



How to Create INTRIGUE in Screenplays





How to Create Narratives Driven by Intrigue

There's a perennial script development anecdote in which an exec says to a screenwriter, "Well, I've read Act One and I really need to know more about the protagonist." To which the writer replies "Exactly!".

It's a delicate balancing act: how much to reveal; how much to withhold. And, crucially, *when*. Reveal too much and you've got soap. Reveal too little and you've got the worst kind of arthouse self-absorption. And one size definitely does not fit all when it comes to genre and story type.

So what is 'intrigue'? Intrigue (also known as 'mystery', though intrigue is a better term because mystery is so closely associated with the genre of the same name) is specifically a cerebral engagement, whereas suspense is a visceral one. You could describe emotional engagement as affecting the heart, while intrigue engages the head and the visceral engages the gut (accepting that extreme emotion can feel so visceral as to be felt more in the gut than the heart).

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INTRIGUE AND GENRE

In screenwriting terms, intrigue could also be described as a question which is answered with both cerebral *and* emotional satisfaction (with the addition of visceral satisfaction when the genre is horror or comedy, or any genre mix which includes either one; indeed this is a pertinent moment at which to point-out why both comedy and horror screenplays are so hard to get right, though they are easy to do passably because you simply aim for the jugular/funny bone respectively).

The key exception is hard [sci-fi](#), in which the intended aim may be to answer the question posed by intrigue with a solely cerebral answer (though there are also forms of drama from which all emotion is deliberately excised and the intended response is the cool-headed and analytically-minded cerebral engagement of the clinical psychologist).



Whilst single-genre horror and comedy rely on visceral engagement in terms of their core requirements, the best of each fold the cerebral and the emotional into the visceral, creating engagement at all three levels. The most engaging horror and action films incorporate thriller plot elements; the most

satisfying comedies incorporate the emotional catharsis of a dramatic arc.

Because the cerebral should always be in service of (or subservient to) the visceral in horror and comedy, the thriller is in a unique position to exploit all three types of engagement. Looked at this way, there is a clear reason why an expertly-wrought thriller is often the most satisfying of all genres, having the potential to combine sustained cerebral intrigue with visceral and emotional engagement. Think of [CHINATOWN](#) or [L.A. CONFIDENTIAL](#) – thrillers which hit you on multiple levels.

It's interesting here to think about [SE7EN](#), which though cerebrally engaging, ultimately chooses to maximise both visceral and emotional engagement over intrigue. This is a great example of why it's not really possible to sustain a combination of all three, as over time the three levels start to work against each other. There appears to be an unwritten rule of story that two elements combine well over time, but three do not. Indeed it could be argued that this rule is fundamental to genre – is maybe even what creates the core differentiations between genres in the first place.

First of all, intrigue directly relates to plot. As the exec said, we want to know more. Not because we feel we don't know enough about the protagonist to be able to engage with them, but because every choice the protagonist makes, every action they take, asks the same question: *What will happen next?* In some cases, diffuse dramatic irony is so strong that we know what's going to happen next before we even take our seats in the cinema. The BOND films are an ideal example of this. The intrigue is now almost postmodern: Which gadgets will 007 use? Which previous films will the current film reference? How will

Bond escape from the villain once captured (because we know he will)?



When there is a law of diminishing returns, often the intricacies of the plot will be convoluted in the extreme, specifically because the major plot points are already written in stone. Vesper Lynd's death in [CASINO ROYAL](#), along with Tracy's tragic demise in [ON HER MAJESTY'S SECRET SERVICE](#), are shocking not only because of their emotional weight, but because they are so unexpectedly outside what we expect to happen next. The revelations in [SPECTRE](#), though one can easily appreciate the aim behind them (to create intrigue where such has an increasingly high premium) feel contrived precisely because they are, [the aim clearly being something akin to a 'Greatest Hits' album](#).

In those rare cases where a film is neither franchise instalment, remake, adaptation or 'same again', filmmakers have the opportunity genuinely to have the audience ask in every scene: What will happen next? And before that, the screenwriter has the opportunity to ask this same question of the reader,

hopefully asking it with such frequency that the reader reaches FADE OUT before they realise they've gone past page thirty.

Splice intrigue with philosophical themes and you're in existential clover:

- Why are we *here*? (specifically the place where we find ourselves) easily becomes:
- Why are *we here*? (at all). Turn the following question a few degrees further:
- Who am I? (specifically the self-interrogation of a protagonist's identity) and you quickly arrive at:
- Who am I? (at all).

The sci-fi/thriller splice (e.g. [OBLIVION](#)) along with the psychodrama/thriller splice (e.g. [MEMENTO](#)) deliver both cerebral and visceral suspense, as well as asking the deepest philosophical questions about our identity, our place in the universe and our very existence.

The screenwriter has the opportunity to ask this same question of the reader, hopefully asking it with such frequency that the reader reaches FADE OUT before they realise they've gone past page thirty

Another essential element to consider is the collusion which can occur between any of the points on the triple axis of audience, character (not necessarily the protagonist) and screenwriter.

When the screenwriter knows more than both the audience and a character, you have intrigue. In the pure thriller, the audience only learns what is happening when the protagonist does. As the plot unwinds the screenwriter withholds less and less. Questions are answered till the point is reached at which everyone knows

everything (unless the screenwriter has opted for the ambiguity of unanswered questions). In this case the screenwriter is privileged above character and audience.

When the screenwriter and the protagonist both know more than the audience, the audience is always playing catch-up. Outside of the mystery genre, this can be effective when used in small doses, but if used too much it leads to the audience losing engagement with the characters.



When the screenwriter and the audience know more than the character you have dramatic irony, but less intrigue – the only mystery being: When will the character learn what the audience already know? (which will also generate suspense, if that which the protagonist does not know is placing them or their loved ones in danger). If the protagonist takes too long to get there,

the audience will become increasingly disengaged and ultimately frustrated.

In those very rare cases where the protagonist appears to know more than both the writer and the audience (e.g.

[ADAPTATION](#)), you are probably watching a postmodern comedy or an existential drama. The one thing that film cannot do, which both theatre and now games can, is have a character act outside the parameters defined by the playwright or gamer (though not, of course, those defined by the actor or the programmer).

So how can a screenwriter create intrigue? By asking questions. And by withholding each answer till the last possible, yet still entirely apt, moment.

STORY: WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN NEXT?

What will happen next? is the engine of story. And because action is character, what this really means is: What will this character *do* next? Sadly there's no escape from the maxim that each plot beat should seem both entirely original and utterly inevitable. So the screenwriter's job is not only to create intrigue, but to satisfy the audience with an answer that is always as compellingly surprising as it is stylishly inescapable.

If the question What will happen next? powers a story at the microcosmic level, then What will happen? drives a story at the macrocosmic. Indeed all the key story types can be defined by a single question, as can many genres (i.e. the ones that aren't defined by tropes, setting or tone). Will the protagonist survive? Will the girl get the boy? Will the fish breathe on land? Will the child become an adult? Will the cop catch the killer? We know

immediately to which genre/story type these questions refer, because, with notable exceptions, we already know the answer. And if we already know the answer – genre-defined diffuse dramatic irony – the delight is in how we get there.



So there are two complimentary levels of intrigue to each of these two questions. At the macrocosmic level: Will my expectation be met? and How will it be met?; at the microcosmic level: Will the answer be elegant? and Will it be unexpected?

SETTING: WHERE IS THIS?

Horror, like the detective thriller and crime drama, has a highly-evolved narrative structure, designed specifically to ask the core question at the outset so as to create intrigue and engagement. In horror you might show a previous protagonist being killed by the antagonist in the very first scene. Which immediately asks the question: Will the protagonist survive? In the detective

thriller you might show a killing – or its immediate aftermath – asking the dual questions: Will the cop catch the killer? (intrigue) and Can the cop survive the killer? (suspense). In a crime drama, you might inter-cut both the criminals and the cops at work, begging the questions: Who is better at their job? and, morally (and this is an emotional judgement as much as an intellectual one; forget the law here): Whom do we want to win?

In horror you might show a previous protagonist being killed by the antagonist in the very first scene. Which immediately asks the question: Will the protagonist survive?

A man awakens on the floor of a cube-shaped, white-lit cell (though initially we are tricked into thinking he's leaning against a wall, thus immediately establishing the lack of any sense of which way is up). He stands, looks around him – every direction appears identical – then goes over to a door and opens it. The identical cube on the other side of the door is lit blue, rather than white. The man rejects this cube; lets the door close automatically. He opens the door in the floor. The cube 'below' is lit red. The man rejects this cube also. He tries a third door of the six available options. This cube is lit orange. The man climbs inside and is diced like a hard-boiled egg, revealing this cube to be booby-trapped.

The brilliant [CUBE](#) – a splice of horror, sci-fi and thriller – asks three questions in the very first scene:

- Will the protagonist/s survive (where this man – who has clearly attempted to exercise some discernment over his choice of cube – has not)? (cerebral/visceral engagement with dramatic irony, plus the addition of emotional engagement once we've met the ensemble);

- Where is this? (intrigue from Setting);
- Why is this happening? (intrigue from Theme).

A man regains consciousness in free fall. Tries to open his parachute. No go. He's spinning and tumbling. The ground is fast-approaching. Finally, as he's almost at the tree tops, his chute opens automatically. He's lurched upwards for a moment, then begins a rapid descent. The foliage and branches break his fall, but he still hits the ground hard. The man is in a jungle, though he clearly knows no more than that. And we don't know any more than that either. Another man crashes to the ground, aims his guns at the first man and starts shouting in Spanish. The situation is only diffused when a third man hits the ground. This man didn't survive the drop; his chute didn't open.



In the expertly-plotted [PREDATORS](#) – a splice of horror, sci-fi and action – the same three questions are posed:

- Will the protagonist/s survive (when someone is obviously not overly concerned about taking risks with their lives)? (visceral engagement plus emotional engagement once we care about them);
- Where is this? (intrigue from Setting);
- Why is this happening? (intrigue from Theme).

Notice how the film – because of both its adrenalized action elements and its eventual single protagonist – starts with the hero rather than with the death of someone who landed before him.

The characters talk. They all share the same experience: a bright light, then they awoke in free fall over the jungle. And they are all fighters, soldiers, killers. But none of them has any clue where they are. Or why. Indeed the fact that all of them are killers, bar one, should intrigue, though the script very cleverly distracts the audience from this key difference by making him a doctor. To the soldiers it's entirely logical to have a doctor in their *de facto* unit. Indeed the doctor's usefulness is reinforced shortly thereafter when he identifies a poisonous plant and stops the Russian soldier from touching it; slightly later our hero declares that the doctor "doesn't belong" and we trust his judgement because he's obviously the group's most capable individual (clever misdirection). So everyone dismisses this anomaly. At least they do till they realise they've been poisoned by the anomaly.

They come across an alien craft, before which is a pile of bones and skulls. One of the group correctly identifies these as trophies: the one with the most trophies commands the most respect. There follows a superbly-crafted exchange in which each of the characters suggests what they think may be happening. In doing so, they reveal more than a little about

themselves, but still not enough for us to know exactly who they are. More intrigue. Now we *really* want to know more:

- Who are they?
- Why were they chosen?
- Chosen for what?
- Whose ship is this?
- Where is the ship's trophy-hungry occupant?
- More importantly: How do they leave?

They follow the self-appointed but still begrudging leader to higher ground. The lone woman shows him that wherever they are, there is no north. The man tells her he's noticed that the sun hasn't moved in the sky since he arrived. So is this some kind of post-apocalyptic future Earth? Or some other planet entirely? Sixteen minutes in and we have enough questions to sustain us for the rest of the film. That's screenwriting of the highest quality: visually rich, lean, taut, layered, suspenseful and intriguing.

The seminal [PLANET OF THE APES](#) tacitly asks the questions: Where is this? and Why is this happening?, thereby creating latent/subliminal intrigue. Then, with the film's final *coup de cinema*, it answers both questions (along with the unasked *When* is this?) with maximum impact. Indeed all the best twist endings answer questions that have already been subliminally posed by the story, which is what makes them so satisfying. Subliminal intrigue of this kind can take the form of subtle foreshadowing, dialogue subtext and tone.



SETTING: WHEN IS THIS?

As with Where is this? stories, the When is this? story tends to be limited in film, in this case to the sci-fi and supernatural genres (though [DOCTOR WHO](#), along with other time-travel based TV series has made repeated use of this particular strand of narrative intrigue). This is because in a film narrative, When is this? must be posed almost subliminally at the outset so as not to risk bathos or unintended humour (and again, it's worth noting that the tonality of DOCTOR WHO – and indeed of all the other time-travel based TV series – very deliberately includes comedy in order to leaven audience disbelief at this question).

Why here? Why now? As soon as a plot commences, the audience should subconsciously be asking themselves these two questions because the story should subliminally be requiring them to do so.

In post-apocalyptic or future-set narratives, the question When is this? can be posed as much by setting as by plot, though as with PLANET OF THE APES, the final answer to this question (along with the answer to What happened?) can be a major twist.

THE VILLAGE is a perfect example of a twist ending that answers a single subliminal question (along with a whole shopping list of overt questions) that has been asked with escalating volume as the plot unwinds. The question: What monsters live at our boundaries? is of course a directly pertinent question for the village's inhabitants. We hear the cries of the monsters within three minutes of the film's start. The village idiot applauds these cries as if they were a show – which, of course, they are, proving yet again that the village idiot has wisdom for those who can see it. “Those We Don't Speak Of” – the village's name for its liminal monsters – directly creates intrigue from its two inherent questions: Why don't we speak of them? and Who/what are they?

These questions – along with Why is the colour red banned? and Who is leaving half-skinned animals around the village? – mask a far more pertinent one: What is beyond those flame-lit boundaries?

The village leader's very first line of dialogue is: “We may question ourselves at moments such as these.” Which, of course, will cause those with steadfast belief in his leadership to decide that belief means you do not question, but those whose belief is less steadfast to question themselves with renewed vigour.



When Edward Walker tells the children that 'Those We Don't Speak Of' have not breached their borders for many years and wonders why they would do this, he raises the two perennial questions that every screenwriter must ask when crafting a story: Why here? and Why now? Why does the story happen where/when it does? Why should we be concerned with this particular time-span of the characters' lives? As well as being essential self-interrogation for the screenwriter (the answers to these questions will provide the controlling idea of a screenplay) these questions should also create intrigue for the audience. As soon as a plot commences, the audience should subconsciously be asking themselves these two questions because the story should subliminally be requiring them to do so.

If the answer, in the case of *THE VILLAGE*, to Why here? is: because this is the world their parents made for them. And to Why now?: because the love between Ivy and Lucius can no longer be contained, then the full version of the story's What if? (the question that long proceeds the other two in terms of story

structure) is: What if the members of a support group for those who've lost loved ones to senseless violence decide to turn their backs on the modern world? and the answer is: Two generations later there'd be characters who knew nothing else. Of course, in the case of a story with a major twist at the end, the primary answer to What if? may not be revealed till deep into Act Three. So in a story with a strong mystery element, the complete version of the What if...? that sits behind the narrative creates the core intrigue. Deduce the full question (after which, the answer is easy) and you'll solve the story.

Indeed, reverse engineer these three questions (and their answers) from any film with mystery elements and you are rendering a map for intrigue. The screenwriter must know the answer to every single question that can be asked of their own story, but must find the most appropriate way (depending on genre, theme, tone and character) to ask these same questions of the audience in order to generate engagement.

CHARACTER: WHO IS THE PROTAGONIST/ANTAGONIST?

Just as *THE VILLAGE* answers the subliminal question When is this? as it unravels its twist, so *FALLEN* answers the question Who is this? as it does likewise. *FALLEN* starts with the wonderfully provocative line: "I want to tell you about the time I almost died." As we learn at the film's very end, the 'I' of this statement – the character telling us about how they narrowly avoided death – isn't who we thought it was. Indeed the 'I' is the antagonist, the fallen angel Azazel, while the protagonist, John Hobbes, fails to avoid death (as well as failing to kill the demon, even when he fatally poisons himself).

Character can deliver intrigue through the very specific questions: Who is the protagonist? Who is the antagonist? These questions can only work within the sci-fi, supernatural and psychodrama spaces, because these are the genres that allow identity to be fluid with memory/identity transfer via technology, through possession, or due to amnesia or mental illness.



[IMPOSTOR](#) and [TOTAL RECALL](#), both based on stories by Philip K. Dick, play with this idea. In IMPOSTOR the multiple twists make one's head spin, while in both renderings of TOTAL RECALL, there remains a nagging doubt about whether both the resistance and the audience have been duped. Hollywood loves Dick, because his stories, while bristling with the themes and ideas of existential philosophy, are also brilliantly-plotted thrillers with intrigue hard-wired at their core. Not to mention the engaging characters and ultra-visual settings. Indeed his stories work so well, that Hollywood has created an

entire sub-industry of films and TV that wouldn't exist without Dick, but are not officially based on any of his stories.

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Another version of this idea is the thriller in which the protagonist hunts a killer who turns-out to be himself. [ANGEL HEART](#) and MEMENTO are very different films with very different moods, but both play-out this most psychologically allusive story type – a story type which marries perfectly with tragic and even nihilist tonality.

CHARACTER/THEME: WHO AM I? WHO ARE YOU? WHO IS ANYONE?

Is the protagonist who he says – or even who he thinks – he is? With these questions, intrigue also delivers theme (and, of course, theme is in turn elucidated by intrigue). Character can deliver intrigue by asking profoundly existential questions away from the adrenalized rush of the sci-fi action splice.

In [FIGHT CLUB](#), [THE MACHINIST](#) and [IDENTITY](#), a fractured psyche is at the core of the story. In FIGHT CLUB, the protagonist has split-off the part of himself that cannot deal with the day-to-day reality of his meaningless, consumerist, corporate lifestyle. When the barrier between the parts can no longer hold, the split part becomes personalized as Tyler Durden. In THE MACHINIST, the protagonist, Trevor Reznik, has split-off the part of him that killed a boy in a hit-and-run. Repressing his guilt has made him a chronic insomniac. But as

with FIGHT CLUB, this state is unsustainable. Indeed the Why now? is precisely because the repressed must *always* return – and with a vengeance. So Trevor’s psyche creates Ivan, who inveigles himself into Trevor’s life with the aim of forcing Trevor to face his guilt (just as Tyler’s ‘job’ is to force the narrator to meet his soulless, joyless, inauthentic, risk-averse existence head-on).

So, once the screenwriter has decided on this story type, the intrigue is created by introducing the split-off element as seemingly a completely separate, though oddly mysterious, character. Who is Tyler Durden? Who is Ivan?



The exceptionally-clever IDENTITY takes this idea one step further. Apparently set at a remote Nevada motel during a torrential rainstorm that has cut-off the ten characters from the outside world, it soon becomes clear that the film is in-part a

stylish reimagining of Christie's *Ten Little Indians*. Cooney has taken this story and recast it as a brilliantly-original and multi-layered psychological thriller.

(This is a good point at which to re-state the essential difference between mystery and thriller. *Ten Little Indians* is closer to thriller than mystery because there is no detective central character, everyone is in jeopardy and the plot is specifically designed to allow the audience only slightly more information than the characters – and even this information is deliberately obtuse. Creating ten engaging characters to be under that jeopardy is the task of whoever is adapting or reimagining Christie's original.)

All the clues the audience need are given in the opening 'real-world' scene, though it's doubtful that more than a handful of the opening-day cinema goers deduced the twist from this evidence. The writer and director have hidden these clues in plain sight then obfuscated them for the audience by playing-out the scene during the opening titles, when the audience are never concentrating fully. The clues comprise:

- Rivers, the killer, quotes the William Hughes Mearns poem from 1899 about meeting "a man who wasn't there" (none of the characters at the motel are real)
- Rivers then tells an outright lie: he wrote this poem when he was a boy (he is clearly a liar now, and is probably lying about what happened when he was a boy also)
- Rivers reveals that as a boy he was abandoned at a motel by his mother who was a prostitute (the 'in-head' action is set in a motel; there are 'boy' and 'prostitute' characters)
- Malick, Rivers's psychologist writes "fractured psyche" on his notepad, then draws a diagram of a central identity surrounded by satellite identities

The opening scenes also achieve some nifty misdirection:

- Rivers is portrayed as not only insane (even though his insanity plea has been denied up till now), but unintelligent and almost child-like (obviously lacking in the kind of guile required for what is to follow).
- Rivers is shown to be guilty of violent, bloody murders (which appear blunt and unsophisticated, thus confirming that Rivers could not possibly be responsible for any of the story's subsequent cleverness).
- As the prosecutors discuss Rivers's last-minute appeal hearing, we hear rain and thunder outside; an extra comes into the court house with a shiny raincoat and shakes his umbrella, thereby establishing that the two worlds ('out-of-mind' and 'in-mind') are one and the same.
- The audience learn from this exchange that Rivers is being transported at that very moment. Which leads the audience subliminally to expect that Rivers will escape and reach the motel.
- However, the audience also learn that Rivers has been "pumped full of drugs" which subliminally persuades us that nothing as elaborate as the story's premise could possibly be going on in Rivers's mind.
- The film CUTS to the rain-lashed motel from an ancillary character saying "Now how the fuck did you let that happen?" and all that the audience can subliminally think as those words ring in their ears is: someone at this motel is going to get killed.

So the film has established the groundwork for the reveal, tricked the audience about the reality of the motel setting and created multiple layers of intrigue:

- Is Rivers a cold-blooded psychopath who is about to fool everyone, or a madman who cannot be held responsible for his actions?
- Will Rivers avoid the death penalty, or not? And will this reprieve be just, or not?
- Will Rivers escape *en route* and kill again?
- Who will be able to stop him when he does? Not a desk-bound psychiatrist, surely?
- Which of the characters that we know we are about to meet at the motel, will die and which will live?

As the audience learn at the reveal, almost the entire story is enacted inside the mind of Rivers. Each character is one of the multiple personalities of the central character (whom we hardly see during the film). Although the plot sets-up its intrigue with a detective thriller premise, behind this is an even bigger question: Are any of these people really who they say they are? (not just in the sense of a whodunnit, but in the deeper sense of existential identity).

And Cooney's screenplay isn't simply prepared to rest on its big-twist laurels. There are multiple twists within the 'in-mind' story, including a cop who's really a killer, and the final twist of the actual killer being the boy who the audience already thought was dead. Though this is, of course, the conceit of *Ten Little Indians* itself, by the time we arrive at this twist, there have already been so many reversals that the audience is in no position to guess at the final identity of the killer, who, with perfect elegance, kills the prostitute character and becomes the last character standing (it was, remember, as a boy that Rivers was abandoned at a motel by his prostitute mother).

Are any of these people really who they say they are? (not just in the sense of a whodunnit, but in the deeper sense of existential identity).

Again, the trick is to deduce (the job of the audience) or to reverse-engineer (the job of the screenwriter) the entire What if...? In this case: What if *Ten Little Indians* happened inside the mind of a killer? (rather than inside the mind of the master herself). And if that's the What if...? then the reveal is going to be withheld till as late as possible. The Why here? and Why now? are both answered in the opening scene: because Rivers's psychiatrist, an expert witness for the defence, is about to testify at a midnight hearing, to which Rivers is being transported – and this is Rivers's very last chance to avoid death by lethal injection.

PLOT/STRUCTURE

Structure is an excellent way to create intrigue, but any structure that doesn't follow time's arrow has its own exigencies and there had better be a very good reason in terms of subject matter, theme or milieu as to why a screenwriter chooses a non-standard structure. *MEMENTO* and [IRREVERSIBLE](#) are both superb examples of narrative structure creating instant intrigue. Because both of these films have a deliberately nihilist tone, the engagement lost due to non-traditional structure is very deliberately intended – in the case of *MEMENTO*, enabling us to experience Leonard's mind from within; in the case of *IRREVERSIBLE*, to portray the ineluctable violence of human existence with a merciless and unwavering focus.



There is one surefire way to create intrigue by utilising plot structure, though it's something of a cheat. Series TV episodes often do it in order to grab you before the title credits; when films do it, it's often a sign that the script wasn't fully developed. Start the plot at a moment of high drama and then FLASHBACK to the story's beginning, using a SUPERTITLE like "THREE HOURS/DAYS/WEEKS EARLIER". Instant and deep intrigue, immediately causing the audience to ask: How did we get to this point? The downsides are that a) you need to deliver an unexpected answer and b) you need to work harder to engage the audience with the present of the story, because they're already three hours/days/weeks ahead of your next scene. Of course there are some story types/genres – like heist, caper and adventure movies – where this technique works very well because the lightness of the story's tone balances the inorganic clunkiness of the device. You could also play with the audience's expectations by cheating about the exact circumstances of the opening scene, or lying about the POV of

the high drama with which you kick-off the plot. As ever, the aim is always to subvert the expectations of the audience.

The ensemble drama or romance allows intrigue to be created from the questions: How will these lives intersect? How will the choices and actions of one character affect another? (of course that's a question for every scene of every single screenplay, though it's writ larger in drama than in any other single genre). [CRASH](#) and [DISCONNECT](#) are excellent examples of the implicit intrigue of drama being made explicit. The romance-driven EVE/DAY films ask similar questions, albeit with a much lighter touch. The What if...? is simple: What if an ensemble of initially unrelated characters have a life-changing effect on one or more of the others? The rest is down to the screenwriter: character, plot, tone and theme. Audiences find these films appealing because they amplify the seeming randomness of real life – but also allow for meaning to be found in the randomness (unless the filmmaker is aiming for this randomness to communicate nihilism, as in the most effective parts of Kiewslowki's oeuvre).

PLOT: WHO IS GUILTY?

Possibly the easiest to attempt, though the most difficult to achieve, is a mystery or thriller which is as intellectually clever as it is emotionally satisfying. All you need is a crime, a perp and a detective. When the killer is finally revealed, they should be not only the most unexpected choice, but also the *only possible* choice. As definitively 'obvious' as the killer will be once revealed, before the reveal their identity needs to be near-impossible to guess. So not so easy after all. One useful trick is to read your way through the works of the master and find new spins on her

stories, as Michael Cooney did with *IDENTITY*. Christie covered everything from ‘everyone is guilty’ (*Ten Little Indians*) to ‘the killer is everyone’ (*Murder On The Orient Express*). When they say ‘steal from the best’ they know what they’re talking about, but remember that what they also say is: steal clever and reinvent as you go.

Mystery writers spend inordinate amounts of time thinking about motive, means and opportunity and each of these allows for the creation of intrigue.

In the pure mystery the detective is never in jeopardy, which means there is no opportunity for visceral suspense regarding the well-being of the main character. Additionally, audience engagement with the detective is at a premium because the detective will always know more about what is going on than the audience. This makes intrigue paramount, because in the mystery, cerebral intrigue trumps everything, even emotional engagement with the ensemble.

Of course, this means that the writer has to put far more effort into crafting their characters than in the case of a protagonist-centred thriller. In the thriller – where mystery and jeopardy are finely balanced – there are fewer requirements for complex intrigue because intrigue can be combined with the visceral suspense created by the protagonist being in jeopardy. Also, the audience’s emotional engagement with the protagonist is already high because the audience only learn what’s going on as the protagonist does.



Mystery writers spend inordinate amounts of time thinking about motive, means and opportunity and each of these allows for the creation of intrigue. Because of the large amount of time spent with the protagonist, thrillers only allow for a small number of possible suspects, but also allow for the killer to be properly introduced only at the time of identification (due to the fact that the audience can only learn what the protagonist learns).

This maximum identification and engagement with the protagonist means that we usually know only as much about the killer and the suspects as the protagonist, which means we're not talking about fully-rounded characters, rather pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which the protagonist is trying to solve. This means that half-lit glimpses or killer-POV scenes in a thriller fulfil at least three functions: firstly, they reinforce that the audience cannot know more than the protagonist; secondly they create intrigue:

Who is this? What motivates them?; thirdly they create suspense: Who is this half-lit killer going to kill?

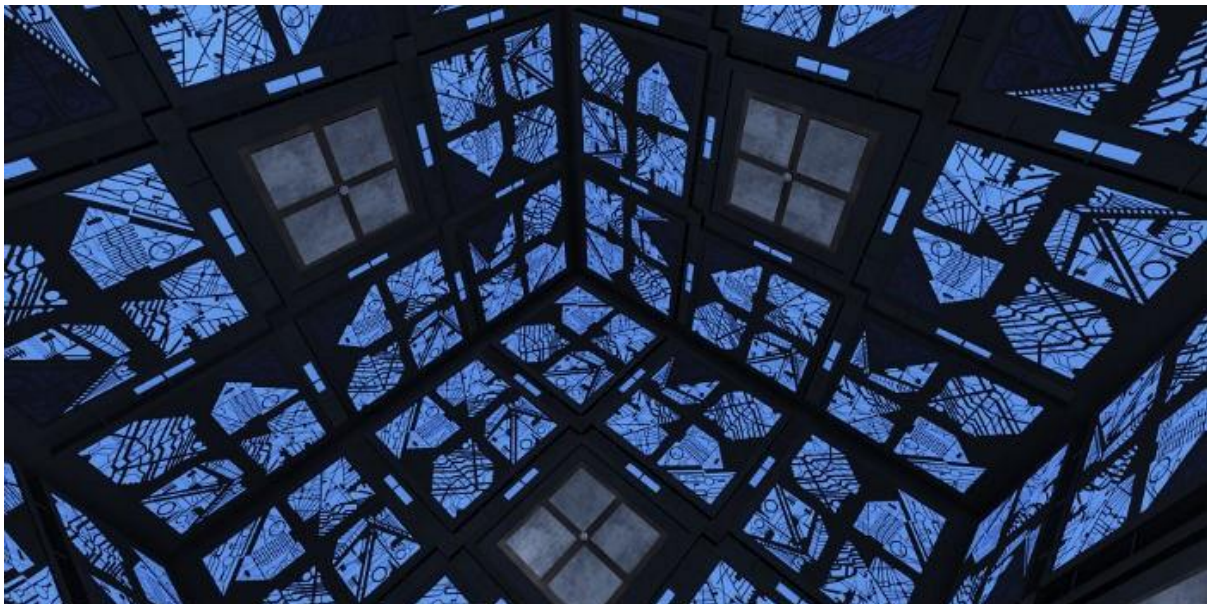
As with everything, there are notable exceptions, though one could argue that in terms of story type and character relationships, both [JAGGED EDGE](#) and [BASIC INSTINCT](#) (both written by Joe Eszterhas, who in his own way deserves the term ‘master’ as much as Christie does) are ‘psycho in the house’ stories more than they are straight-up ‘detective’ thrillers. Even so, both of these films create ridiculously effective amounts of intrigue *and* suspense by asking the same question: Is the character with whom the protagonist is obsessed (in a way that is, quite frankly, as much sexual as it is criminological) the perfect lover or the perfect murderer (or, indeed, as the theme of both films makes abundantly clear) both?

Mysteries, due to the greater amount of time spent with the ensemble, allow for a far greater number of possible killers (one of whom *must* be guilty; it’s bad form in mysteries to introduce the murderer at the time of unmasking). Because the audience always knows less than the detective (strictly speaking, the central character) about the crime and its execution, the audience need to know much more about the ensemble (because strictly speaking this ensemble includes the dramatic protagonist/s as well as the character who will ultimately be unmasked as the killer/s).

In the best mysteries, every single character is beautifully realised, whether they’re in almost every scene, or just the one (it may seem counterintuitive that ancillary characters in thrillers don’t need to be fully realised, but it is precisely this lack of full realisation that reflects the protagonist’s lack of three-sixty understanding *and* that ultimately favours suspense over intrigue). The character traits that matter most in both suspects

and murderer, are the ones that ultimately define them as either potential, or actual, killers.

Choosing motive, means or opportunity (or a combination thereof) for each of your red herring suspects in a mystery allows great scope for building intrigue (which in a mystery is favoured over suspense) because a character who is known to have had one or even two of the three (whether they admit it or not) could, of course, be hiding the other/s (or indeed could be partners in crime with someone who had the ones they lacked).



THEME: WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

Why is this happening? is the question which speaks to theme. Whether a screenwriter agrees with the idea of their work having a theme or not, the simple act of answering the Why here? and Why now? of a story creates theme. Whether you want simply to let the theme just sit there, or whether you want directly to refer to it through dialogue, plot or visual juxtaposition is a choice for the individual screenwriter. However theme is one more tool in

the writer's toolbox and as such it provides scope for its own brand of intrigue, especially when the story is in some way or other an allegory for the human condition.

Both CUBE and PREDATORS have very clearly-defined themes, which are the answers to the above question. In CUBE, 'this' is happening because life is a cruel game with no exit, unfathomable rules and no winner. In PREDATORS, 'this' is happening because the hunter will always become the prey, no matter how strong, clever or tooled-up that hunter thinks they are. Or, put even more simply: Life is a jungle.

In PREDATORS, 'this' is happening because the hunter will always become the prey, no matter how strong, clever or tooled-up that hunter thinks he is.

STORY: SERIOUSLY, THOUGH, WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?

Some films are so outrageously clever that they seem only to ask a single unifying question: What the hell is going on here? In order ultimately to be satisfying for an audience (and screenwriters/filmmakers have every right to refuse to be so if they wish, albeit this stance comes with its own unique challenges) even these films need to be able to answer this question, whether the answer is Russian doll-dreams ([INCEPTION](#)), a portal that can only connect the passenger to 43-year-olds or babies ([BEING JOHN MALKOVICH](#)), a causal loop ([TRIANGLE](#)) or twins ([THE PRESTIGE](#)).

Every screenwriter who aspires to write something as brilliantly clever as any of these should remember that Kaufman started with an idea for "a story about a man who falls in love with

someone who is not his wife” while Christopher Nolan is clearly prepared to spend an amount of time on painstaking plot construction that most screenwriters would baulk at (and has also obviously read several books about the history of magic). Whether you start with a very simple idea and add layers – or [start by inadvertently copying someone else’s idea then add originality](#) – you still need to apply the same levels of three-sixty self-interrogation and prismatic thought.



Stripped to their constituent elements, even these narratives can appear simple (yet elegant). Any writer who wants to create something as intriguing could do worse than spend time stripping-down their favourite complex stories to their constituent elements. For example, in its final form BEING

JOHN MALKOVICH is simply Philip K. Dick as reimagined by Woody Allen. With puppets.

TO RECAP...

To create intrigue, you first need to know the right questions – and then to formulate answers that are both satisfying and unexpected, yet perfectly aligned with the questions. For every single story you need to know the following three questions/answers inside out:

What if...?

Why here?

Why now?

Then, depending on your chosen genre, you need to define a group of complimentary questions, drawn from the options outlined above that taken together define your plot, your characters' journeys and your theme/s.

When you have interrogated these questions and answers from every single angle, it's time to draft an outline, with the aim being to ask questions, but withhold the answers for as long as possible (or, in the case of *What if...?* to withhold the balance of the question till the last possible moment)...

THE END

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