

the works of other writers they crib scenes we've seen before, paraphrase dialogue we've heard before, disguise characters we've met before, and pass them off as their own. They reheat literary leftovers and serve up plates of boredom because, regardless of their talents, they lack an in-depth understanding of their story's setting and all it contains. Knowledge of and insight into the world of your story is fundamental to the achievement of originality and excellence.

SETTING

A story's SETTING is four-dimensional—Period, Duration, Location, Level of Conflict.

The first dimension of time is Period. Is the story set in the contemporary world? In history? A hypothetical future? Or is it that rare fantasy, such as *ANIMAL FARM* or *WATERSHIP DOWN*, in which location in time is unknowable and irrelevant?

PERIOD is a story's place in time.

Duration is the second dimension of time. How much time does the story span within the lives of your characters? Decades? Years? Months? Days? Is it that rare work in which storytime equals screentime, such as *MY DINNER WITH ANDRE*, a two-hour movie about a two-hour dinner?

Or rarer still, *LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD*, a film that liquefies time into timelessness? It's conceivable, through cross-cutting, overlap, repetition, and/or slow motion, for screentime to surpass storytime. Although no feature-length film has attempted this, a few sequences have done it brilliantly—most famous of all, the "Odessa Steps" sequence of *THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN*. The actual assault by the Tsar's army on the Odessa protesters took no more than two or three minutes, the time needed for jack-booted feet to march down the steps from top to bottom. Onscreen the terror expands to five times this length.

DURATION is a story's length through time.

Location is the story's physical dimension. What is the story's specific geography? In what town? On what streets? What buildings on those streets? What rooms inside those buildings? Up what mountain? Across what desert? A voyage to what planet?

LOCATION is a story's place in space.

Level of Conflict is the human dimension. A setting includes not only its physical and temporal domain, but social as well. This dimension becomes vertical in this sense: At what Level of Conflict do you pitch your telling? No matter how externalized in institutions or internalized in individuals, the political, economic, ideological, biological, and psychological forces of society shape events as much as period, landscape, or costume. Therefore, the cast of characters, containing its various levels of conflict, is part of a story's setting.

Does your story focus on the inner, even unconscious conflicts within your characters? Or coming up a level, on personal conflicts? Or higher and wider, on battles with institutions in society? Wider still, on struggles against forces of the environment? From the subconscious to the stars, through all the multilayered experiences of life, your story may be set at any one or any combination of these levels.

LEVEL OF CONFLICT is the story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles.

The Relationship Between Structure and Setting

A story's setting sharply defines and confines its possibilities.

Although your setting is a fiction, not everything that comes to mind may be allowed to happen in it. Within any world, no matter how imaginary, only certain events are possible or probable.

If your drama is set among the gated estates of West L.A., we won't see homeowners protesting social injustice by rioting in their tree-lined streets, although they might throw a thousand-dollar-a-plate fund-raiser. If your setting is the housing projects of East

L.A.'s ghetto, these citizens won't dine at thousand-dollar-a-plate galas, but they might hit the streets to demand change.

A STORY must obey its own internal laws of probability. The event choices of the writer, therefore, are limited to the possibilities and probabilities within the world he creates.

Each fictional world creates a unique cosmology and makes its own "rules" for how and why things happen within it. No matter how realistic or bizarre the setting, once its causal principles are established, they cannot change. In fact, of all genres *Fantasy* is the most rigid and structurally conventional. We give the fantasy writer one great leap away from reality, then demand tight-knit probabilities and no coincidence—the strict Archplot of *THE WIZARD OF OZ*, for example. On the other hand, a gritty realism often allows leaps in logic. In *THE USUAL SUSPECTS*, for example, screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie arrests his wild improbabilities inside the "law" of free association.

Stories do not materialize from a void but grow out of materials already in history and human experience. From its first glimpse of the first image, the audience inspects your fictional universe, sorting the possible from the impossible, the likely from the unlikely. Consciously and unconsciously, it wants to know your "laws," to learn how and why things happen in your specific world. You create these possibilities and limitations through your personal choice of setting and the way you work within it. Having invented these strictures, you're bound to a contract you must keep. For once the audience grasps the laws of your reality, it feels violated if you break them and rejects your work as illogical and unconvincing.

Seen this way, the setting may feel like a straitjacket to the imagination. When working in development, I'm often struck by how writers try to wriggle out of its restraints by refusing to be specific.