

# Fight, Seduction, or Negotiation?

*How Conflict Drives Scenes*

# Lesson Plan:

- Objective: to be able to identify the conflict within a scene, break it into its component parts, and understand how it is being used to propel the scene and, in turn, the film.
- Topics Covered:
  - Conflict Review:
    - Types of Story Conflict
    - Types of Scene Conflict
  - Creating Conflict in Scenes
  - Action Verbs
  - Live Demonstration
  - Example from *Atlanta*

How would you define conflict?

# con · flict

## noun

/'kän,flikt/

a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one.

## verb

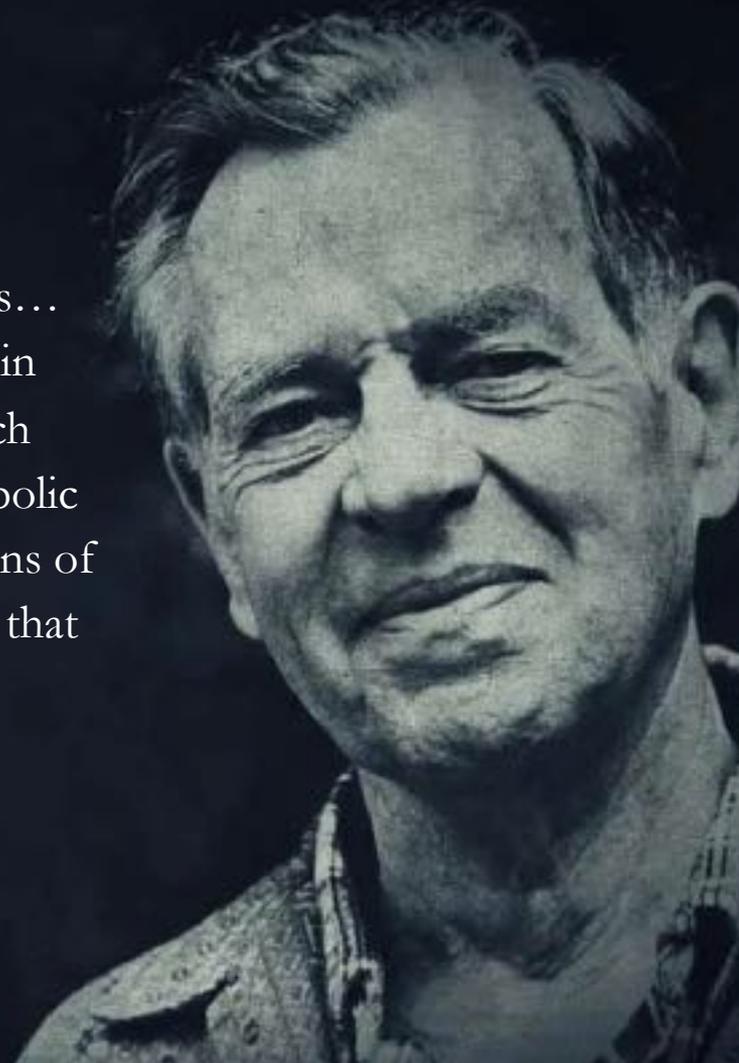
/kən'flikt,'kän,flikt/

be incompatible or at variance; clash.



Heaven and hell are within us, and all the gods are within us...  
They are magnified dreams, and dreams are manifestations in  
image form of the energies of the body in conflict with each  
other. That is what myth is. Myth is a manifestation in symbolic  
images, in metaphorical images, of the energies of the organs of  
the body in conflict with each other. This organ wants this, that  
organ wants that. The brain is one of the organs.

- Joseph Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*)

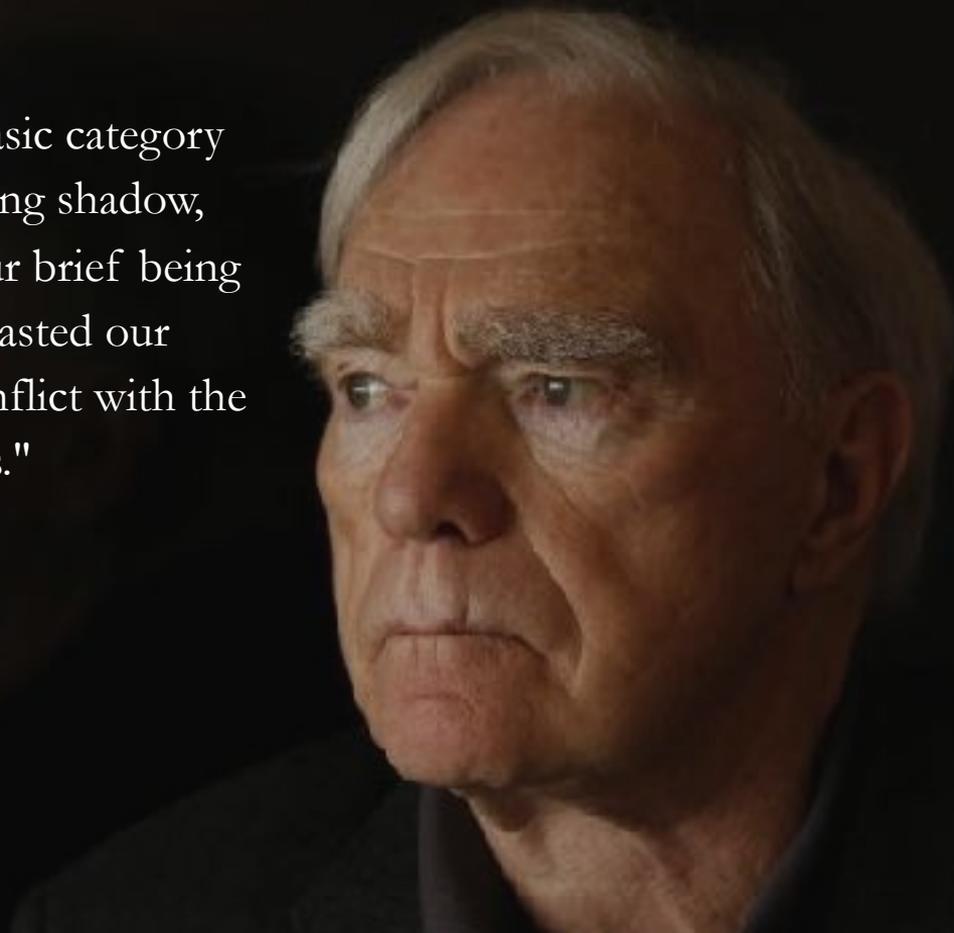


"The Law of Conflict [nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict] is more than an aesthetic principle; it is the soul of story. Story is metaphor for life, and to be alive is to be in seemingly perpetual conflict. As Jean-Paul Sartre expressed it, the essence of reality is scarcity, a universal and eternal lacking. There isn't enough of anything in this world to go around. Not enough food, not enough love, not enough justice, and never enough time.



Time, as Heidegger observed, is the basic category of existence. We live in its ever-shrinking shadow, and if we are to achieve anything in our brief being that lets us die without feeling we've wasted our time, we will have to go into heady conflict with the forces of scarcity that deny our desires."

- Robert McKee (*Story*)



# Basic Categories of Story Conflict:

- Man vs. Man
- Man vs. Nature
- Man vs. Self



Man vs. Man | *Hanna* (Joe Wright, 2011)



Man vs. Nature | *The Revenant* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2015)



Man vs. Self | *You Were Never Really Here* (Lynn Ramsay, 2017)

# Additional Categories of Story Conflict:

- Man vs. Machine
- Man vs. Society
- Man vs. Fate



Man vs. Machine | *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014)



Man vs. Society | *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018)



Man vs. Fate | *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985)

# Examples of Scene Conflict:

- Argument (verbal or physical)
- Struggle Against Circumstance
  - e.g. Locked out of your house
- Internal Conflict (i.e. Unfulfilled Desire)
  - Writers job is to externalize through action
- Avoiding a Negative Outcome
  - e.g. Want to break up with someone but don't want to hurt their feelings
- Confusion
  - Character doesn't understand what's happening; e.g. *The Bourne Identity*
- Dilemma
  - Decision between two equally negative outcomes
- \*Adapted from Craig Mazin (*Chernobyl*) on Scriptnotes Episode 179. See “*Additional Materials*” section of website

What do we need to create conflict within a scene?

CONFLICT = WANT + OBSTACLE

# Action Verbs

# Live Demonstration:

SETUP: I have a non-negotiable no phone policy in class.

Questions to answer:

- Who is the scene protagonist? (Who drives the scene?)
- Who wants what?
- Was it a fight, seduction, or negotiation?

# Live Demonstration:

- “Put your phone away.”
  - TELL
- “I’m not kidding. Put your phone away this instant.”
  - DEMAND
- “If you don’t put your phone away you will leave this room right now and fail the class!”
  - THREATEN

# Basic Conflict Scene Structure:

\* Buffer - Pre-conflict banter (setup)

1 - Attempt (Scene Goal) - Easiest and most logical FIRST attempt (TELL)

- Gap between expectation and outcome explodes

2 - Attempt (DEMAND)

3 - Attempt (THREATEN)

4 - \*Fulcrum -> Conflict could go either way

5 - Scene turn (success or failure) = Resolution & Causal Relationship to Next Scene

\*There should be a clear escalation or progression through the scene.

# ATLANTA



# Atlanta Screenplay Example:

## SETUP:

Earnest (Earn) Marks (played by show creator Donald Glover) is a Princeton dropout who has moved back to his hometown of Atlanta. He is essentially unemployed and doesn't really have a place to live except when he stays with his parents or with his "girlfriend" Van with whom he has a daughter. He discovers that his cousin Alfred is becoming popular in the local music scene as the rapper Paper Boi and decides becoming his manager is his ticket out of his current situation. After failing to convince Alfred to let him be his manager he heads to a local radio station where he still has some connections.

## CHARACTERS:

### EARN

DAVE: "A young, actually cool-looking, white guy" who Earn knows from the Atlanta music scene. Dave works at a local radio station.

\* Includes strong language that some may find offensive

# Atlanta Screenplay Quick Analysis:

- Who is the scene protagonist? (Who drives the scene?)
- Who wants what?
- Who “wins” the scene? i.e. Who got what they wanted?
- Was it a fight, seduction, or negotiation?

# Atlanta Scene Structure Breakdown:

\* Buffer - Pre-conflict banter (setup)

1 - Attempt (Scene Goal) - Easiest and most logical FIRST attempt:

- SUGGEST (PROPOSE, ENCOURAGE)

2 - Attempt:

- PERSUADE (BARGAIN)

3 - Attempt:

- BEG (REASON, PLEAD)

4 - \*Fulcrum -> Conflict could go either way

5 - Scene turn (success or failure) = Resolution & Causal Relationship to Next Scene

\*There should be a clear escalation or progression through the scene.

Objectives (wants) make possible conflict and a sense of event in the relationship because the actors are doing something to each other rather than doing something to the lines.

- Judith Weston (*Directing Actors*)



Watch Atlanta Scene



## Analyze Atlanta Scene:

- Did the scene confirm our expectations? Why or why not?
- How did the editing/shot selection/blocking articulate the conflict?

# Atlanta Scene Structure Breakdown:

\* Buffer - Pre-conflict banter (setup)

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- Gap between expectation and outcome explodes
- SUGGEST (PROPOSE, ENCOURAGE)

2 - Attempt:

- PERSUADE (BARGAIN)

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\* Buffer - Pre-conflict banter (setup):



## \* Buffer - Pre-conflict banter (setup):



DAVE

Obviously. If I knew you were in town I would've invited you to the party last night. We needed a real DJ. This dude's playing Flo Rida back-to-back. I literally walked up to the booth, calmly took him to the side, and just said: "Really, nigga?"



EARN

("nigga")

Ha...you actually did that?

# Attempt #1 (SUGGEST):



**EARN**

Okay...Have you heard the song "Paper Boi"?

**DAVE**

Paper Boi by Paper Boi? Yeah, I've heard that.  
Shit is fire. Streets love it.

**EARN**

You guys should play it.



**DAVE**

Yeah, for real.

**EARN**

Nah, but seriously y'all should play "Paper Boi".

# Attempt #2 (PERSUADE):



DAVE  
KP picks all the music.

EARN  
Can you slide it past him?

DAVE  
Well, I mean, KP will usually spin  
some records for some scratch up  
top.

EARN  
How much?

DAVE  
Half a stack.

EARN  
Five hundred dollars?! Am I buying  
the station?

DAVE  
Everything is who you know.

EARN  
Introduce men then.

DAVE  
Yeah. I'll just introduce every  
dude in Atlanta, with a mixtape to  
my boss.

## Attempt #2 (PERSUADE):



**EARN**

I'm not every dude.



**DAVE**

You kind of are.

# Attempt #3 (BEG):



**EARN**  
I don't have five hundred dollars to give. I'm making \$5.15 an hour plus commissions. I gotta pay rent tonight. My parents won't let me in the house. Like those drug commercials, only not funny.



**DAVE**  
Man, you know how niggas are out here. He usually charges a full C.

**EARN**  
Then what's in it for you? Why am I so lucky? What's your cut?



**DAVE**  
I'm not about that. I'm too busy, man.

# Fulcrum -> Crisis could go either way:



**DAVE**  
I mean, it's business. You give me the money, I pass it on to KP.



**DAVE**  
It's probably for the best, man. Music business is gross. Alright, man, I'm takin over tonight for Speedy. Keep it locked.

\* Buffer - Pre-conflict banter (setup):



Attempt #1 (SUGGEST):



## Attempt #2 (PERSUADE):



Attempt #3 (BEG):



Fulcrum -> Crisis could go either way:



What are some possibilities for  
what the next scene could be?

## \*The Next Scene:



\*This scene is known as a "*French scene*". In a "*French scene*" the beginning and end are marked by a change in the presence of characters, rather than by a change in time or location.

# In Conclusion:

## Why is conflict important?

- Putting characters in situations where they need to make difficult decisions gives a scene momentum.
- The moment to moment decisions will generally relate to the conflict (and central dramatic argument) of the film as a whole, giving the piece a sense of unity.
- Those choices also reveal a character's true nature and, in turn, they are a reflection of who we are. Through these characters we gain a deeper understanding about ourselves and what it means to be a human being.

QUESTIONS?

THANK YOU!

Presentation & Additional Materials:

[www.davejannetta.com/humboldt](http://www.davejannetta.com/humboldt)