

FILM THINKING

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JILL: Let's go!

L(Ø!)

Creative filmmakers, screenwriters, teachers and screen analysts usually need to write down ideas about screen drama as quickly as they think in film language. The following is a simple hand-written Notation which organizes and records movies, etc., very quickly. It has been used successfully in the high speed, high standards, pressured movie industry.

Notation can be used by writers, producers and critics for high speed, accurate:

- 1) creative writing of screenplays and ideas for films
- 2) developing motion audio visual ICT story action
- 3) analyzing cinema, TV and other events on the screen
- 4) rapid recording and analyzing real life dramatic interactions

The following concepts are best approached through practice and workshopping. Like any skill, Notation is slow at first but it rapidly overtakes the sluggish speed and ambiguous notes which plague screen projects.

(A Casablanca/ Donnie Darko workshop is also available. Send an email with my name in the subject line).

NOTATION WORKSHOP

Robert Watson

The best way to learn this more useful thinking tool is to sketch it on paper with your own movie as the example. Enjoy.

Writing a character's name repeatedly wastes time. If one imagines a character called JACK, write his name in full once and then use his initial J thereafter. If another character appears called Jill, write her name once in capitals, JILL, then use another letter thereafter, eg., L.

In screenwriting, it is usual to give the approximate age of the character immediately after they appear, such as JACK (20). Some films are cast to two or more ages, such as L (6) and L (18), that is, L as a child and L as a young woman.

Screen drama is eventful action and good scripts precisely describe eventful action with a verb. Notation does too. A present tense verb will usually sum up a scene, such as 'J dances' or 'J L swim'. Use lower case for actions, places, props - keep upper case for characters. That way, you can scan a page of notes for every important appearance of a character: he/she stands out clearly as a capital letter.

If a prop is a highly significant object through much of the drama, (such as a treasure being sought and returned home), the prop is a character and is capitalized. If a BUCKET featured throughout a film, and hence was another character, it would be abbreviated to 'B' after it was capitalized once.

Sometimes the point of a scene is in its dialogue, not its action. In that case, the point of the dialogue can usually be summarized in a word or two. Simply enclose the dialogue or soundtrack in round brackets, to clearly distinguish the audio from the vision. 'J L (B) ' means that Jack and Jill are in the scene and Jill speaks of a 'bucket'. The B is not actually in this scene, L only speaks about the B. The audio brackets go next to L's name as Jill is saying 'bucket', i.e.,

JL(B)

If you write down J then L as they appear in that order in your scene, but then Jack speaks about 'water', add a colon to indicate that the first character and not the character near the soundtrack brackets is speaking, i.e.,

J L: (water) ' is J's line about water, not L's.

Film is a time based art. Counters count time or frames on players. Page numbers (which approximate minutes in a standard script) count time too. In Notation, any plain numeral is time code in minutes. '5' means five minutes on screen or page 5 of a standard script. E.g., 'five minutes into the film, Jack mentions the water to Jill' or:

5 J L : (water)

Cinematography always records the setting along with the characters and action. Unlike a standard script, settings use lower case because only characters use capitals in Notation. Settings or scene locations are distinguished by underling, such as paris, well, or L, the later being Jill's main location.

Sometimes interior/ exterior, day/ night are important enough story changes to be in your notes. Exterior scenes are labeled 'e' and interiors 'i'. Day and night are 'd' and 'n'.

A scene heading in a script such as 'INT. JILL'S HOUSE - NIGHT' would be coded as

i L n

Compare the above ways of writing J's scene and measure how rapidly the scene is written in Notation. You can record your creative ideas or critique another film in real time with Notation.

Once locations are set up in a film, there is often no need to describe them in detail. A cut to a new scene without further detail is simply an underline, ' '. For example, a sequence of three un-detailed scenes depict Jack fetching a bucket, Jill skipping and Jill kissing Jack is:

 J+B L skip L+J

Actions are punctuated within a scene by using a dot, or two dots for a longer lapse of time.

Scripts which greenlight into production add production scene numbers to their scene locations. 'Scene 68' is simply the underlined numerals 68. Underlining always denotes a scene.

Arrival is @ and departure is 0 (zero). If Jack shows up at Jill's place, it is

J @ L

If Jill then says, 'let's go' or 'go away', it would code

J @ L (0)

The two signs = and # chart significant changes in characters' facial *looks* and *voice tone*. The face is where most of the emotional story is told in a movie. Intimate actions are simply divided into positive and negative facial looks and other gestures.

A positive reaction or look is an equal sign, such as

J = L

which means Jill gives Jack a friendly look, comment or gesture. If Jack and Jill both stare with

disgust at the water well, then 'disgust' is coded as a crossed out equal sign '#' and the action is coded as

JL # well

If a look is ambiguous, it can be questioned the standard way with a '?', such as when Jill gives Jack a puzzled but negative look:

L #? J

If actions increase from facial tone and gestures to more overt actions, then positive action is

+

such as affectionate giving, kisses, hugs, assistance, rescue, delivery, service, etc.

If the action is negative such as a hit, restraint, violence, betrayal, etc., then the code of two circles divided is used.

%

'Jack broke his crown' would be

J % crown

If positive and negative large actions, '+' and '%', are not clear enough, add the precise verb of the action. Usually, as film builds meaning, you may drop the time-consuming words and use more and more graphic symbols to code the film.

In summary so far, we can turn the following film description into a simple code.

Jack arrives at Jill's place twenty-five minutes into the film. And then Jack and Jill leave. They travel through a couple of scenes before arriving at the hill. Jack and Jill pick up buckets. They climb the hill to a well and draw WATER. On the way down the hill, Jack slips, falls and cracks open the crown of his head. Jill comes tumbling after. This complex sequence of scenes is noted as:

25 J@ L .. JL 0 _ _ hill +B . climb well +W .0 _ J slip % head! . L %!

Notation is the minimum message length which allows you to think and record film. It is four times faster than someone who writes or thinks without code. Furthermore, Notation organizes the story into its film qualities, the way a writer, director or producer thinks.

Please read the above paragraph of italics again and answer the question, how many film scenes are in the paragraph of italics? Notice how long it takes to read prose and calculate the answer.

Now simply count the number of underlines in the line of notes under the italic paragraph. Counting the underlines, the sequence has:

L _ _ hill well _ ... which is half a dozen underlined scenes. Imagine how quickly you could scan a single page of notes for major scene changes.

In which scene is the bucket located? Returning to the line of notes, I can easily see it is the hill scene where the B is collected +

hill +B

Scanning the prose paragraph to find both the bucket and its scene is much slower.

Where is the violence in the above description? In the beginning or the end? I can either look for ' % ' in the code or waste time reading the paragraph of italic prose. A glance at the code immediately informs me that the violence occurs at the end. The ' ! ' has its prose function of emphasis!

25 J@ L .. JL 0 _ _ hill +B . climb well +W .0 _ J slip % head! . L %!

Adding to the above description, let us say: Jack arrived at Jill's house, and he stares in disgust at a map of the hill. This codes as

L J @ # [hill]

The hill is only a graphic, a map of the underlined hill location because we are at L's house, not the hill setting. Any graphic is enclosed in square brackets:

[hill]

Jill's place 'L' is the only live location in the sequence. Jack enters that location: 'L J@ '.

Jack takes issue with the map of the hill

J# [hill]

Jack gives the map a dirty look, '#'

The complete location, action of arrival, dirty look and the picture of another location in the graphic is coded

L J @ # [hill]

Movies are full of graphic, mediated images. When filming, the filmmaker must *first* create or license any significant photos, text, paintings, monitors, signs, computer screen images, or maps before incorporating these graphics into the production. It is essential to distinguish between the filmed, live story and the graphic imagery which is inserted into the film. Notation deals with graphic elements such as maps signs, computer screens and photos by enclosing these graphics in square brackets. The square brackets are also used for mirrors.

The code supports the motion-audio-visual thinking of filmmakers. One thinks in film language: its scene locations, characters, props and graphic imagery. One thinks in the positive, negative, or ambiguous dynamics of dramatic gesture, voice tone, and larger actions.

One thinks in soundtrack. Besides enclosing speech in round brackets, round brackets distinguish all elements of the soundtrack. An audio waveform '~' is used to indicate sound effects or music in a scene, such as Mozart playing at Jill's place:

L (~mozart)

or birdsong at the hill:

hill (~wrens)

Notice that Mozart is all lower case. He is not an on-camera character in the film, so the producer will not budget for Mike Myers to play Mozart. But the sound department will budget for a (sound recording) of Mozart.

All the time, Notation abbreviates the message length of film ideas but greatly increasing the professional concepts for analyzing and creating screen imagery. By distinguishing between 'Mozart' as a live action character and Mozart as a soundtrack we save casting confusion and focus on what is useful in production.

'~' means audio but it also means 'hears or listens'. Imagine Jack is at a swimming pool and he takes a phone call from Jill. Jill tells Jack how hot and thirsty she is.

pool J ~ (L: thirsty)

Notice that Jill isn't photographed in the scene because the L is inside the soundtrack.

A special effect, such as an ALIEN space ship landing in the swimming pool, is denoted by '*'

If Jack is pleasantly surprised by its arrival, this scene might be coded thus:

pool A * @! J =

A special effects team can quickly scan a page of code for all the asterisks and immediately estimate their commitment to a film. The ' * ' also indicates a flashback or flashed scene.

A film which is full of flashbacks is immediately obvious by all its * * *

When critiquing film or screenplays, the comments of the reader need to be bracketed off from the description of the film with curly brackets.

{ thoughts }

For example, if you note the ALIEN's arrival at the pool but then you want to add the comment that such a scene would be expensive to shoot, simply insert curly comment brackets and ' \$ ' or other currency unit against the item in question. This would be:

pool A@! { \$ }

In fact any comment, economic or creative, can be inserted into the code at the moment it comes to mind, by using curly brackets. By using ' { } ', comments are kept separate from the creative work while still being noted where they are completely relevant. For example:

75 pool A*@! { \$ } J =

means that: 'On page 75 of the script, the Alien space ship crashes into the swimming pool. (note: it's an expensive effect). Jack is pleasantly surprised'.

I want to return to the earlier idea that film is a mainly philosophy of action, about what people do, rather than what they say they do. The wishful, abstract words 'want' and 'don't want' are rarely used in film. When used, they are only used in speech, not action. For example, imagine the Aliens emerge from their space ship and proclaim their vision for an Earth poisoned by a hydrocarbon atmosphere. Jack cries out, 'I don't want to die'. This is noted:

' A (^ hydrocarbon atmosphere) J (x 0) '.

' ^ ' is want, ' x ' is don't want, and death is ' 0 '

Notice that death is an underlined zero. But no death occurs in this scene because it only J's word 'die' spoken inside his soundtrack brackets.

On the other hand, if the Aliens zap Jack dead, this would be written:

A % J 0

and it would be noted, without brackets, in the film's action.

In explaining film thinking through Notation, we have now covered most movies of the last century. There remain only three concepts which have to do with causality, time and space.

Film runs in a time order. Using Notation, scenes may be shifted back and forth, using * for flash-forward and flashback. But usually, events unfold in logical chronology. If time is described in reverse time order in a speech, such as, Jack saying, 'Jill left the house *because* she couldn't stand Mozart', the concept 'because' is written 'as a function of' or ' *f* '. Jack saying, 'Jill left *because* she couldn't stand Mozart' is written:

J (L \emptyset *f* mozart)

There is no interesting action in this scene, just Jack *talking* about an interesting action. All the drama is in the dialogue which is bracketed off from the action. The practice of Notation reminds filmmakers and screen analysts to make their films active. The above note is not. At times though, reversing causality by using ' *f* ' in a speech may be useful.

With the above symbols you can record the main points of a movie onto half-, to one-and-a-half-, handwritten pages of code. The notes can then be used over and over. A character's capital initial can be scanned in seconds through their whole character journey. Or all the underlined locations can be seen at a glance rather than scrolling through 90 minutes of media. The dynamics of violent % and helpful + drama are patterned and obvious. The code's timing and page numbers provide accurate links between one's notes and the film or screenplay.

This is a manual for a whole film language. It is simple, fast and accurate but it needs to be sketched with your own examples, played with and practiced.

NOTATION LIST

! emphasis, surprise

@ arrive

\emptyset depart

A to Z characters in capitals

sing.. action in lower case

rain.. props, costumes, in lower case

(18) age of character

28 page number, minute number

= recognize, see, point of view, love

'de-recognize', a negative stare

+ friendly action, hug, give, affection, relationship

% violence, vandalism, physical restriction, act of betrayal

0 die

\$ money, budget note

*** flashback or flash forward, obvious transition, intrusive visual effect**

~ audio, telephone, radio, overhears, listens

x doesn't want

^ wants

. beat, new angle or pause

.. longer beat

? question

() soundtrack, dialogue

_ scene change

place underlining for scene location

d day

n night

i interior

e exterior

5 scene number

[] graphic, photo, sign, book, TV screen, monitor, title, card

(A:) voiceover or phone call voiceover by A

A B () speech by B

A B: () speech by first character A, using colon to indicate this.

(~siren) siren sound effect

(~jazz) jazz music track (or detail the score phrase inside the brackets)

∕ function of, because of

/ hypertext page, switching decision in game narrative

<> hypertext, virtual address

{ } the writer's thoughts, changes, and project notes

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