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*There is no such thing as an
antihero. There are only characters
who act heroically and those who do not.*

ACCIDENTS

IMAGINE YOU'RE WATCHING an early cut of *Annie Hall*, the story of two lovers who have quarreled and parted. Imagine that, as the film nears its conclusion, Annie is on one side of the street and Alvy is on the other. They wave to one another, and Annie crosses the street to talk to Alvy. When she's halfway across, a passing truck strikes her dead.

Would such a version of *Annie Hall* have helped it receive its Academy Award? Would it have helped it get on almost every list of the great American films? Or would audiences have demanded their money back?

Woody Allen could have appeared in every theater in the United States where the film played to explain that ending *Annie Hall* with an accident was a realistic conclusion to the story because, after all, 55,000 Americans die in traffic accidents every year and a good proportion of them were undoubtedly lovers. But, as the audience hanged him from the nearest rafter, they would have responded, "Yeah, but I didn't pay good money for *that!*"

In the film as it was actually made, Annie successfully crosses the street, has a conversation with Alvy that we don't hear, and then leaves him forever while he prattles on about needing some eggs. That's an acceptable ending because most of the world's memorable love stories end with the separation of the lovers.

If the story had ended with an accident, we would have felt cheated, like buying a jigsaw puzzle and discovering one of the key pieces was missing just as we thought we were completing it.

The important events in drama are not accidents of nature, disease, or automobiles — things that occur because of some outside force that we call Fate. Drama is about individual human decisions and actions, and the consequences of both. Characters must be *responsible* for what happens to them.

Nothing important in modern drama is accidental.

(See also: INTENTIONALITY; DEUS EX MACHINA; DESTINY)

ACTING

THE FRENCH PERFORMER Sarah Bernhardt was called “the greatest actress in the world” in the early years of the twentieth century when films were becoming a mass art form. Enterprising producers sought to capitalize on her worldwide fame and they convinced her to repeat some of her greatest roles in film versions of *Hamlet*, *Tosca*, *Camille*, and *Queen Elizabeth*. Adolph Zukor bought the American rights to these films and formed a company whose announced goal was to present “famous plays with famous players.”

While Zukor survived into his nineties, heading the company that became Paramount Pictures Corporation, most of the early films of Bernhardt and other famous actors and actresses of the day did not. That’s because one of the first lessons early filmmakers had to learn was that great theater acting is not great film acting.

When the Bolshevik Revolution gave Lenin dictatorial power over the newly formed Soviet Union, his minister of education declared that film was the most important of all the arts. The world’s first school devoted to teaching film was established in Moscow to further this uniquely powerful new medium, and one of its first professors was the noted director, Lev Kuleshov, who conducted an experiment that is cited to this day in film classes.

There are different versions of the details, but the gist of the story is this: Kuleshov used footage of Ivan Mozhukhin, a popular stage actor of the day. Unlike Sarah Bernhardt, who was allowed to do on film what she did on stage, Mozhukhin

did the thing that actors find hardest: express *no* emotion. Kuleshov repeated the same shot of Mozhukhin and juxtaposed to it bits of stock footage, which some versions of the story say consisted of a steaming bowl of soup, a young child coming toward the camera, and an old woman in a coffin. He cut together Empty Ivan and the bowl of soup, Empty Ivan and the young child, Empty Ivan and the old woman in the coffin.

Audiences marveled at Mozhukhin's superb acting ability — how he expressed extreme hunger as he approached his bowl of soup, tender fatherly emotions as *his* child came toward him and overpowering grief at the death of *his* mother.

Thus was revealed the secret of great film acting: it is not action, but *reaction* that counts. The emotional response of the audience comes not just from what is projected *from* the screen but also from what the audience projects *onto* it.

The implications of the Kuleshov experiments lie at the foundation of popular American film to this day. We are likely to see this most clearly when the Academy Awards for Best Actor are given. The archetype of the American male screen hero is The Strong Silent Type. Year after year, when they show clips from films that garnered nominations for qualified actors, what dominates are reaction shots. If we study publicity stills of popular male actors over the years and ask, “What are they expressing?,” the answer is usually: *nothing*.

The audience projects *onto* the image on the screen the relationship between thought and

emotion. It is therefore an active collaborator in the process of constructing the story.

The trick, of course, is to get the audience to project onto the screen what you *intend* them to. That is as much the writer's job as it is the actor's — if we can't imagine in our heads how a character might look when we read the script, it is probably not our imagination that is at fault, but rather the writer's.

WHEN THE CAMERA starts rolling, American directors do not yell, “Dialogue!” — they yell, “Action!”

In real life, our “character” is often considered to be some inherent quality within us. In film, however, character is the result of what someone *does*.

Action is often disdained by intellectuals and critics, perhaps because Aristotle placed “spectacle” at the bottom of his list of the elements of drama, and dismissed it by saying, “The production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.”

In the history of theater, which operates in real time and within very limited space, it has always been difficult to stage expansive and fast-paced action sequences. That staple of action films, the chase, works well when an actor can run, ride a horse, car, airplane or rocket ship across considerable distances. Editing, which has no analogous technique on the stage, can condense and manipulate time to produce thrills, suspense, fear, and the kind of emotional rush found in roller coaster rides. But the necessity in the theater of staging a chase in real time and limited space prevents it from being as effective as it could be in film.

The Birth of a Nation, one of the cornerstones of American feature film history, has become dated in many ways, but the chase scene at the end of the film holds up quite well. Other classic films, such as *Stagecoach*, *The French Connection*, *Bullitt*, *The Terminator*, and *The Fugitive*, are memorable in large part because of their chase scenes.

ACTION

Action scenes revolve around the fulcrum of power. The relationships are simple and clear, and yet they can reverse themselves in the blink of an eye — the pursuer can become the pursued, as so often happens in cartoons.

In the theater, conflict is almost invariably between human beings. In film, however, the conflict can also be between human beings and firestorms, tornadoes, floods, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, meteors, and many other non-human sources of power.

The chase is one of the basic building blocks of drama, but it does not necessarily have to involve physical movement. Detective films involve the pursuit of the killer; in conventional love stories, the boy pursues the girl.

Some filmmakers, producers, and executives act as though there is a dichotomy between action and character, that you can have one or the other but not both. This is why, when stories are referred to as “a character piece,” eyes sometimes glaze over — many people in the industry take this to mean it’s devoid of action and, therefore, dull.

Because character development and action sequences are so often seen as antithetical, many modern action films give us an action sequence, then stop for a little “character development,” then rush to another action scene. There is no reason, however, why characterization cannot proceed through the chase. The long scene in *The French Connection* in which Popeye Doyle chases a killer in an elevated train while he is driving a careening car

below does more to develop his character than any other scene in the film. *The Terminator*, *Alien*, *The Matrix* and many other recent films revolve around one long chase. One reason they work so well with audiences is that, rather than alternating between action and character development, the two proceed simultaneously.

The prejudice against action films that some intellectuals, critics, and writers demonstrate may stem from a prioritization of words over images. How does one *write* an action sequence — “The villain chases the hero across the galaxy for the next twenty minutes”?

Action is generally visual, which explains why action films are the most successful exports of the American film industry — difficulty with the English language does not hamper non-Americans from appreciating such films. The fact that there is less dialogue in action sequences does not, however, mean that the writer has nothing to contribute to action scenes; it just means the writer’s contribution will lie more in scene description than in dialogue. That, too, is an essential art of the screenwriter.

 ACTS

THERE ARE THOSE who claim that a film must have a three-act structure, and they often claim that Aristotle gave this “rule” to us. In fact, there were *no* acts as we define the term today in Greek drama, and Aristotle did not talk about acts at all because the plays he analyzed were all presented in a single continuous performance.

Nor, for that matter, is the five-act structure that many people associate with Shakespeare something he was hung up on. While he did use a five-act structure occasionally, it wasn’t until nearly a hundred years after his death that a publisher imposed a consistent five-act structure on his plays.

In the theater, the audience is aware of acts because the curtain comes down, the house lights come up, and they get a chance to go to the bathroom. In film, the curtains don’t come down, the houselights don’t come up, and anyone who goes to the bathroom has to miss whatever keeps running on the screen.

Thinking in terms of acts is similar to erecting a scaffold to build a building: it may be a useful tool for the craftsmen during the construction phase, but it obscures the view of the work itself, and the people who gaze on the finished project will not know or care what kind of scaffold was used.

If the Greeks and Shakespeare had no need to worry about acts, maybe we have no need to, either. But because so many people in our time *do* worry about acts, entries follow for three possible ways of thinking about them (see: PARADOX).

(See also: ARISTOLATRY; ACTS, FIRST; ACTS, SECOND; ACTS, THIRD)