Cinema of the Mind

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“If only we could pull out our brains and use only our eyes.”

Pablo Picasso

1 Fiction technique and film technique have a great deal in common. We’re not talking here tonight about how to translate a book to the screen or how a film could be transformed into a novel, but about deep and essential common ground.

2 The great D. W. Griffith (I say great in the sense of movie-maker; he was a loathsome human being)—who did those massive silent screen epics in the teens of the last century, Intolerance and Birth of the Nation—was rightly credited with inventing modern film technique. Griffith himself credited one man with teaching him everything he knew about film, and that was Charles Dickens. Of course, Dickens died several decades before film was invented, but what Griffith learned from him about this new art form of the twentieth century goes to the heart of the experience of literature as we read.

3 Pause for a moment and consider what goes on within you when you read a wonderful work of fiction. The experience is, in fact, a kind of cinema of the inner consciousness. When you read a work of literature, the characters and the setting are evoked as images, as a kind of dream in your consciousness, are they not? The primary senses—sight and sound—prevail, just as in the cinema, but in addition to seeing and hearing, you experience taste and smell, you can feel things on your skin as the narrative moves through your consciousness. This is an omni-sensual cinema. Consequently, it makes sense that the techniques of literature are those that we understand as filmic.

4 All of the techniques that filmmakers employ, and which you understand intuitively as filmgoers, have direct analogies in fiction. And because fiction writers are the writer-directors of the cinema of the inner consciousness, you will need to develop the techniques of film as well. I want to deal with some of those techniques tonight, because I think they can help you overcome some of the problems I’ve been describing in the past few weeks: the impulse for abstraction and analysis, for summary and generalization, problems of rhythm and transition—how to get from one scene to another, or one image
to another or one sentence to another—how to put all the parts together, where to place your own personal focus when you’re in your own creative trance.

5 I inveigh against abstraction in these works called novels and stories. Consider how Jack Nicholson as a crotchety old bachelor in a movie looks at Helen Hunt. We see his face on the screen; he lifts an eyebrow; his lip curls. If the screen suddenly went blank and the word “wryly” came up, or “sarcasm,” or “contempt,” how would you react? You can imagine: with great discomfort. For readers who know how to read, abstraction, generalization, analysis, and interpretation have the same deleterious effect.

6 Let’s turn to a few basic film concepts, most of which will be familiar to you, and then let’s look at some literature together and see how it is that writers have always been filmmakers.

7 *The shot* is the basic building block of film. Strictly speaking, the shot is a single segment of film from when the camera begins running to when it stops. But in fact that’s not how it works. From your point of view as spectator, it is rather a unit of uninterrupted flow of imagery. From the moment that image begins, to whenever that image is interrupted, by whatever—that is the shot. That is the basis of every film.

8 Then there are a number of transitional devices for getting from one shot to another. By far the most common, used for the vast majority of transitions, is *the cut*. You see an image on the screen, and snap! it’s not there; another image is there in its place. It’s called a cut because originally when film was edited—and this has only changed in the last few years—the film stock was literally cut and then spliced together with the image that followed.

9 And, of course, shots are connected into scenes and scenes are developed into segments. *Scenes* are unified actions occurring in a single time and place—maybe a single shot, more likely a group of shots. *A sequence* is a group of scenes comprising a dramatic segment of a film.

10 These concepts can be seen as descriptive of the inevitable flow not only of the film but also of the narrative voice as picture-maker. These pictures have a life in time. They begin, they develop and they end, in equivalents of the filmic concepts. As in film, it is the manipulation of these “shots” accumulating into “scenes” and “sequences” that creates meaning and produces the rhythm of the voice of the narrator.

11 The narrative voice in fiction is always adjusting our view of the physical world it creates, which is equivalent to another group of film techniques on a continuum from extreme *long shot* to extreme *close up*, and the many stages in between. The long shot, the *medium shot*, the close up, the extreme close up—you can slice that sausage as fine as you wish. The narrative voice always places our reader’s consciousness at a certain distance from the images it’s creating. It can place us at a far distance or bring us into a position of intimate proximity by its choice of detail, by what it lets through the camera lens.

12 Not only do fiction and film adjust us in terms of our physical relationship to the image, they are also constantly adjusting our sense of time. Fiction and film both often speed time up or slow it down, operating in *slow motion* and *fast motion*. You’re familiar with the moment when the lovers are finally reunited, and they run to each other in slow motion across the plaza or the meadow. In the late sixties or early seventies Sam Peckinpah invented slow motion violence—at the end of the Western *The Wild Bunch*, for example, when a gang of criminals all get blown away in excruciating slow motion. That technique has by now become a filmic cliché: every bullet’s impact is in lugubrious slow motion.
Fast motion in film, however, is almost always comic in effect. Some filmmakers have tried to overcome the comic uses of fast motion, but without much success. A wonderful and deadly serious early silent film, Nosferatu, has a sequence in fast motion, when Nosferatu's coffin arrives from abroad and is taken off the ship and carried into the hearse in fast motion—and it looks comic. I can't think of an example in modern filmmaking where fast motion is used except for comic effect. In fiction, though, fast motion can be used with infinite variety of emotional nuance.

Another technique shared by fiction and film is **cross-cutting**, where the fiction writer or the filmmaker cuts back and forth between two separate parallel actions. These actions are not happening at the same place or even the same time, but by cutting back and forth you create a meaning or resonance between them.

The last film technique I want to lay on the table for you is one of the most crucial. It's called **montage**. Montage is a concept developed by Sergei Eisenstein, a great Russian early film director. Simply put, montage creates meaning by placing two things next to each other, juxtaposing elements. In a work of art everything is laden with affect, and whenever you put two of *anything* next to each other, a third thing emerges; that's what montage is about. If you see an image on the screen of a grassy slope and a freshly dug and refilled grave, and we cut to a woman in black walking slowly down a gravel path beneath some trees, the montage leads you instantly to understand that this woman has left a loved one in the grave she has just visited. In film the juxtaposed elements are most often visual, but in fiction the flexibility is almost infinite.

Let's look at some examples now. I'm going to start with a piece from a short story by Hemingway, “Cat in the Rain.” I want you to just listen to the flow here of Hemingway’s narrative voice, and then we’ll come back to it and examine it in cinematic terms:

The American wife stood at the window looking out. Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables. The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on.

“I'm going down and get that kitty,” the American wife said.

“I'll do it,” her husband offered from the bed.

“No, I'll get it. The poor kitty out trying to keep dry under a table."

The husband went on reading, lying propped up with the two pillows at the foot of the bed.

“Don't get wet,” he said.

“The American wife stood at the window looking out.” Hemingway here evokes the full figure of the wife standing at the window. In interior terms, it's a kind of medium long shot. We see her fully across the room.

“Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables.” What has happened here? We have now cut to what she is seeing. You understand this same technique when you’re watching a movie: In Out of Africa, you see Robert Redford's face on the screen. He looks. Cut. We now see a lion bounding toward the camera. We understand that this is what he is seeing because of that montage: Robert Redford's face, a lion coming this way; and the third thing emerges. The most deprived, illiterate youngster understands this.

Hemingway has just used the same technique. “The American wife stood at the window looking out,” and, “Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables.” We see that cat, again in a kind of medium long shot, the table and the rain and the cat underneath. How many inexperienced writers, having written
“The American wife stood at the window looking out,” and now wanting us to understand what she’s seeing, are going to put her back into the next sentence? “The American wife stood at the window looking out. She watched a cat crouching under one of the dripping green tables.” Right? You now have a slack, awkward run of prose. It is as if, in the film, we saw Robert Redford’s face on the screen. Cut. Now we see the lion bounding this way, but in the foreground is the back of Robert Redford’s head. Can you imagine the awkwardness of that shot? Yet we all write sentences with that kind of built-in awkwardness, when we don’t need “her” in the sentence; montage takes care of it much more elegantly and powerfully.

Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables. The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she could not be dripped on. What just happened? We zoom in for a close-up on the cat.

“I’m going down to get that kitty,’ the American wife said.” How many times in film have you seen an image, and then a line of dialogue, somebody’s voice coming in over that image, and then an image of the speaker? Images linger and other images come in on top. This is all happening very fast, but I promise you it’s happening as you read, and it’s exactly what Hemingway does here. The dialogue tag doesn’t come until the end; first it’s a voice, then we know who speaks. There’s an after-image of the cat until Hemingway puts in the character.

“I’ll do it,’ her husband offered from the bed.” Notice that we don’t have any equivalent to “The American wife stood at the window.” We know he’s on the bed but don’t know what his physical position is; we do not see him fully, and so for the moment it’s a close up of him as he speaks.

“No, I’ll get it. Poor kitty, out trying to keep dry under a table.” No dialogue tag this time. So we stay with him as her voice floats through. We know it’s her because of the conventions of paragraphing in dialogue. But our attention is not brought back to her. We stay with him, and we’re still close on him. And then, the husband “went on reading, lying propped up with the two pillows at the foot of the bed.” The camera pulls back slowly, revealing him as finally full figure, reading and lying propped up at the foot of the bed. “Don’t get wet,’ he said.”

When I read that, a number of you smiled. Why? Because he has not moved a muscle. You do not have to say, ‘I’ll do it,’ her husband offered insincerely from the bed. You need not abstract that, because all of the affect in the scene is embedded in the sensual way Hemingway directs the scene. The revelation comes through montage. The husband says ‘I’ll do it,” we see him lying there doing nothing, and next comes, “Don’t get wet.” It’s raining out; of course she’s going to get wet.

So much is said about the relationship in so few words!—because Hemingway was a brilliant filmmaker.

Fast action, slow motion: What I want to show you now is how these venerable film techniques can work for us writers of narrative. This passage is from the Book of Judges, 2,500 years old. The Old Testament—King James version, of course. The passage is self-explanatory except for the character of Sisera—a bad guy who’s bringing his armies to face Israel.

Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent.

He asked water, and she gave him milk; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish.

She put her hand to the nail, and her right hand to the workmen’s hammer; and
with the hammer she smote Sisera, she smote off his head, when she had pierced
and stricken through his temples.
At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet, he bowed, he fell: where he
bowed, there he fell down dead.
The mother of Sisera looked out at a window and cried through the lattice, Why is
his chariot so long in coming?

27 Pure cinema: “he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet, he bowed, he fell: where he
bowed, there he fell down dead.” That is slow motion violence à la Sam Peckinpah. He is
falling forever. And then that wonderful cut, that wonderful bit of montage, sans
transitional device: “…he fell down dead. / The mother of Sisera looked out a window.
…” You can see the lattice work, the shadow of it on her face. “Why is his chariot so long
in coming?” He should be finished raping and pillaging by now. Time for dinner.

28 Next I want to read you a little bit of Henry James with some ellipses in it. I want to give
you a cheek-by-jowl example of three speeds in a brief section of “The Siege of London.”
Here is an example of appropriate summary—I’ve used summary as an epithet in these
lectures, but the summary that’s destructive races through what needs to be done in the
moment; it is summary that has no sensual impact on the reader. Sensual, carefully and
judiciously used summary can be effective and, indeed, is how you mostly achieve fast
motion—fast action—in fiction.

29 The “glass” referred to here is an opera glass; that is, a little pair of binoculars.
That solemn piece of upholstery, the curtain of the Comédie Française had fallen
upon the first act of the piece, and our two Americans had taken advantage of the
interval to pass out of the huge hot theatre in company with the other occupants of
the stalls.
She turned and presented her face to the public, a fair well drawn face with smiling
eyes, smiling lips ornamented over the brow with delicate rings of black hair and,
in each ear, with the sparkle of a diamond sufficiently large to be seen across the
Théâtre français. Livermore looked at her, then abruptly he gave an exclamation.
“Give me the glass!”
“Do you know her?” his companion asked as he directed the little instrument.
Livermore made no answer. He only looked in silence. Then he handed back the
glass.
“No, she’s not respectable,” he said, and he dropped into his seat again.
As Waterville remained standing he added, “Please sit down. I think she saw me.”

30 Now this is the great thing about fiction. We can move from fast action to slow motion to
real time seamlessly and with great nuance. The first part of that was fast action—“that
solemn piece of upholstery”—it’s summary but with wonderful sensual impact—that pretentious, heavy thing. “…the curtain of the Comédie Française had fallen upon the first act... and our two Americans had taken advantage of the interval to pass out of the huge hot theatre in company with the other occupants of the stalls.” He never lets go of the image in our minds but we move quickly. Then time stops. We examine her face in very slow motion. “She turned and presented her face to the public,” and there’s this lovely
little bit of close examination of her face: “a fair well drawn face with smiling eyes,
smiling lips ornamented over the brow with delicate rings of black hair and, in each ear,
with the sparkle of a diamond...” Then we shift into real time, the moment to moment
time that is your normal speed as fiction writers. The normal speed, I emphasize:
“Livermore looked at her, then abruptly he gave an exclamation. “Give me the glass!”’ We
watch him sit down. We watch the handing of the glass. We hear the words of their
exchange. It’s all in real time there.
Next I’m going to give an example from the writer who taught D. W. Griffith everything he knew about film. This is the opening of the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Our narrator, Philip Pirrip, is writing in his adulthood, looking back to his childhood as an orphan, and he refers to himself sometimes in the third person, sometimes in the first person. During his childhood he was called Pip. The people mentioned here are his dead siblings and his parents.

This is the opening of *Great Expectations*. Just go to the movies here.

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of the parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the flat dark wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

“Hold your noise,” cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. “Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat!”

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied around his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

“Oh, don’t cut my throat, sir!” I pleaded in terror. “Pray don’t do it, sir!”

“Tell us your name,” said the man. “Quick!”

“Pip, sir.”

“Once more,” said the man, staring at me. “Give it mouth.”

“Pip. Pip, sir.”

“Show us where you live,” said the man. “Pint out the place.”

I pointed to where our village lay, on the flat in-shore, among the alder-trees and pollards, a mile or more from the church.

The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself—for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet—when the church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone trembling while he ate the bread ravenously.

Dickens begins with the shot they call the *establishing shot*. We’re at “a memorable raw afternoon toward evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard...” We get a long shot in the gathering dark of the churchyard. And then, what does Dickens do? He cuts to close-ups and pans one after another along the tombstones—as we can tell from the formal phrasing “late of this parish.”

...that Philip Pirrip, late of the parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried.

These are, in fact, the graves of Pip’s dead father, his dead mother, and dead brother, dead brother, dead brother, dead brother, dead brother, dead brother—one after another.
You see the absolutely essential quality of fiction-as-film when you see what he does then.

We go from that last dead brother to what?

...and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes...

He lifts his camera from the dead brother and looks off to a long shot out over the mounds and gates and dikes to the marshes, beyond the churchyard, and then where?

... and that the low, leaden line beyond was the river...

Then we go to an even longer shot:

...and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea...

He takes us to an extreme shot at the furthest horizon. Then what? He cuts from that distant horizon to a close-up of the orphan child, the narrator of our novel, “the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry was Pip.”

How many writers would do this, with perfect logic?

At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place [...] was the churchyard and that Philip Pirrip [...] and also Georgiana wife of the above and Alexendar, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children [...] were also dead and buried [...] and the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry was Pip.

Perfectly logical. Perfectly thoughtful. Dead father, dead mother, dead brother, dead brother, dead brother, dead brother, dead brother, last remaining child of the family.

Montage, of course. But in such a novel, where you went from that last dead brother to the remaining child, you would be in a totally different world from the one that Dickens is creating. You would be in a world where the focus is on the plight of an orphan, a family in trouble—a sociological problem, a sentimental tale of a struggling child.

Dickens’ world is about something far greater, and Pip does not yearn for a family; he yearns for his destiny. When you move from that last dead child to the marshes and the river and to the far horizon, and the whole sensual world is bleak and empty and mysterious, and there’s a dark wind blowing from that far horizon, and then you cut to the child—that montage creates something utterly different, a world in which the issue is not just, “Gosh, I don’t have parents. I’m a kid struggling,” but “I am a human soul trying to work out the destiny of my existence.”

Let’s go further:

“Hold your noise,” cried a terrible voice as a man started up among the graves at the site of the church porch. “Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat!”

How does Pip respond to this? He says, “Oh, don’t cut my throat, sir!” I pleaded in terror...” Now, I don’t mean to presume to edit Charles Dickens, but Dickens sometimes wrote in haste. Does he really need to say “in terror”? Do you understand what I’m talking about in terms of abstractions? Certainly the world of emotional abundance he’s creating can tolerate these extra taps on the knee, but it is not necessary. Pip’s terror is manifest already, is it not?

But the important thing to understand here is that the man says, “I’ll cut your throat,” and Pip says, “Don’t cut my throat.” How long do you think it took him to come to that response? A nano-second. And how is it written? Pay attention, because there’s something really interesting about these three sentences:

“Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat!”

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat,
and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied around his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped, and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

“Oh, don’t cut my throat...”

Time stops here, doesn’t it? This is extreme slow motion, because all of that comes between “I’m going to cut your throat” and “Oh, don’t...” What is the psychological reality of that? When was the last time you skidded your car on a wet pavement? What happens? You hear every beat of your heart; that telephone pole is floating in your direction, in extreme slow motion, right? It is absolutely organically appropriate for time to slow down drastically in a moment of terror like that. And remember I’m talking about the organic nature of art; every tiny sensual detail has to resonate into everything else. What’s unusual about those three sentences in that paragraph where time has stopped? I bet most of you didn’t even notice that not one of those is a complete sentence. Listen to it again:

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied around his head. [“Tied around his head” is a subordinate clause here.] A man who had been soaked in water, smothered in mud, lain by stones and cut by flints and stung by nettles and torn by briars, who limped and shivered and glared and growled, and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

There’s not a single independent verb in those three sentences. Why? Time has stopped. What are the parts of speech that signify the passage of time? Active verbs. Things happen. But here nothing is happening except perception. It is beautifully appropriate—and you don’t even notice, except afterward, in an analytic way. The organic nature of art, down to syntax.

We’ve dealt so far with very clear examples, I think, of the correspondence of film and fiction techniques, but there are many, many others. I dare say that if you examine the tiniest filmic concept, the most subtle nuanced filmic concept, you can find its equivalence in fiction.

I want to leave you with one more example, a subtle one, but I think an unmistakable one. This concerns the common transitional device called dissolve. The dissolve is a transition from one image to another where the first fades while the second comes into focus superimposed over the first. The two things, then, mix inextricably for a time.

I want to give you an example of dissolve from my own work—a novel hardly ever read by anybody, called Wabash. I need to give you some background first. Deborah and Jeremy Cole live in a fictional steel mill town of Wabash, Illinois. It’s 1932. They’re both struggling with private demons of one sort or another. He’s getting involved in radical politics at the steel mill where he works; she’s trying to reconcile a family of women who rip each other to pieces as a matter of daily course. But Jeremy and Deborah carry a shared grief that has been a barrier to them in their marriage for some time—the death of their little girl Lizzie, who died from pneumonia a couple of years before. They have not made love since Lizzie died. They do not touch. There’s no intimacy between them at all. In this scene they go off for a picnic on an ancient Indian burial mound, a gesture toward reconciliation, trying to find moments when they can reconnect. But as the scene progresses, they lapse into separate memories about their daughter, memories that are lovely but painful.
The scene partly represents a technical problem—not, I need hardly stress anymore, that I was conscious of finding a technical solution to an analytically perceived problem. This is analysis after the fact. But the problem was that I wrote the book in the third person limited omniscient, with two point of view characters, Deborah and Jeremy. In the sections that begin in Jeremy’s sensibility, the narrator has no access to Deborah. And in the sections that begin with Deborah, the narrator has no access to Jeremy. This is so for the first eighty some pages of the book. But in this scene of the picnic, just as they aspire to come together—so does the narrator get into both sensibilities at the same time. So the narrator moves between these two isolated reveries, hoping to bring them together somehow.

A couple of things you need to know: the memory that Deborah has is of seeing Lizzie outside the house one day crouching near the grass, swaying in front of a poisonous copperhead snake, singing a variation of the old nursery rhyme: “Hush little snaky, don’t you cry;” and the snake is swaying and coiling as well. Lizzie has literally charmed the snake.

Jeremy’s memory involves Lizzie and his work at the steel mill. In this memory he has Lizzie on his shoulders. It’s night time. He’s stopped near the slag pile and has an unobstructed view of the blast furnace. He’s watching its beauty: the flames of the ovens and the billows of smoke, the constellation of lights on the equipment, and a single prominent smokestack that is flaring off a flame from the excess gasses.

Here is the passage using the technique of the dissolve:

Deborah waited motionless as Lizzie sang to the snake and finally Deborah whispered come away now, and her daughter rose slowly and left the copperhead where it lay charmed on the grass and when Lizzie was near Deborah grasped her hand and Jeremy reached up to grasp his daughter’s hand and she said, “What’s that jelly fire?” and he looked and he knew at once what she meant, the flame coming from the tall thin stack. “It’s a bleeder valve,” he said, and he felt her chin touch the top of his head. He could imagine her resting her head on his so that she could study this flame, and when Lizzie looked up at her mother she smiled a smile that seemed full of some special knowledge, and Lizzie’s thoughtful study of the flame and her smile at the charming of the snake brought both Jeremy and Deborah the same tremor of grief. They each felt it in the other’s body and to feel the other’s grief was too much to add to their own and they pulled gently apart. Jeremy rose and walked to the western edge of the mound and he looked off at the mill, and Deborah lay flat and closed her eyes against the sky and she thought she heard a gliding nearby in the grass but she did not care and did not move.

Did you hear the dissolve? It’s set up with Lizzie’s question, “What’s that jelly fire?” and Jeremy knows at once what she means. Focus on “He could imagine her resting her head on his head so that she could study this beautiful flame, and when Lizzie looked up at her mother...” Now we are in his reverie and for a moment there the two images are superimposed because the “looking up” we first take to mean Lizzie looking up from her father’s head toward that bleeder valve; but then we realize it’s with her mother. “And when Lizzie looked up.” It’s even tapped a little bit, because it is linked to the same gesture that Jeremy made to look in the same direction. So we have a clear sense of looking up at the flame and then all of a sudden she’s also looking at her mother. Then we adjust to seeing her looking up only at her mother. And so one dissolves into the other. After this the narrative voice goes back for a long while into the two separate sensibilities. So the flowing together in the narrative voice has a kind of ironic sadness to
it, which resonates in the detail, because it gives a sense of what could happen between these two people but, in fact, it does not.

So I urge you as fiction writers to recognize that the nature of the process you’re working with is filmic. A lot of the problems that I’ve been articulating for you in the last few weeks can yield to you if you give yourself over to elements that are visual, sensual, transitional. Otherwise, you can get bogged down in the stodgy, unyielding doughiness of abstraction. You try to put the transitions in, and explain these things, and the narrative power is lost.

Before I leave you with all this talk of film I want to borrow one more notion from another art form, music, which you will recognize as relevant to film and is also important to fiction. When you’re listening to a song, a certain kind of expectation develops—harmonically, or in its key or in its rhythm or in its color—and when that expectation is set up, the moment that gives you chill bumps is the moment when it cuts against the grain. It suddenly spins the harmonic, shifts the key, varies the rhythm, sets the orchestration askew. Musicians call it the rub. Two things rub against each other, and that’s what gives it life, the unexpected thing that nevertheless feels just right. And that is what happens too in the creation of character. When you are inside your characters’ yearnings, whenever they’re feeling one way, going in one direction, showing certain attitudes, emotions—open your unconscious to the opposite; cut against the grain. Rub the thing that seems predictable.

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