

No Off Screen Action! ... from *Your Screenplay Sucks.com!*

Or... not much. Try hard to put important moments right there, where we can *see* 'em.

If your main character is making a movie and the agony of writing and the agony of raising money happen 100% off screen... you might consider, "What if I brought some of that process out from behind the curtain?"

If Dave tells Francis, "Hey, whoa, last night, at Radio Club, guess what!, I found out Albert can *levitate!*" Textbook off screen action! How much more entertaining to watch Dave gaping in stunned amazement while, OMG, Albert floats out over the swimming pool while talking on ham radio!

If the genius daughter is not allowed to visit her sweet scientist father... don't deliver that information by having her crab to the Bad Guy, "I didn't get to see my beloved old man." So boring. *So* off screen action. Instead, write it so we *watch* her get turned away from the parental unit's locked laboratory by Swiss Guards (on loan from the Vatican!). We *see* her argue with them fruitlessly. We *see* her throw herself against the shiny stainless steel door and *hear* her loving father on the other side, weeping. *That's* how we should learn she can't be with her dad.

Don't tell us about it. *Show us*. Put the cool stuff front and center.

Go through your draft with a highlighter (color of your choice!) and mark every piece of information or action or revelation that happens off stage. Much of which can then be brought into the spotlight. We want to see the crucial moment as it happens. Sometimes that sort of thing must remain off screen, but a lot of useful business is off screen because the writer made a mistake.

Don't have a character bounce in, bewigged and bepowdered and say, "Hey, whoa, those zany anti-British! They dressed up like Mohawks and tossed forty six tons of tea into Boston harbor! Those goofballs started a *riot!*" NO, NO NO!! You march your actors and camera and crew down to yon harbor and you *SHOW*. US. THAT. RIOT!

Do a read-through only asking ONE QUESTION (Chapter 68 of my fabulous book!): "What happens off screen that we might need to see?"

Guess what?! There are exceptions! Duhh. Have you seen KILLER JOE, directed by William Friedkin, shot by Caleb Deschanel, and written by Tracy Letts? Amazingly intense. It's a testament to the filmmakers' skill that, watching the film, it never occurred to me it might have been based on a play.

One of the crucial relationships happens almost completely off screen. Joe, played by Matthew McConaughey, is a Dallas police Detective. He has a relationship with Dottie, Juno Temple, the younger sister of a drug dealer he's involved with in a murder-for-hire scheme. Joe and Dottie's first two encounters, sort of a first date and a second date, take place in the living room of the mobile home where Dottie and her brother, father, and stepmother live.

Until the finale, we never see another Joe / Dottie scene. They enjoy rendezvous three through however-many, off screen. He asks her to marry him, off screen. She accepts, off screen. *That* huge story point is revealed to the characters and audience just before the climax. Works great. But, I

guarantee you the screenwriter well understood the power of a late-in-the-fourth-quarter revelation versus the need to show us Joe and Dottie's burgeoning relationship and marriage proposal. The filmmakers knew about deciding to put events in front of the camera versus hiding them behind a closed door.

I was rewriting a scene... a guy comes up and asks a friend where's the girl who was waiting for him and the friend says, "She just left... with your dad." Ewwww. Scarred for life. I thought, "Hey, wouldn't it be BETTER if our hero walks up and watches in horror as his father convinces his crush to go with him...?" A heapin' helpin' of agony, made more powerful because it is not described as something that happened in another place, a while ago, but as an event the hero experiences first hand, making him (and us) FEEL more.

Have you seen WINTER'S BONE? Wow, was I dying to see that movie. I had tried to get the rights, so I obviously loved the story, characters, setting, everything. I failed at that mission and hadn't thought about the book in a while. Then all of a sudden it reared its Sundance-y head at a theater near me. So I went. High anticipation, to say the least.

It's a good movie, but... significant action and decision-making happened off screen. Repeatedly.

Ree Dolly has a problem (a drama & conflict-heaped problem, btw) and has to ask people for help. One by one they turn her down, and then, one by one, they decide OFF SCREEN to help her.

Here's the first of several instances. Ree desperately needs wheels. She can't solve her problem without transport. So she goes to ask her friend, who just had a baby and lives with her jerk husband, if she can borrow his truck. The friend asks the husband... off screen. The BFF comes in and tells Ree her husband won't lend her the truck. Mega-jerk.

Then, a day or so later, friend shows up out of the blue at Ree's house with the truck. We never hear how she convinced her man to loan it to Ree. That scene could have been a *showstopper*! Maybe she left him. She should. The movie is one hell of a lesson in "Take your birth control pill, honey." Not, however, a lesson in putting critical events on screen.

Be careful you don't have too much juicy stuff taking place OFF camera. Rule of thumb: action germane to your tale might oughta happen where we can see it.