paul Gulino and Linda Aronson in expanding and developing the understanding of unconventional narrative structures and the meanings they create, and in this sense might help to empower



and enable more dynamic, unconventional practice in the screenplay.

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*Black Panther.* (2018) Directed by Ryan Coogler. [dvd] USA: Walt Disney.

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*Le cercle rouge.* (1970) Directed by Jean-Pierre Melville. [dvd] France: Rialto Pictures.

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*Diner*. (1982) Directed by Barry Levinson. [dvd] USA: MGM.

*Double Indemnity*. (1944) Directed by Billy Wilder. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*Down By Law*. (1986) Directed by Jim Jarmusch. [dvd] USA: Island Pictures.

*Down Terrace*. (2009) Directed by Ben Wheatley. [dvd] UK: Magnolia Pictures.

*Easy Rider*. (1969) Directed by Dennis Hopper. [dvd] USA: Columbia.

*L'enfant*. (2005) Directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. [dvd] France: Sony.

*Escape from Planet Earth*. (2013) Directed by Cal Brunker. [dvd] USA: The Weinstein Company.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. (2004) Director by Michel Gondry. [dvd] USA: Focus Features.

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*Everyday*. (2012) Directed by Michael Winterbottom. [dvd] UK: Channel 4.

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*Fences*. (2017) Directed by Denzel Washington. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*Fish Tank*. (2009) Directed by Andrea Arnold. [dvd] UK: Curzon Artificial Eye.

*Five Easy Pieces*. (1970) Directed by Bob Rafelson. [dvd] USA: Columbia.

*The Florida Project*. (2017) Directed by Sean Baker. [dvd] USA: A24.

*Following*. (1998) Directed by Christopher Nolan. [dvd] UK: Momentum Pictures.

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*Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer.* (1990) Directed by John McNaughton. [dvd] USA: Greycat Films.

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*Inception.* (2010) Directed by Christopher Nolan. [dvd] USA: Warner Bros.

*Independence Day.* (1996) Directed by Roland Emmerich. [dvd] USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*In The Mood for Love.* (2000) Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. [dvd] Hong Kong: USA Films.

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*The Killer Inside Me.* (2010) Directed by Michael Winterbottom. [dvd] USA: Icon.

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*Lady Bird.* (2018) Directed by Greta Gerwig. [dvd] USA: A24.

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*Lifeboat.* (1944) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. [dvd] USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*The Limits of Control.* (2009) Directed by Jim Jarmusch. [dvd] USA: Focus Features.

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*M\*A\*S\*H.* (1970) Directed by Robert Altman. [dvd] USA: 20th Century Fox.

*Mean Streets.* (1973) Directed by Martin Scorsese. [DVD] New York: Warner Brothers.

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*Le mepris.* (1986) Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. [dvd] France: Marceau-Cocinor.

*Michael Clayton.* (2007) Directed by Tony Gilroy. [dvd] USA: Warner Bros.

*Midnight Cowboy.* (1969) Directed by John Schlesinger. [dvd] USA: United Artists.

*Miller's Crossing.* (1990) Directed by Joel Coen. [dvd] USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Moonlight.* (2016) Directed by Barry Jenkins. [dvd] USA: A24.

*Mrs Doubtfire.* (1993) Directed by Chris Columbus. [dvd] USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Mulholland Drive.* (2001) Directed by David Lynch. [dvd] USA: Universal.

*My Name Is Joe.* (1998) Directed by Ken Loach. [dvd] UK: Channel Four Films.

*Nashville.* (1975) Directed by Robert Altman. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*Nights of Cabiria.* (1957) Directed by Federico Fellini. [dvd] Italy: Paramount.

*No Country for Old Men.* (2007) Directed by Ethan Coen & Joel Coen. [dvd] USA: Miramax.

*North by Northwest.* (1959) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. [dvd] USA: MGM.

*Norte, The End of History.* (2013) Directed by Lav Diaz. [dvd] Philippines: Cinema Guild.

*Ocean's Eleven.* (2002) Directed by Steven Soderbergh. [dvd] USA: Warner Bros.

*The Odd Life of Timothy Green.* (2012) Directed by Peter Hedges. [dvd] USA: Walt Disney.

*Once Upon A Time In The West.* (1968) Directed by Sergio Leone. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest.* (1975) Directed by Milos Forman. [dvd] USA: United Artists.

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*Parental Guidance.* (2012) Directed by Andy Fickman. [dvd] USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Paterson.* (2016) Directed by Jim Jarmusch. [dvd] USA: Amazon Studios

*Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest.* (2006) Directed by Gore Verbinski. [dvd] USA: Buena Vista Pictures.

*The Place Beyond The Pines.* (2012) Directed by Derek Cianfrance. [dvd] USA: Focus Features.

*Police, Adjective.* (2009) Directed by Corneliu Porumboiu. [dvd] Romania: 42KM Film.

*Poltergeist.* (1982) Directed by Tobe Hooper. [dvd] USA: MGM.

*Psycho.* (1960) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*Public Enemies.* (2009) Directed by Michael Mann. [dvd] USA: Universal.

*Pulp Fiction.* (1994) Directed by Quentin Tarantino. [dvd] USA: Miramax.

*Puss in Boots.* (2011) Directed by Chris Miller. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*Le quatre cent coups.* (1959) Directed by Francois Truffaut. [dvd] France: Cocinor.

*Raging Bull.* (1980) Directed by Martin Scorsese. [dvd] USA: United Artists.

*Raiders of the Lost Ark.* (1981) Directed by Steven Spielberg. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*Rain Man.* (1988) Directed by Barry Levinson. [dvd] USA: MGM.

*Rashomon.* (1950) Directed by Akira Kurosawa. [dvd] Japan: Daiei Film.

*Ratcatcher.* (1999) Directed by Lynne Ramsay. [dvd] UK: BBC Films.

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*The Return.* (2003) Directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev. [dvd] Russia: Kino International.

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*Rosetta.* (1999) Directed by Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne. [dvd] France: ARP Selection.

*Saving Private Ryan.* (1998) Directed by Steven Spielberg. [dvd] USA: DreamWorks.

*Scarface.* (1983) Directed by Brian de Palma. [dvd] USA: Universal.

*Scarface.* (1932) Directed by Howard Hawks. [dvd] USA: United Artists.

*Seven.* (1995) Directed by David Fincher. [dvd] USA: New Line.

*sex, lies and videotape.* (1989) Directed by Steven Soderbergh. [dvd] USA: Miramax.

*She's Gotta Have It.* (1986) Directed by Spike Lee. [dvd] USA: Island Pictures.

*The Shining.* (1980) Directed by Stanley Kubrick. [dvd] USA: Warner Bros.

*The Shop Around The Corner.* (1940) Directed by Ernst Lubitsch. [dvd] USA: MGM.

*Shoplifters.* (2018) Directed by Hirokazu Koreeda. [dvd] Japan: GAGA Pictures.

*Short Cuts.* (1993) Directed by Robert Altman. [dvd] USA: Fine Line Features.

*Shrek 2.* (2004) Directed by Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury and Conrad Vernon. [dvd] USA: DreamWorks.

*Slacker.* (1991) Directed by Richard Linklater. [dvd] USA: Orion.

*The Smurfs.* (2011) Directed by Raja Gosnell. [dvd] USA: Sony.

*Snowtown.* (2011) Directed by Justin Kurzel. [dvd] Australia: Madman Films.

*The Social Network.* (2010) Directed by David Fincher. [dvd] USA: Sony.

*Sonatine.* (1993) Directed by Takeshi Kitano. [dvd] Japan: Bandai Visual.

*Stalag 17.* (1953) Directed by Billy Wilder. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope.* (1977) Directed by George Lucas. [dvd] USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Star Wars Episode V: the Empire Strikes Back.* (1980) Directed by Irvin Kershner. [dvd] USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi.* (1983) Directed by Richard Marquand. [dvd] USA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox.

*Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens.* (2015) Directed by JJ Abrams. [dvd] USA: Walt Disney.

*Sunset Boulevard.* (1950) Directed by Billy Wilder. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*Taxi Driver.* (1976) Directed by Martin Scorsese. [dvd] USA: Columbia.

*Tender Mercies.* (1983) Directed by Bruce Beresford. [dvd] USA: Universal.

*Terminator 2: Judgment Day.* (1991) Directed by James Cameron. [dvd] USA: TriStar.

*Thelma and Louise.* (1991) Directed by Ridley Scott. [dvd] USA: MGM.

*Thief.* (1981) Directed by Michael Mann. [dvd] USA: United Artists.

*There Will Be Blood.* (2007) Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson. [dvd] USA: Paramount.

*The Third Man.* (1949) Directed by Carol Reed. [dvd] UK: British Lion.

*Three Colours Blue.* (1993) Directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski. [dvd] Poland: MK2 Diffusion.

*To Live And Die in LA.* (1985) Directed by William Friedkin. [dvd] USA: MGM.

*A Touch of Sin.* (2013) Directed by Jia Zhangke. [dvd] China: Xstream Pictures.

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# Appendix I—A Reverie Outline 1

## A REVERIE

JERRY MANNINGER. . . . . *an alcoholic pickpocket with little to lose*  
ERNEST COBB. . . . . *lawyer to a crime syndicate*  
MAEVE MCKINNON. . . . . *world weary waitress, one year sober*  
LUDOVIC GATLAND. . . . . *hot-headed loan-shark chanced upon a big score*

JERRY MANNINGER walks the streets alone. A rumpled heavy-set 40-something on a downward curve, traces of confidence and potential lingering around his frayed edges. He drinks, alone. We see him balls-out drunk on a street corner, howling and singing... Sitting in a dingy bar pawing over some sad-luck floozy... Bothering some young street toughs, throwing a punch and missing, getting clocked, landing hard on the sidewalk.

Now we see Jerry somewhat cleaner, sober. On a fast moving train. Staring with fascination out the window at birds flying gracefully through lush green fieldland... They arc through blue skies, trees positively glowing behind them...

He walks unsteady down the rocking carriage, takes a seat opposite a well-dressed man reading a newspaper. This is ERNEST COBB (40s). He has the sleek black style of an Italian Mafioso with the educated air of a defence attorney. They nod a polite greeting.

JM: "Nice mornin'."

EC: "Gotta love the sun."

Another dark and dingy watering hole, Jerry propping up the bar.

Cobb arrives next to him. Again they nod hello, *as if they've never met.*

EC: "Good evening."

JM: "How do."

*Two first-time chance meetings?*

The city at dusk. Jerry walks down crowded streets, keeping his distance from something, watching. We see what he's looking at: a well-dressed young couple walking arm in arm. He's stalking them. Watching the woman... Her pretty blonde head, her mouth as she smiles at her man...

Jerry approaches. He's being careful, hanging back. He sees them about to enter a store, but as they dally in the doorway he nips ahead of them.

JM: "Allow me."

He holds the door for them. As they pass he is momentarily entranced by her... her skin, the soft lines of her neck... his hand gently pulls her purse from her bag and slips it into his pocket.

Later: drinking, howling, falling. Lying on concrete looking at the stars.

A secluded beach at night. Jerry stumbles toward the waves, falls into them... Lies on his back, the water lapping at his head, staring up, a sloppy grin on his face... Lying on the concrete... Lying in the water...

Train, day. Sitting opposite Cobb. Making with the polite talk - for sure they're just meeting for the first time... Right?

JM: "Train to Miami huh? Like something in the movies."

EC: "That's right."

JM: "Ever done something like this? I mean before?"

EC: "Yes. New York to New Orleans, twenty years ago. Sunrise and breakfast in Georgia as the train took a westward turn. It was something."

Jerry lying in the water, staring up, that sloppy grin.

Dingy bar, night. Cobb walks to the bar. Jerry sits at the bar nursing a beer. Cobb brushes him, maybe Jerry turns into him slightly. *But Cobb notices it...*

JM: "Sorry."

Cobb eyes Jerry.

EC: "Good evening."

JM: "How do."

Train, day.

JM: "I like looking out the windows. Much better'n on a plane. How bout you guys?"

We see for the first time a man dozing next to Cobb, his jacket pulled over him like a blanket.

EC: "Airports were not a consideration."

The dozing man eyes Cobb, goes back to sleep.

We'll come to know this man later. His name: LUDOVIC GATLAND (30s).

Dingy bar, night.

EC: "How do? Ha. How do. Mm."

Cobb eyes Jerry unflinchingly. Barman appears.

EC: "Give me your three best scotch whiskies, once cube in each."

He turns to look directly at Jerry now.

EC: "I see you've got a pendant on your neck there. I bring this up because it interests me when men wear jewellery."

JM: "Yeah?"

EC: "It illuminates a facet of themselves which they're not necessarily aware they're drawing attention to. Cross pendant can say 'this man is religious', but more often it says 'this man is a traditionalist'. This man may not believe in the Lord our God any more than I do, which is not much, but you can be sure his mother does. Take the diamond studded giant crosses that rappers wear. Most people would say that's about wealth, not religion. A display of brash affluence. But it says as much about traditionalism."

Jerry's looking uncomfortable.

EC: "You know what a shark tooth pendant on a leather thong says to me? It says: soft. This man is soft, and he knows it. He's become concerned with the iconography of strength. Now a shark tooth on a gold chain on the other hand, that's something very different - that says Eastern Europe, it says bravado, a temper. It says beware."

JM: "Very fuckin interesting."

EC: "A thin gold chain says vanity, a thin silver chain says sentimentality. Your pendant there: a gold compass. Know what you're saying about yourself?"

JM: "I got this at a garage sale. I like shiny things."

EC: "It's saying: you're a loser."

He's too close now.

EC: "It's saying you're afraid of losing your way. Men who have never lost their way are unafraid. It says you're lost, and more than that it says you've stopped trying to find your way,



and are instead relying on the powers of this totemistic object to save you. But it will not.”

JM: “I don’t know—”

EC: “I know you don’t.”

He shifts slightly closer. Very hard now:

EC: “Put my wallet back in my pocket.”

A long beat. They fucking stare at each other. What’s Jerry gonna do?

JM: “Take it off me.”

Beat.

Cobb slowly shifts into a smile.

EC: “Okay. Good. Take a scotch.”

Close on those graceful birds as they swoop and glide alongside the rushing train.

A low-rent diner, very late night. 2am drunks slouch in the booths. Outside, Jerry pukes up a generous helping of apple pie a la mode between a couple of dumpsters.

Pale and sweaty he stumbles back inside, back to his booth and the half-eaten pie. He pulls out a hip flask under the table.

“Just take a little hit, then stick to food and water. You’ll feel better.”

That was a waitress. In her 30s, well built, not bad, but tired and out of luck. An embroidered name-badge says Doreen. She starts walking away.

JM: “That your name? Doreen?”

She pauses.

“No. I weren’t inviting you to know me. Just thought maybe you’d wanna kick the heaves.”

JM: “Mine’s Jerry. My name. Your husband drink?”

“Fuck, you’re all the same man.”

JM: “Your pop?”

“I ain’t reachin out to you fat man. Drink your fuckin water.”

Cut to a strange image... deep darkness and shadows thrown by a bare lightbulb swinging from its fittings... the waitress’s face, eyes glinting, looking close at Jerry’s face... two bodies in unclean underclothes pushed tight for warmth on a single bed...

Diner. Another late night. Jerry’s in better shape tonight, keeping his pie down. Maybe he’s combed his hair.

He’s watching Doreen.

She’s having some kind of argument with the manager.

Another waitress passes.

JM: “Hey - excuse me. That waitress. What’s her name, really?”

“Why don’t you ask her? And you can’t drink in here.”

A tatty weathered guy in filthy clothes has wandered in. He walks up to the tills, where Doreen and the manager are talking. They notice him, ask what he wants.

Jerry watches as the man points at the register, casually takes out a knife. He’s spaced out or something. Doreen backs away, the manager tries to reason with him. Suddenly the customers notice - a scream, murmurs.

Jerry stands up. Gingerly approaches. He can hear the man now.

“Jus do it jus do it, please, now, all the money please, now, I’ll cut you.”

This guy’s not all there.

Jerry’s approaching, starting to think about taking him out, when some other guy approaches from the side.

“Hey come on man, put it down man, put down the knife.”

Jerry pauses – Knife Man looks at the guy.

“Just put it down man.”

Knife Man goes for him!

Screams! The guy’s stabbed right in the side!

Jerry pounces on Knife Man from behind, another man falls on top of him too, Jerry twists his arm, wrestles the knife from him, the stabbed guy’s bleeding badly, blood all over the floor, Doreen shaking and covering her mouth.

An ambulance takes the stab victim away. Jerry and Doreen are on the street, huddled in their coats from the cold.

JM: “They say he’s gonna die.”

“Yeah?”

JM: “Yeah I heard em talking. You ever seen that before? A guy getting stabbed like that?”

“Yeah. You?”

JM: “Yes. Plenty.”

Silence.

JM: “You wanna come for a drink? I got brandy. Good for the nerves.”

“I’m sober.”

JM: “How long?”

“A year.”

Jerry’s apartment. Dark, cheap, unclean. Jerry drinks brandy from a tumbler, she sips on water.

JM: “So what’s your name really?”

“Maeve.”

JM: “Maeve. That Irish?”

“Yeah. Irish mother, Scottish father. Surname’s McKinnock.

JM: “Maeve McKinnock. Two Ms.”

MM: “You’re some conversationalist.”

JM: “Don’t be an asshole, I’m just making nice.”

MM: “What’s your last name, Jerry?”

JM: “Manninger. Austrian. I speak a little German.”

MM: “Bet that opens a lot of doors for you huh.”

JM: “What is this, you bored? You don’t like me? Got a lot of better offers?”

MM: “What’re you offering?”

JM: “A bed. And you can watch me drink.”

Beat.

MM: “Take my shoes off me.”

She puts her foot in his lap.

Bar, night. Corner booth. Cobb and Jerry sit opposite each other, Cobb’s wallet on the table.

EC: “Your name’s Manninger, first name Jerry, short for Gerhard, same as your father. Austrian grandparents. You speak a little German. You did three years in the Hudson correctional facility for your part in the armed robbery of a launderette in Chinatown in which a sixteen year old Chinese boy was shot and injured. Five months at the Willard drug treatment centre for addiction to crack – no relapses. Six years in Green View for a bank job gone wrong, you were the driver or it would’ve been ten. Released eight months ago. But your real talent is pickpocketing. He of the magic fingers. No charges for that because you never

get caught. And so you spend your time these days fishing for wallets and emptying them out onto that bar.”

JM: “Who are you?”

EC: “My name is Ernest, though I am not.”

JM: “Not what?”

EC: “My surname is Cobb. That’s what you should call me.”

JM: “Okay Cobb. What the fuck is this? What was all that shit at the bar, about my pendant and shit?”

EC: “Assessment. I had to see if you were the fuck-up everyone says you are.”

JM: “And am I?”

EC: “Not entirely, which is ideal. I need someone exactly half-way fucked up. A man in his prime would demand more money, or may try to betray me. A man too fucked-up cannot be relied upon. I believe you will suit my needs quite well, Jerry Manninger. Take another scotch.”

He does, takes a good hit.

JM: “And what are your needs, Ernest Cobb?”

EC: “For several years I have protected the interests of a syndicate of like-minded crime professionals. They run poker games, cock fighting, various forms of gambling, some loan-sharking. I am their... well I suppose it’s closest to say I am their lawyer.”

JM: “You look like a lawyer.”

EC: “One of their number, one Mister Gatland, has come into possession of a very rare and valuable item, valuable to the right people. He does not wish any of his partners from said syndicate to find out about this, since they would demand their share.”

JM: “Their share of what?”

EC: “The profits. Mister Gatland intends to sell this item to an interested party in Miami for a very large sum, and he has employed me to broker the deal for him.”

JM: “But you ain’t gonna broker no deal for him.”

EC: “No.”

JM: “You want me to lift the item before he can make the deal.”

EC: “Yes. Mister Gatland is the weakest minded and youngest member of the syndicate and will not be hard to deceive. And for this role I will pay you ten percent of the fee I receive.”

JM: “And how much will that be?”

EC: “Six figures, guaranteed, perhaps more. Bear in mind that I am taking all the risks. He knows me – he will not know you. You will use a fake name. It will appear as if you have met us purely by chance, and after our meeting it will be a simple matter for you to disappear. For lifting the object you will be paid handsomely. If you’re caught in the act, I will kill you immediately in order to protect myself. These are the parameters.”

JM: “You’ll kill me?”

EC: “Immediately.”

JM: “Fuckin’ hard ass, huh?”

EC: “That doesn’t enter into it.”

JM: “You killed anyone before, hard ass?”

The slightest smile graces Cobb’s lips.

EC: “Yes. Have you?”

JM: “Yes.”

EC: “You’re lying.”

JM: “So are you.”

Night. Maeve’s apartment. Jerry lies on the bed taking hits from a battered old hip flask.

MM: "Brandy?"  
 JM: "Cheap shit. Tastes like paint."  
 MM: "So don't drink it."  
 He looks at her.  
 JM: "Don't start with that."  
 MM: "Don't fuckin look at me like that."  
 JM: "Like wha—"  
 MM: "Like you wanna hit me."  
 JM: "I wasn't."  
 MM: "I mean it, don't you ever fuckin look at me like that again, I'll kill you if you do,  
 I swear it."  
 JM: "Whoa. Relax."  
 Silence.  
 JM: "I just don't want this to go down that road. You don't drink, that's fine, that's  
 good, good for you. I like drinking and I ain't quitting."  
 MM: "Not now, not ever, huh?"  
 JM: "Why kid yourself? This is me. Ain't no other me waiting to be found."  
 Silence.  
 JM: "You wanna lie down next to me? Or you too worked up?"  
 MM: "You ever hit a woman?"  
 JM: "I don't know... what you want me to say? You want me to say no or you want me  
 to say the truth?"  
 MM: "Fuck, man. Fuck. Why you all gotta be so Goddamn evil?"  
 JM: "Look it was a long time ago, when I was young, and a lot of shit happened to me  
 when I was young, shit you don't need to know about. I ain't done that in years, like ten years.  
 I don't think I'd do it again. I weren't looking at you like that, I was just looking at you."  
 MM: "You're good now?"  
 JM: "Good I don't know. I'm in the middle I think."  
 MM: "So just be good. Just push a little further that way and be good, why not?"  
 JM: "Sure, sure I'll be good. Why not right? Lie down next to me."

Bar, night.

EC: "Mister Gatland is on several FBI watchlists. His appearance at any airport would  
 be noted and his business carefully scrutinised. He is not however under constant surveillance,  
 and the FBI pay no attention whatsoever to train passengers. In this way we should be able to  
 make our journey to Miami in secret."

JM: "Uh-huh. Like a sleeper train?"

EC: "Yes. Mister Gatland is suspicious and paranoid by nature. He keeps the package  
 on his person at all times, and he does not easily relax in my presence. You must strike up a  
 conversation with us, ingratiate yourself. Befriend Mister Gatland. Put him at ease. And once  
 his guard is down you must not only lift the package but replace it with a duplicate, which I will  
 provide. He has no reason to examine the package before the transaction, by which time we  
 will already have sold the package to a rival party, and split the dividends."

JM: "Ninety-ten."

EC: "If you are not happy with the split—"

JM: "It ain't exactly generous."

EC: "You're a forty-three year old alcoholic pocket-picker, and I am delivering a  
 treasure chest into your lap. You ought not concern yourself with the contents of my own  
 chest."

JM: "Yeah, alright."

EC: "Let me tell you something important. I never lie about a double-cross. I will not cheat a compatriot. If I am seen to be betraying Mister Gatland, it is only because he is not my compatriot, but in fact my enemy. On my ethics you can be sure."

JM: "Why don't we drink to it."

EC: "I don't drink scotch."

JM: "I don't trust someone won't drink with me."

Beat.

EC: "Alright then. <lifts his glass> Compatriots."

JM: "Yeah, compatriots."

Stars hanging in the night sky... Jerry staring up wide-eyed, water lapping around him...

Train, day. Ludovic Gatland stirs under his jacket, pale skinned, eyes hurt by the sunlight streaming through the window. Woken by Jerry and Cobb's conversation.

LG: "Who fuck's dis?"

JM: "James, James Thompson. Was just getting to know your buddy here."

Gatland looks at Cobb, his "buddy", starts to chuckle.

LG: "Ha ha... okay, okay..."

JM: "Yeah turns out we're from same neck of the woods."

LG: "That a fact."

JM: "Yeah that's right, that's right. Damn near neighbours. Didn't catch your name chief?"

LG: "Mickey Mouse."

Beat.

JM: "Okay Mickey, okay, nice name you got there. What business you in Mickey?"

LG: "The punching nosey assholes in the nose business."

Beat.

How's Jerry gonna handle this?

JM: "Don't talk to me like that."

Cobb's eyes flash.

LG: "What?"

JM: "You fuckin heard me, I said don't talk to me like I'm a piece of shit, I'm just a guy talking. You don't wanna talk don't talk, but don't be a fuckin asshole just 'cause."

Cobb tries to contain his fury.

Gatland stares at Jerry...

...Finally:

LG: "I'm tired."

JM: "So you're tired, have a drink. I got liquor in my bunk."

Sleeping compartment. Jerry and Gatland passing a bottle of brandy back and forth, Cobb politely declining. They're playing a game:

JM: "Queens."

LG: "Anacostia, DC. I been there."

EC: "Tennessee."

JM: "Fuckin... fuckin Russia. Moscow!"

LG: "The Castro, San Francisco."

JM: "That's worse than Moscow?"

LG: "They won't fuck you in the ass in Moscow!"

Gatland's getting loose, drunk, braying with laughter, encouraged by Jerry. It's going to plan.

EC: "Tehran."  
LG: "Fuck's that?"  
JM: "It's in Iran. Ahhh... Islam... Islamabad."  
LG: "What's the one in Iraq? Beirut?"  
JM: "Baghdad."  
LG: "Baghdad, yeah, Baghdad."  
He puts a cigarette in his mouth, drops it.  
LG: "Ah shit."  
As he bends down to get it, Jerry sees a thick manila envelope tucked into the inside pocket of Gatland's jacket. Cobb nods at him - that's it.  
LG: "It's fuckin crooked now."  
EC: "Can't smoke on the train."  
LG: "So I'll tell 'em it was you."  
JM: "Nah he's right, they got smoke detectors everywhere, they fine you and shit."  
LG: "Fuck them!"  
EC: "We don't need it."  
Gatland sees Cobb's look - one of reprimand.  
LG: "Yeah alright. Whatever. I'll have a drink instead."  
JM: "Attaboy."

Later. Bottle almost empty. Gatland's drunk. He struggles to his feet.

LG: "I gotta go potty."  
He stumbles, half falls - Jerry's there, holding him up, his hand slipping under Gatland's jacket...  
Cobb looks at Jerry...  
Gatland looks at Jerry...  
LG: "Trying to feel me up?"  
JM: "Yeah I couldn't help myself, you're beautiful."  
LG: "Alright loverboy, I'll slip into a neg... slip into a ne... negligee."  
JM: "Slip into a nig?"  
LG: "Shut up."  
JM: "What's that? What you gonna slip into?"  
LG: "Shut up already! I gotta bathroom."  
He stumbles out of the compartment. Jerry and Cobb share a loaded look.  
JM: "Don't kill me yet."  
EC: "You've got five hours."  
JM: "He'll sleep soon."

BANGING! on a door.

JM: "Gatland! Come on, open up!"  
It's the bathroom door.  
JM: "Come on!"  
LG: "Fuck off."  
JM: "You been in there three hours now, you got a nice clean bunk ten feet away."  
Beat. Muffled puking.  
LG: "Fuck off."

Birds soaring through the pre-dawn skies... Jerry watching out the window... Cobb lies on a bunk, awake.

Gatland stumbles in.

LG: "Jesus Christ I think that crab they fed us was off."

EC: "I feel fine."

LG: "You barely touched it. Christ I need a new shirt. You wanna get out, let me freshen up, huh?"

Reluctantly Jerry and Cobb leave the room.

The train approaches the outskirts of Miami.

Cobb and Jerry sitting in the dining car, tense. Jerry drinks.

Gatland appears in new clothes.

JM: "There we go, good as new."

LG: "Feel like someone's making balloon animals out of my guts."

Cobb's slyly eyeing Jerry - he wants him to make his move.

LG: "How long you in Miami?"

JM: "I don't know yet. Maybe a while."

LG: "We're only there two nights, but night number two's gonna be a doozy, you should come celebrate with us, we'll paint the town fuckin black and blue, huh?"

JM: "What you celebrating?"

LG: "Ah nothing, just finishing our business, right? Come on, lemme buy you one last."

He takes him up to the bar, buys two shots.

LG: "There's this thing my pop used to say when he was knocking one back with a guy he'd just met, it's old fashioned as shit but... well met."

JM: "Well met."

They throw back the drinks.

Gatland grips Jerry in a brief man hug.

Miami. Station. Cobb and Gatland say goodbye to Jerry.

As Gatland walks off Cobb hangs back, looks at Jerry, concerned.

Jerry opens his jacket.

The package sticks out from this inside pocket.

Cobb nods. Follows Gatland.

Maeve's apartment, night. Jerry sits on the bed in vest and shorts, throwing darts.

There's no dartboard - he's throwing them at the wall. They stick and gouge holes in the plaster.

MM: "Don't fuckin do that, I'll lose my deposit."

JM: "They're your darts, ain't my fault there's no board."

MM: "They were here when I moved in. And you don't gotta throw 'em."

JM: "They're right here, why wouldn't I throw 'em?"

MM: "Because they make holes."

He throws one. It gouges out a particularly big chunk of plaster.

JM: "I like holes."

MM: "You fuckin asshole. Look at that hole. You know you keep throwing and throwing and sooner or later there's nothing but holes. Just fuckin stop it."

He does. Turns to scratching the floorboards with the sharp end of a dart.

MM: "You're a particular kind of character. I've noticed it. Wanna know what it is?"

JM: "Why of course."

MM: "You're a self-destructive introvert."a

JM: "Yeah that sounds like me."

MM: "It means you're concerned with ideas and feelings, and not with what's really

going on around you, in the outside world, and it means that in your introverted state you consistently do things that are bad for you without realising you have the power to act differently.”

He scratches at the floor.

MM: “You can be different. You can be good if you want to be, you can be a good man.”

JM: “Yeah, sure. Sure I can.

MM: “All you gotta do is do it.”

JM: “I know.”

Motel, Miami, night. Jerry sits on the bed here too, the lights off, waiting.

We hear noises outside, see the sweep of headlights. We hear a car stop, hear a door open and close.

Hear footsteps, voices. A conversation.

Jerry listens, sitting in the shadows.

The conversation finishes, more footsteps.

KNOCK KNOCK.

Jerry opens the door.

EC: “Building manager, wanting me to check in, I told him I was visiting a relative. He could identify me.”

Jerry goes to the window, peers out.

JM: “That a problem?”

EC: “I hope not. Where’s the package?”

JM: “Still in my jacket. He gone, the manager?”

EC: “I think so.”

JM: “No he’s still there. Talking to some woman.”

EC: “I have to congratulate you Jerry, you did an excellent job. To show my appreciation I’ve decided to bump your share up to twenty percent.”

JM: “Really? That’s generous.”

Cobb nods curtly. Jerry’s still looking out the window.

JM: “You got the buyer information?”

Cobb taps his top pocket.

EC: “Everything’s here. They called me a half hour ago and will call again to arrange the meet. We’re almost through. Isn’t he gone yet?”

Jerry watches the manager leave.

JM: “Yeah. He is.”

Jerry turns, pulls out a pistol front loaded with a homemade silencer, and shoots Cobb in the head.

Maeve’s apartment, night.

MM: “You can be good. Anyone can be good.”

JM: “Sure I can.”

MM: “It’s easy.”

JM: “Sure I can.”

He stands over the dead body, blood rapidly flooding the carpet, spray over the wall and bed. He reaches inside his jacket pocket, finds the buyer information, takes it, along with Cobb’s phone, and his wallet which is full of money.

Maeve’s apartment, night.



JM: "I gotta go, I got a train to catch."

MM: "See you tomorrow?"

Beat.

JM: "Yeah sure."

Miami hotel, beachside bar. Jerry's drunk on mai-tais, and still drinking, the place almost empty. A cheesy 80s dancefloor track is pumping out at full volume. Jerry's swaying his head, feeling the music, as the sea wind blows palm leaves and the waves break.

JM: "This is a fuckin great song."

A Cuban waiter is cleaning glasses, bored.

"Huh?"

JM: "The song. It's... it's uh..."

"Harold Melvin."

JM: "Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes! Yeah."

He sings along:

*"But it's because I never knew how long your love would be true, sometimes I feel I'm 'bout to lose my mind, girl it's because of you, if you only give me a little more time I'll make it up to you, don't give me up! Don't do it babe, I promise to be better—"*

Over this we see...

...the birds arcing through the lush green fields...

...two bodies in unclean underclothes huddled together in the half-light...

...the stars in the city sky...

Earlier, sunset on the beach. Jerry sits at a table, one of those restaurants on the sand. Three imposing foreign men approach across the sand.

Two sit at a table across from Jerry, the third sits at Jerry's table.

He nods at Jerry, neither says a word yet.

A young waitress approaches.

"Can I get you anything?"

The man shakes his head.

"You want another beer?"

JM: "Thanks sweetheart."

She leaves. The man is eyeing Jerry carefully.

"Where would you like to go?"

"I got a room."

The man looks surprised.

"Your own room?"

"Sure."

His beer arrives.

"I'd clink but you ain't got nothing."

He drinks.

"Alright?"

They stand. The other two men wait a moment. Then follow. We notice one has a sports bag with him.

Jerry shows them to his room, they file in one by one.

A few moments go by.

The door opens again, the men file out, without the sports bag, the man who sat with Jerry positioning something in his jacket pocket.

Beach bar. Jerry still singing along to that song. He notices some seagulls nesting on a nearby

roof.

JM: "You know much about birds?"

"No."

JM: "Me either."

"Those dudes been lookin at choo."

Jerry looks over his shoulder, sees two rough looking tough types sitting at a table eyeing him. They keep eyeing him undeterred as he looks at them.

Maeve's apartment, the two of them lying on top of the bed.

MM: "You can. It's easy."

JM: "Stop saying it now."

Beach bar. Jerry stands up, unsteady on drunk feet.

*"Don't give me up! Don't do it babe, I promise to be better..."*

He walks toward the sand, nodding hello to the two guys brazenly as he passes them.

They stand up, follow.

He totters to the waves, steps into them, lies down.

The waters lap his head, as he stares up at the stars.

We hear the splashing of more feet entering the water.

Shadows form over Jerry's enraptured/drunken face. He's laughing - he can't help himself.

"Okay, okay, I get it, okay. Wait wait wait, wait. Just... she was wrong. Ha! Ha. She was wrong, okay? Okay."

We hear a gun being cocked.

# Appendix II—A Reverie Outline 2

## A REVERIE

### ACT 1.1

*Images in slow motion: a boy staring straight into camera as if he's seen something terrible... a man, GUY (late 40s), looking back, caught in some act... the darkness of an outflow pipe, some dark object held inside it by beach pebbles... we're going to see these images again...*

An island in Thailand as monsoon rain begins. Guy, a heavy drinking loner, has been moving island to island for several months. He hears people are looking for him. He takes a ferry to an even smaller, more isolated island, where he holds up in a small dark beach hut.

Flashback to Brighton. Guy's brought in on a robbery job, knocking over a Ladbroke's, but he clashes with the idiot running it and walks off the job. He drinks himself stupid, getting chucked out of pubs, getting into arguments. He's a highly expert and principled criminal, but a self-destructive loner on a downward spiral.

### ACT 1.2

Guy's also a musician: a raw, blues-rooted guitarist and Cash-esque singer, a wasted talent. He plays open mic nights, impresses musos, gets thrown out for being drunk.

At an all-night diner he meets MAEVE (early 40s), a tired waitress. She throws him out for drinking, but when a mugger holds up the diner at knifepoint Guy intervenes. Maeve goes back to his place, says she doesn't want to start anything, just wants to stay for one night. They sleep together, wake together.

### ACT 2.1

*Flash forward: Guy and two other men run through empty morning streets, full of focused intent. They hop a fence, not saying a word to each other. As they approach the rear of a building, they pull balaclavas over their faces...*

Guy and Maeve begin to bond. Maeve tells Guy her dad and brother went to prison, she doesn't want a life like that. Guy says he doesn't either, says he wants to change. She watches him play an open mic night at a trendy bar, where he impresses the trendy crowd.

His friend, MITCH, visits from London, tells him the job he walked off was set-up by Martyn Waghorn, someone you don't fuck with. Mitch says the idiot running the job was Waghorn's brother-in-law. Tells Guy that Waghorn is going to come down to Brighton sometime and give him a job to do to make up for it, and he's not going to be able to say no. Guy doesn't want to do it.

He works roofing jobs, decent hard graft, he jams with his colleague in their break. Plays more acoustic nights, and on a chance meeting with a local respected musician who saw one of his open mic shows he's asked to audition as second guitarist in his band. The band don't think he'll be any good, but he nails the audition, playing hard and angry and true.

## ACT 2.2

*Flash forward to Guy in a packed gig venue, loud music playing, coloured lights sweeping. Guy's trying to push through the people, toward a young man who's staring at him, saying something. We can't hear him over the noise of the crowd... a quick flash of that young boy's face, the one we saw in the opening, staring into camera, having seen something bad... Guy's face, caught in some act, staring back...*

He starts rehearsing and gigging with this band. Maeve's impressed, but as he enters the underground music scene, Guy starts drinking more, doing coke, enjoying attention from women, and he grows distant from Maeve. One of the guys from the Ladbroke job sees him in a pub, accosts him whilst he's with Maeve, Guy beats him up and Maeve flees. Maeve finds him asleep on her doorstep in the dawn, brings him in. She tells him it's not enough to want to change, you've got to do it too. Wanting and not doing is for cowards. Says maybe they should spend some time apart. Drunk in a pub, alone, he sees the barman leave the till unattended, and nicks a stash of notes.

Guy and Maeve's flame is tentatively rekindled. The band goes from strength to strength, but in the middle of a rehearsal the police arrive to bring Guy in for questioning regarding the pub robbery. Police also show up at Maeve's diner, tell her what Guy's accused of. She reluctantly gives him an alibi. After he's released she goes to see him, and finds women's underwear that isn't hers in his bed. She ends it. Guy loses his temper, scares her.

A big important gig for the band, and Guy's drunk. He's playing wildly, arguing with the band, smashing his guitar around. As they finish people ply him with drinks. We see him pushing through the crowd, lights strobing over him, and realise it's the gig we've seen flashes of before. The young man looking at Guy through the crowd is the barman from the pub he knocked over. Guy pushes through to the bar, everything slow and throbbing and hallucinatory, sees a boy standing on the bar pouring shots for people - the boy we saw in the opening. Pouring shots in people's mouths, people laughing weirdly. We don't know if it's real or not. Guy finds himself heaving in the toilets, the boy patting his back. Guy asks if he's going to be okay, the boy shushes him and rubs his back.

## MIDPOINT

Thailand. A prostitute arrives on a moped. Guy has cold, sad sex with her, pays her. Speaks with her in broken Thai. He asks how long she's been doing this, she says since she was 12. Guy apologises, gives her more money, watches her as she goes back to her moped and leaves. He stares out at the evening sea, cicadas thrumming and waves lapping, alone.

## ACT 2.3

Guy's kicked out of the band, gets into an argument on his roofing job and gets told to leave, goes home and smashes his guitar and throws it in a skip. The next day, Waghorn and Mitch arrive with a job for him. Waghorn knows of a pub whose manager is away on holiday, and several weeks takings are sitting in the safe. Tomorrow is the biggest weekend in the year, Pride, and the pub stands to take £30k alone over the weekend. He wants to hold up the pub the morning after Pride and steal the takings. Guy can't say no.

Guy and Mitch go out drinking with Waghorn during Pride. Waghorn is a livewire, likely to fly off the handle at any second. He takes them to Maeve's diner - Guy refuses to go in until Wags forces him. Wags messes with Maeve, gropes her, insults her, until Maeve slaps him and he goes for her. Guy stops him from hurting her, gets him out, Wags calling her ugly and filthy,

saying no wonder Guy chucked her, he's going to rape her and kill her. Guy pushes him away, takes him and Mitch back to his place. He watches Wags as he sleeps.

#### ACT 2.4

They go to the pub job, but things go wrong: Wags brings a gun, and a load of partying bar stuff have crashed over, and the only one with a safe key stayed somewhere else that night. Guy has to control Wags as he terrorises the bar staff. Eventually they get the safe key, but not before Wags beats one of the young lads to a bloody pulp, Guy unable to stop him. They get the money, flee. The plan is for Guy and Mitch to take the car up to London and Wags to take the train with the money, but Guy changes the plan at the last second, says they need to stash the gun, takes Waghorn down under the pier, to an outflow pipe, tells Waghorn to stuff the gun inside it. As he's doing it, Guy throttles him from behind. It takes a lot of force and a long time to throttle a person, and we see it all, until a young boy stumbles upon them. The boy freezes, looks at them: it's the boy we saw in the opening images. Guy looks back, caught. The boy runs, he has to chase him. He chases and chases through the morning streets, but isn't fast enough - the boy gets away. He goes back to Wags but bystanders have already found the body, called the police. Guy, however, has the money. He flees.

#### ACT 3.1

Flashback to Maeve and Guy together in the early hours, their first night together. Guy is awake watching the dawn come in, an arm around Maeve. Maeve wakes, they talk, quietly, tenderly. This is the first moment Maeve sees Guy's soul, the moment that makes her stick around with him.

She's opening up the diner in the morning. She finds an envelope, opens it, finds it's stuffed with money. She sits down, cries. Cam stays with her as the tears come and come.

#### ACT 3.2

Thailand. Guy is alone on the beach as the sun goes down, a shadowed figure totally isolated. He walks back to his hut, sees a moped up the road with the prostitute sitting on it - as he sees her she speeds away. He walks into his hut to find Mitch sitting in a corner. Mitch nods 'yes' to someone behind Guy, and he turns in time to see a man put a gun to his head and pull the trigger.

We watch from a distance, taking in the shadowed beachside jungle, the thrum of the cicadas and the rush of the waves, as Mitch pays the man and they flee on mopeds. Guy's dead feet are visible in the open door. A giant gecko crawls between the roof slats. A monsoon rain begins.