

Dye In The River Theory ... from *Your Screenplay Sucks.com!*

Here's a great song, "Goin' Out of My Head" by Little Anthony and the Imperials. Lucky you, if you've never heard it before, because there's nothing like hearing a killer song for the first time.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qah0t_maZRo

Now, here's the same song, done by Les McCann. The beginning is just a little different, though...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGxYSHP4-g8>

Other than McCann's one line intro to his version, the song is the same. But, that one line *totally changes* your appreciation of what comes next. Because of the one sentence Les McCann says, the song that comes after it is a wholly different experience from Little Anthony's version.

That is the Dye in the River Theory. The musical version, anyway.

Imagine your story... happening, happening, happening... a river flowing past a woman standing on the bank. A character in your story, she's holding a big bucket of blue dye and she dumps it in the river.

Soon all the water downstream from her will be a light blue.

This is just like your book or script or poem.

If you change something in a scene, or remove a scene, or add a new shot or scene, everything after that, on every single page, will be affected by that change. Just like the downstream water turning blue, every moment in your story after that event will be colored or affected by that event.

You'd better be aware of it because it's going to happen whether you want it to or not. That woman on sure, pouring the bucket of dye in the river, besides risking arrest for water pollution, has changed everything that came after where she's standing on the riverbank, without actually doing one single thing to any of those scenes.

In THE ENGLISH PATIENT script, the Patient, (Almásy) confessed his true identity to Caravaggio. Only Caravaggio knew who he really was. That's the way they shot it. Late in editing, they changed the scene from one with the Patient and Carravaggio to one where Hana overhears the Patient's confession. They used footage of her from a scene that had been cut. Adding her to the scene (dye in the river!) gave her new information about who the Patient was. Later in the film, she gives him an overdose of morphine, which kills him. Adding Hana's overhearing the confession changed what she knew when she administered the morphine... without changing that moment at all.

You've heard the cliché, that is decidedly *not* a cliché but a piece of exquisitely wise wisdom: a film is written three times: the script, shooting, and editing. Of these, editing is the most powerful. It's also the one where you get to spend the most time in an air-conditioned room.

Moving Hana from the "trim bin" to the confession scene alters every moment that comes after it, for the rest of the movie.

Ondaatje did not have that in mind when he wrote the scene. Minghella did not have that in mind when they shot it. It was Murch's idea way late in the storytelling process -- the third and final draft of the story. Such is the power of editing!!

The same can be seen in this scene from modern Romance, written and directed by Albert Brooks. A superb description of the power of editing.

<https://vimeo.com/53767618>

You need to be careful of inadvertently bringing the Dye in the River Theory into effect. When you move something, or delete or add, be aware of the possibility of a downstream change. Pull a scene out, everything afterward changes color. Put a different scene in, everything afterward changes to a different color and you have to pay attention to those possibilities.

Imagine this... Darth Vader, in STAR WARS: A NEW HOPE, Episode IV (which everyone thinks of as Episode I). *What if* George and Marcia Lucas were in the editing room and took a line from a scene much later in the STAR WARS saga, and dropped it in when Luke meets Darth Vader for the first time.

I can see it now "Let's put that line in here, it'll be great!" "Absolutely, Marcia. Let's do that. What a swell idea." So, they bring the line from the later scene and drop it in the scene of Darth Vader meeting Luke and now he says, "Luke... I am your father."

That would sure change everything that comes after it!