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## Cinematic Storytelling and Directing the Director

### By Jennifer van Sijl

Let's assume you have a great story. You've got a great hook, premise, structure, theme and characters. Despite these necessary qualities, it's still anyone's guess if you've got a great screenplay. Why? Because having a great story is only half the job. To get to the finish line, you also need a story that's rendered cinematically. When the studio readers read your script they need to be able to imagine it up on the screen. If they can't, you may have a great radio play or a budding novel, but it's not a screenplay unless you write it as one.

#### Classic Script Examples

One of the quickest ways to understand how to write a cinematic script is to study some classic examples: Take a look at *ET*, *Witness*, *Chinatown*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, or *Raging Bull*. None of these are written by writer-directors. For writer-director scripts you might read *The Professional*, *Bound*, *Barton Fink*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Dead Man*, *The Piano*, *Boyz N the Hood* or *The Sixth Sense*.

What these scripts have in common, whether written by screenwriters or writer-directors, is that they rely on cinematic tools to advance their stories. These writers use everything: sight, sound, motion, camera angles, camera lenses, transitions, editing, locations, graphics, and color, etc to tell their story. Of course these are not employed all at once, or even in every script, but are enlisted according to the needs of a specific story. Rather than rely on dialogue to tell the reader the plot, the writers



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demand that readers participate by translating their text into sound and picture. Consequently, readers have to construct the "screen" in their head and then decode it as the movie unfolds. This ups the readers' emotional and psychological engagement, even if it's subconscious, or maybe *because* it's subconscious.

Let's take a look at a concrete example. Here's how Quentin Tarantino uses *editing* as a storytelling device in *Pulp Fiction*. The excerpt occurs midway in the script.

### **Cinematic Example: Editing - Pacing and Expanding Time**

In the drug overdose scene, midpoint in the movie, Vincent (John Travolta) attempts to revive Mia (Uma Thurman) by stabbing Mia's heart with a hypodermic needle filled with adrenalin. The scripted scene fills us with tension. We hold our breath hoping that Mia is going to make it.

The reason "we hold our breath" is because the script is written "already edited." In this case it is edited to "milk the scene" and thereby pump up suspense.

So how does Tarantino do this?

Tarantino does this through overlapping action. He includes cuts to the needle, the red dot, and the faces of characters. These cuts lengthen the time needed for the real-time-event of the stabbing to occur. Although Vincent counts out three seconds on the dialogue track, it takes  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a page for the moment to take place or 45 seconds of screen time. That means that we are holding our breath 15 times longer than Vincent's three-second countdown suggests.

Through purposeful use of editing, the writer is guiding the reader's emotional experience, and delivering a scene that can be imagined as a movie.

### **Writing in Shots**



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Tarantino accomplishes this by writing in shots. He doesn't write in descriptive paragraphs like novelists. Each of his sentences implies a specific camera angle. "Implies" is the operative word here. Camera angles and lenses are not called out, but understood from his description.

The script's pacing mimics what we will later see on screen. Paragraphing and sentence length suggest how long a shot will play on the screen. For example, a single one-sentence paragraph implies one shot. The implication is that it should play out longer on screen than would say, multiple shots implied in a four-line paragraph. The white space buys the single shot time. Adding an editorial aside like "Mia is fading fast. Nothing can save her now" is like saying "hold on the shot". It again gains the shot more screen time.

Let's take a look at how this is done in the actual script. This excerpt is taken from mid-scene.

*The top line is from Tarantino's script, where no camera information is given.  
The parentheticals in the line below are my interpretation of the shot that is implied.*

### **Excerpt from *Pulp Fiction***

Vincent lifts the needle up above his head in a stabbing motion. He looks down on Mia.

(LOOSE CLOSE-UP VINCENT) (VINCENT POV - MIA)

Mia is fading fast. Soon nothing will help her.

(HOLD ON MIA.)

Vincent's eyes narrow, ready to do this.

(TIGHT CLOSE-UP - VINCENT)

VINCENT



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Count to three.

Lance on his knees right beside Vincent, does not know what to expect.  
(WIDE SHOT - LANCE AND VINCENT)

LANCE

One.

RED DOT on Mia's body.  
(CLOSE ON RED DOT )

Needle poised ready to strike.  
(CLOSE ON NEEDLE)

LANCE

Two.

Jody's face is alive in anticipation.  
(CLOSE-UP JODY)

NEEDLE in the air, poised like a rattler ready to strike.  
(CLOSE ON NEEDLE)

LANCE (OS)

Three!

The needle leaves the frame, THRUSTING down hard.  
(CLOSE ON NEEDLE)

Vincent brings the needle down hard, STABBING Mia in the chest.  
(MEDIUM SHOT)



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Mia's head is JOLTED from the impact.  
(CLOSE ON MIA'S HEAD)

The syringe plunger is pushed down, PUMPING the adrenalin out through the needle.  
(CLOSE ON SYRINGE PUMPER)

Mia's eyes POP WIDE OPEN and lets out a HELLISH cry of the banshee.  
(CLOSE-UP ON MIA'S EYES)

She BOLTS UP in a sitting position, needle stuck in her chest---SCREAMING  
(WIDE SHOT - MIA)

### Summary

In this brief page, Tarantino has implied 15 camera angles. Despite his use of camera, the reader isn't taken out of the read because the script never calls out specific camera positions or angles.

Had Tarantino described the camera angles with 15 descriptors like CLOSE-UP ON MIA'S EYES, it would have been an unbearable read.

Tarantino was able to slow down real time by cutting away to objects and multiple reaction shots of the characters. He used editing and the inherent elasticity of the medium to help dramatize a pivotal moment and up the suspense.

Pacing was further aided by how Tarantino suggested shot length through paragraphing.

### Directing the Director

Many new writers steer away from this kind of writing because they believe only writer-directors are allowed to do this. Somewhere they have read that screenwriters should not direct-the-director. They interpret this to mean that screenwriters should focus on



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scene description and dialogue exclusively.

The best way to dismantle this myth is to compare the screenplays of successful screenwriters with those of writer-directors. Take a look at Melissa Mathison's *ET* and look at her use of camera angles and sound effects. Study the scripts of Robert Towne, Shane Black, or Larry Karaszewski & Scott Alexander.

What you will find is both sets of writers are well-practiced in writing cinematically. Both use the full complement of visual and aural messaging. They do so without calling attention to the technique. While they write cinematically they do so purposefully. They don't throw in a 360 degree camera move just to have one, or describe everyone's clothing and hair color, unless it's important. Everything depends on the needs of the scene.

Writing cinematically is not the same as Directing-the-Director. Directing-the-director is when you write: "JOE'S POV WINDOW- LOW ANGLE," instead of "Joe looks up at the window." They mean the same thing. The first unnecessarily draws attention to camera information taking us completely out of the story. The second method implies it's a POV shot and a low-angle, but it does not distract us with technical jargon.

Similarly if a tracking shot is essential to a scene it's better to say "Joe jogs alongside Susan" rather than "TRACKING SHOT - JOE AND SUSAN JOGGING" which is considered directing-the-director.

### **The Good Read**

Writing cinematically requires understanding the language of film, knowing how to use it creatively and how to translate it into script form.

Editing is just one of the many film techniques. Lighting, sound effects, camera angles, camera position, transitions, space, framing and so on are other tools available to the writer.



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Studio readers don't want to read a novel that's been poured into Final Draft. They expect to read a script that they can envision as movie.

Exploiting the tools of cinematic storytelling can't turn a bad story into a great script, but it can help translate a good story into a cinematic screenplay. Worth a shot.

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