

**MAKING THE ACTION COUNT**  
**(WHEN YOU'RE WRITING ACTION)**

One of my favorite dramatic scenes - arguably one of the best dramatic scenes in cinema - takes place in the second act of Sidney Lumet's 1976 film of Paddy Chayefsky's *Network*. In the scene, Max Schumacher, a middle-aged television news executive played by William Holden, breaks the news to his wife, Louise, played by Beatrice Straight, that he has been having an affair with a much younger colleague.

The scene opens in the kitchen of the couple's New York apartment and proceeds through three distinct dramatic movements. First comes Max's confession, in which he cannot admit even to himself that he is in love with another woman until Louise insists on it. Second, a triggered Louise delivers a scathing rebuke of her husband during which she exits the kitchen and travels to the apartment's living room.

In the third and final movement of the scene, Louise and Max have a surprisingly rational and mature discussion of their shared future in which he explains to her that while he must pursue this affair, he fully expects it to fail and will most likely come crawling back. Wounded but understanding that this sad drama will have to play itself out, Louise shows Max a moment of sympathy by telling him that he is in for a lot of pain, and then grudgingly asks him to move out.

What makes this scene great, in addition to the wonderful performances (Beatrice Straight won a best supporting actress Oscar for this film, which is amazing since this is her only scene in the entire movie) is that it is a textbook example of a successful dramatic scene. I have four requirements that a scene must meet to achieve this goal, they are:

## **1. CLEAR EMOTIONAL EXIGENCY**

This is Drama 101 - the single most basic need a scene must meet in order to be dramatic. The breakup scene in *Network* embodies this requirement in its most stripped down form: there are two people in a room, one of them wants something, the other one wants something different. They argue, and the scene ends when either one has gotten their way, or when the action leads to a surprising and unexpected resolution.

In the case of Max and Louise, the scene opens with Max having already told his wife of the affair, but not knowing what to do next. Louise reacts with denial, anger and bargaining: she clearly doesn't want this, and wants to know he truly feels love for the other woman. When her husband cannot answer, Louise's rage grows harder and harder as she explains that she needs for him to be in love with the other woman because that would at least justify the pain through which she is putting him.

As the scene ends, both of Max and Louise realize, and agree - with a surprising amount of lived-in ease and friendship between one another - that they will simply have to agree to play out the roles of spurned wife and philandering husband and separate, even if both of them know that the most likely outcome of this scenario is that Max will come crawling back to the marriage.

This classic thesis/atithesis/synthesis construction - this three-act play - is the heart of all drama, whether played with words, song, dance, or pantomime. For a scene to be dramatic the characters must meet under an explosive set of dramatic conditions, light the fuse, and see where the explosion leads.

## **2. CLEAR GEOGRAPHY**

Under Sidney Lumet's elegant and spare direction, this scene efficiently uses the physical movement of the actors in their space to support the dramatic action in the dialogue. The scene

opens with a husband and wife sitting across one another in a kitchen. This is perfectly normal domestic scene that establishes the status quo of the Schumacher's stable and functioning marriage... even though Max is guiltily smoking a cigarette, Louise is clearly distraught, and one of the early establishing shots of the sequence is framed from outside the kitchen doorway.

This framing indicates that the scene will most likely expand to include more of the space in which the Schumachers live. More importantly, when a director chooses to show the audience the characters through a threshold, the visual language implies that the audience is eavesdropping on something they shouldn't. Visually, this also carries the implication that what's taking place is private and sensitive.

As Louise's anger flares, she stands and exits the kitchen. This is important because the change of venue demonstrates an escalation in the emotional charge of the scene. The practical and metaphorical dialectics are pretty clear: from sitting in a kitchen to standing off against one another in a living room, from talking to shouting, from the hearth of a breaking home to a location closer to the front door through which Max will eventually exit. Even in a scene as simple as this one, the motion of the characters through their space is a clear indicator of their emotional state and the increasingly precarious state of their union.

### **3. CLEAR ESCALATION OF PHYSICAL OR EMOTIONAL JEOPARDY**

Because this scene has such a clear emotional exigency - a husband in the process of telling his wife news that he expects will end the marriage - the dramatic escalations are equally as sharp and crisp as they can be. First, Louise demands that Max own his sin and commit to the truth that he is in love with someone else. When Max commits to that truth, escalating the emotional stakes to the next level, Louise stands and tells him to get out.

Louise then explains that she sees this is Max's "last great roar" of masculine virility before he "settles into his emeritus years". She then makes it clear that she is enraged by the notion that someone else is getting his "winter passion" while she is cursed with nothing more than "the dotage".

Louise then lays down the law. "I am your WIFE, damn it" she screams, "and if you can't work up a winter passion for me then the least I require is respect and allegiance!" Even as she dries her tears, Louise turns the screw on Max by simply and quietly declaring "I hurt, don't you understand that? I hurt badly".

As the scene moves into its endgame, Louise, having screamed and cried, tearfully gathers herself together and asks that her husband "say something for God's sake". This is the moment in which the scene reaches its emotional climax and its most devastating moment. Max has nothing to say. Both their truths have been laid bare, and neither can go back on what they feel.

Now that the emotional stakes of the scene have risen past the point of no return, the stage is set for the fourth and final of my requirements for a successful dramatic scene:

#### **4. CLEAR RESOLUTION BASED ON CHARACTER**

*Network* is not just a study of character and the dynamics of power in personal and corporate affairs, it is also a film of ideas. One of these ideas is that television as an institution weaponizes the human need for stories. People seek narratives to tell them what is right and fair, the film implies, and television twists this need into a vapid, materialistic stream of lies and half truths that bring about emotional catharsis without meaningful consideration or growth. Television, *Network* tells the audience, turns the truth of human existence into a commodity to be consumed and disposed. Television is not a medium for truth, spiritual, or personal growth, one of the characters in the film rants, television is strictly in the boredom-killing business.

As Max and Louise's breakup scene reaches its climax, a very surprising turn takes place. Louise dries her tears, then she and her husband calmly discuss how his lover is much younger and completely driven by her work and the emotional education she received from television. Max breaks down the truth that his affair is doomed to failure by presenting it to Louise in the form of a number of TV movie-of-the-week scenarios which he claims have been concocted by his lover:

"My God, look at us, Louise. Here we are going through the obligatory middle of Act Two scorned-wife-throws-peccant-husband-out scene. But don't worry, I'll come back to you in the end. All of her plot outlines have me leaving her and coming back to you, because the audience won't buy a rejection of the happy American family. She does have one script in which I kill myself. An

adapted for television version of Anna Karenina where she's Count Vronsky and I'm Anna."

As Max finishes explaining the sad and predestined fate, Louise smiles through bitter tears and tells her husband that "you're in for some dreadful grief, Max".

It would be easy to dismiss the end of this scene as a pedantic lecture on television - especially since Paddy Chayefsky's language is ornate and erudite to a fault - but underneath all that verbiage is a rich character study. Max and Louise have been married a long time, they have raised children together, they are best friends.

This is what I mean by "a clear resolution based on character". What resolves this scene is the realization that this will most likely survive this trauma because it has gone beyond passion and dotage into a supportive union that can sustain its partners even amidst an awful betrayal. Even through the pain of this rupture, the abiding bond of decades of partnership remains.

A successful dramatic scene is one that the audience enters because of plot and exits because of character. Max is having an affair, it has come to a head, and he has to tell his wife - that's plot. Max's wife responds with extreme emotion but ultimately reveals a willingness to accept what has to happen, and even sympathizes with her husband, with whom she has a long established a mutually nurturing bond.

The final line in the breakup of the Schumacher marriage is the cherry on top. Beatrice Straight's delivery encompasses both bitter heartbreak and hard-earned marital sympathy and solidarity, and the line itself foretells film's third act, illustrating the best piece of scene-writing advice I have to give...

The end of a scene is a promise to the audience of what is to come, do not squander that trust.

Naturally, this deep examination of a bitter moment of middle-aged emotional turmoil - nestled in a pitch-black, unapologetically didactic and erudite, satire of capitalism and how it cheapens the human condition - can only bring me to the twenty minute orgy of knives, swords, guns, fists, and downright promiscuous vehicular carnage that makes up the core of the film *The Matrix: Reloaded*. Whatever one's opinion of the totality of that film may be, this extended sequence of non-stop action is

one of the finest ever put on film. The reasons are no different from what makes the break-up of Max and Louise Schumacher's marriage a gem of writing, acting, and direction.

For an action scene to truly engage the audience it has to be more than a collection of cool moments of physical prowess. This is especially true in the era of digital film making, in which computer generated imagery has basically ensured that, in the twenty-five or so years since the adoption of computer graphics and animation as the primary way to render visual effects on film, the audience has pretty much seen every plausible and implausible death-defying feat any film maker could imagine.

A refrain frequently heard from me is that action sequences - like sex scenes, training and make-over montages, and musical numbers - are all expressions of a dramatic need. They are what happens when dialogue will no longer suffice. As such, these kinds of sequences can easily exist for their own sake, but truly, they only sing when they are designed and built to carry the same freight as a dialogue sequence on the order of Max and Louise's breakup. These scenes merely use a different language to further plot and character meaningfully.

In *The Matrix: Reloaded*, the cyber-revolutionaries Neo, Morpheus, and Trinity enter the virtual reality city that makes up the Matrix on a mission to free a program known only as "The Keymaker", who has been imprisoned by another very powerful program named "The Merovingian". The sequence opens in the palatial penthouse apartment of The Merovingian, where Neo must fight off a small army of men to buy time for Morpheus and Trinity to get away with The Keymaker.

As Neo engages in an extended scene of hand-to-hand-to-swords-to-lances-to-axes combat, Morpheus and Trinity are pursued to the basement garage of The Merovingian's home by two of his henchmen: pale, white-dreadlocked twins with the power to make their bodies immaterial, walk through solid matter like ghosts. These pursuers prove nigh-impossible to kill since bullets and blades go through their incorporeal form. When Morpheus, Trinity, and The Keymaker boost one of The Merovingian's many Cadillac sedans, the Ghosts give chase through the city's downtown as Morpheus learns that the only exit from the virtual reality of The Matrix is across the length of the city, and accessible only through the freeway.

Going on the freeway, we are then told, is tantamount to suicide. Morpheus nevertheless takes the forbidden route, which leads to

an even bigger chase between our heroes and the Ghosts. This chase - which includes every possible iteration of hand-to-hand combat from over, under, behind, and above several rapidly moving vehicles - is then complicated by the arrival of the Police, several of the invincible Agents of The Matrix, and even other members of the insurgency who have been called in to arrest Morpheus and his team for insubordination.

The sequence takes about twenty minutes and is absolutely breathtaking. While a huge amount of the credit for that goes to the visually brilliant writer/directors the Wachowski sisters, and the stunt and vfx teams that choreographed and rendered all the mayhem, the primary reasons why the sequence works are the same as those that make the breakup of Max and Louise's marriage. The sequence is a three-act play with a beginning, middle, and end, clear emotional stakes, endlessly escalating complications, and a resolution based not on more and bigger action, but on the convictions of the characters.

Any writer tackling an action sequence, be it simple fisticuffs or an epic conflagration on this scale, would do well to measure the dramatic needs of their story against the spectacle they are about to mount. In the case of Morpheus and his band of rebels trying to escape The Matrix with The Keymaker, the sequence breaks down as follows:

## **1. CLEAR EMOTIONAL EXIGENCY**

In their gross anatomy, *The Matrix* and its sequels tell the story of how geeky computer hacker Thomas Anderson (played by Keanu Reeves) transforms into Neo, the Christ-like savior of all humanity in their war against the Thinking Machines who have enslaved the majority of the race in the virtual reality of the titular Matrix. The truck chase at the heart of *The Matrix: Reloaded*, however, is not about Neo.

In his role as Neo's mentor, Morpheus (played with Shakespearean gravitas by the great Laurence Fishbourne) has one abiding character trait. Morpheus believes in a prophecy that states that Neo is the Chosen One, and that by his aiding and abetting Neo's hero's journey, the war humanity has been fighting against the machines will come to a definitive end.

Morpheus is a True Believer, and the strength of his belief drives almost every significant plot point in *The Matrix*:

*Reloaded* until the final movement of the film in which Morpheus' mission ultimately fails and the prophecy is proven to be a lie perpetrated by the machines to keep the more rebellious element of humanity in check. In many ways, this second chapter of the trilogy is more Morpheus' story than it is Neo's: it tells the tale of how Morpheus' faith pushes him and the plot only to tragically break him of his illusions in the end.

This epic action sequence, then, exists not because a plot device crucial to the film's third act (getting The Keymaker) requires it, but because it is a test of Morpheus' faith in the prophecy and in his friends. Morpheus goes against direct orders to enter The Matrix to retrieve The Keymaker, who is crucial to the film's endgame, and that endgame is entirely motivated by Morpheus' faith as it is affirmed by his survival in this sequence.

Consider the monologue Morpheus delivers to his team after the truck chase has ended and they reunite to plan their final assault on the machines:

"Tonight is not an accident. There are no accidents. We have not come here by chance. I do not believe in chance when I see 3 objectives, 3 captains, 3 ships. I do not see coincidence, I see providence, I see purpose. I believe it is our fate to be here. It is our destiny. I believe this night holds for each and every one of us the very meaning of our lives."

This are words of rock-hard belief. In the context of *The Matrix: Reloaded*, the events that lead up to, and that happen in, the truck chase happen because of Morpheus' faith in Neo and the prophecy. The events that come after the action sequence happen because the very extremity of what comes to pass in the action sequence proves to Morpheus that his faith is true and that its signs and portents are worth following at the risk of the very future of humanity.

## **2. CLEAR GEOGRAPHY**

The geography of the virtual city that makes up The Matrix is highly variable: one major plot point in this sequence is that the doors in The Merovingian's house can be programmed to lead to different places in the world of the Matrix. As a result, Neo is sidelined for the balance of the truck chase, as The Merovingian sends him five-hundred miles away to an unpopulated mountainous range.



For a world that is in a lot of ways predicated on geographical unpredictability, the success of the truck chase depends entirely on the audience's perception that there is a specific goal at the end of this freeway and that it can be reached. Once Morpheus, Trinity, and The Keymaker move from the bowels of The Merovingian's home into its basement parking garage, all of the geographical chicanery that landed Neo five-hundred miles away comes to a swift end. The story becomes a desperate race to get from point A to point B.

Here is the dialogue that establishes the parameters of the chase, it takes place as Morpheus, Trinity, and The Keymaker drive their stolen Caddy through the streets of what appears to be a densely populated downtown. The lines are spoken between Morpheus and Link, his "operator" who sits outside the virtual relaiity and serves as a sort of guide:

**Morpheus:** Get us out of here, Link.

**Link:** That won't be easy, sir.

**Morpheus:** I know. We're inside the core network.

**Link:** Yes sir. The only exit I got near you is the Winslow overpass.

**Morpheus:** Off the freeway?

**Link:** Yes, sir.

**Morpheus:** Fine, we'll make it.

One of the inviolable rules of the *Matrix* films is that there is only one way to exit the virtual reality: by making a call to the operator outside the Matrix on a landline phone. Considering that the characters in the film continually talk on cell phones, this is a both a droll commentary on the march of technology as well as a nifty plot device. The audience may not know what "the core network" is (the term is not explained any further) but most of us understand the scarcity of old-timey phone booths in any densely populated modern downtown.

Essentially, these twenty minutes of film boil down to one goal: the heroes need to find their phone.

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In apropos of the above, I can offer some practical advice. Whenever I am called to write an action sequence, I always start in the same place: I figure out what the characters want, how I need for it to be resolved... and then I draw a map.

For episode #306 of the Netflix Series *The Witcher*, titled "Everyone Has A Plan 'til They Get Punched In The Face" I had to write the climactic battle of the season. This sequence took up two thirds of the episode's length, encompassed four different factions including all of the series leads as well as the majority of its supporting cast, was divided into a series of smaller skirmishes in several locations, and provided the moment in which every one of the season's plot strands came together, and subsequently rocketed away in several new directions.

I won't go into further specifics - the *Witcher* lore is every bit as complicated as that of *The Matrix*. What here is that from Jump Street, I knew there were several events that needed to happen for this scene and this episode to pull their dramatic weight in the context of the greater story. The *Witcher* is based on a series of novels, this battle is a crucial event, and the events of the episode not only resolve a number of plotlines, they also separate the heroes for the rest of the season, initiating new stories that go on for the length of the fourth and fifth season of the series.

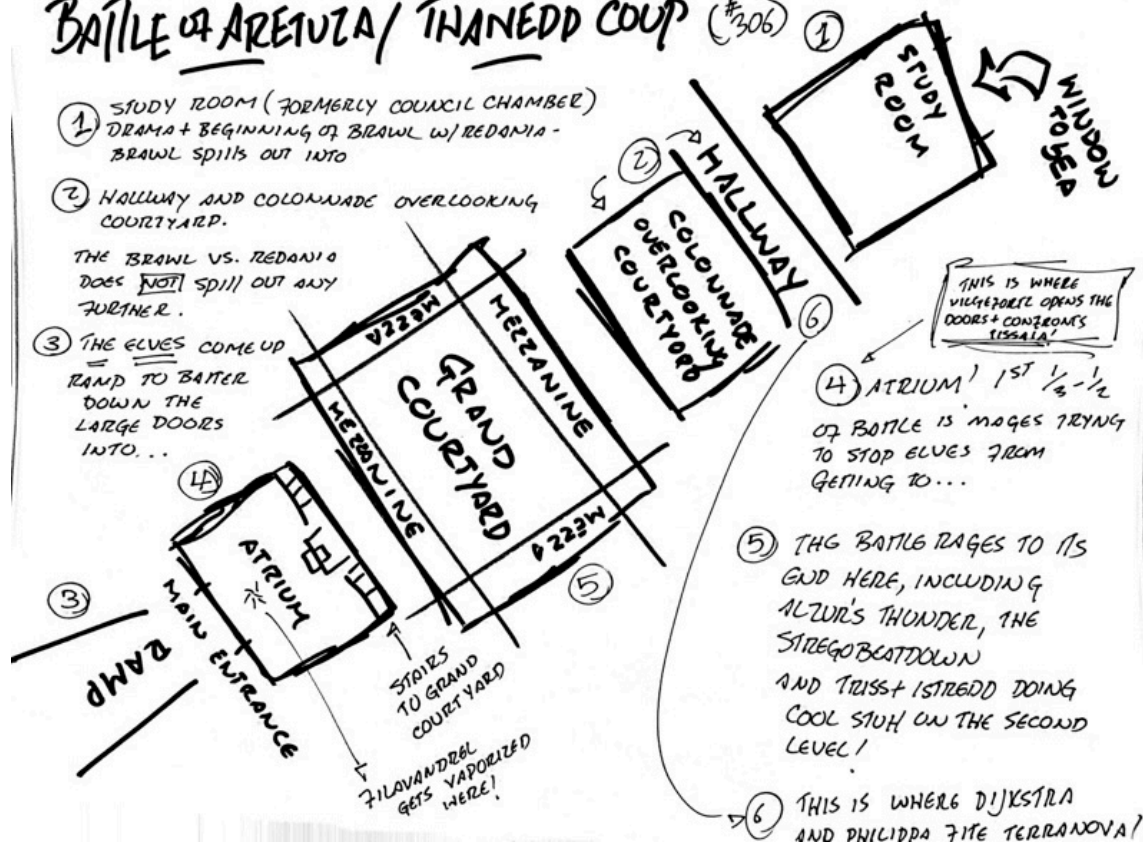
The battle took place in and around a castle called "Aretuza", and the main theater of battle would be a number of rooms, chambers, and halls in Aretuza (in the novels, the battle takes place over two separate but adjacent castles, I condensed that for the sake of both the show's budget and my own sanity). Knowing how those places would physically lay out was crucial both for me and for the production.

The better the writer understands the motion of the action in space, the better equipped the production team is to build the right sets, choreograph the fights within them, and direct the actors in their action.

My early plot of the battle's action also points out where in the theater of war some of the key events are to take place. The battle begins in the rearmost room of the castle, but knowing that certain things needed to happen - the violent deaths of several characters, the entrance of the climactic casting of a doomsday spell, a betrayal from within that allows the elf army entrance into the keep - and where and when they happened in the story, dictated how quickly the battle would spill from that small room through the rest of the site.

This is what my first map looked like:

# BATTLE OF AREVUZA / THANEED COUP (#306)



The battle starts as a brawl in a library where one faction of mages has imprisoned the opposing faction. While that brawl ends conclusively, its immediate aftermath, and the fights that break out as a result, carry several characters out through a colonnade to the large courtyard at the center of the castle. The battle is then complicated by the entrance of an entirely new faction - a commando force of pissed-off elves fighting as proxies for the overarching villain of the series - through the main gate on the opposite side of the castle. The elf army then proceeds into an entrance atrium and moves to join the fight in the courtyard.

Once I had pared down the geography of the battle from the two separate castles in the novel to a single venue, I made the decision that this courtyard would provide the choke point where the parties would clash. As I figured out what had to happen to get them there, both the timeline and the level of escalation of action within that timeline became clear to me.

If you look closely at the map you will see that the numbered events each indicate a dramatic conflict ("This is where Vilgefartz opens the doors and confronts Tissaia" or "Dijkstra and Philippa fight Terranova"), or a significant event such as the death of a major character ("Filavandrel gets vaporized here"). The reason for this is simple: every stop on the way to

that courtyard represented a character moment that had to happen for the battle to get there on the road to its resolution.

In the planning of an action sequence, space and time become synonymous. You begin by figuring out the conflicting goals, and then decide how much space there needs to be between the characters and those goals. Plotting the motion of the actors and their action through the playing space is the beginning of understanding not just where, but when the key emotional moments that complicate the journey have to happen.

Much of what dictated the flow of the Aretuza battle was knowing that in addition to the action, a series of personal betrayals, alliances, and reversals had to take place to motivate the battle into its endgame, in which the sorceress who rules Aretuza casts a spell called "Alzur's Thunder" as a weapon of last resort, setting the entire place on fire and sealing the demise of her castle and the school for mages it contained. Deciding where those events would happen was a crucial part of deciding when they would happen. In an action sequence, these decisions are always intertwined.

As complicated as the battle I had to write in *The Witcher* may have been once it was completed, the map I drew to guide my process is pretty cut and dry. The vast majority of the players had to meet in a central location, and the map was my way of deciding the where and when.

I frequently refer to the act of designing an action sequence as "Air Traffic Control" because of the complexity of the choreography usually involved. There is one crucial difference: the storyteller as Air Traffic Controller isn't looking to land the planes safely, but rather to position and guide them so that when they crash, either into each other or the ground beneath, they do so with the brightest and most impressive explosion.

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In the scene breaking up the Schumacher marriage, a simple physical geography illustrates a much greater emotional geography. A trip from the kitchen to the living room represents the much larger and complex distribution of emotions that go from the revelation of a betrayal to the conclusion that the marriage has to separate but will most likely reunite.

In the truck chase from *The Matrix: Reloaded*, a complicated physical geography - from the bowels of The Merovingian's home

into a parking garage, through the crowded downtown of the core networks into the expanse of the city's freeway system - illustrates a simple emotional geography. If Morpheus fails to find the phone booth at the Winslow overpass, then the faith on which he has built his entire life will prove false.

In order to achieve its dramatic goal, the truck chase demands that every possible obstacle be thrown between Morpheus and the eventual confirmation of his faith (spoilers: they make it out), which leads to my third consideration for a scene's success:

### **3. CLEAR ESCALATION OF PHYSICAL OR EMOTIONAL JEOPARDY**

This is where the truck chase in *The Matrix: Reloaded* becomes a transcendent work of popular culture. If this entire chase is a test of Morpheus' faith in Neo, and the prophecy of The One, then it stands to reason that the tests be extreme, ongoing, ever-larger, and that they isolate Morpheus to the point where that faith and that faith alone is his only way out.

The first act of the chase is about separating Morpheus from Neo both physically and spiritually. The Merovingian tasks a platoon of henchmen to kill Neo, and Neo takes all of them on to buy Morpheus, Trinity and The Keymaker time to escape. After dispatching all of The Merovingian's henchies, Neo's attempt to rejoin his team is thwarted by The Merovingian's trickery - he is transported to a mountain range five-hundred miles away from his team at the time they need him most.

Even though Neo is a superhuman being with the ability to fly, it is now clear that he will be out of the action for the balance of the sequence.

There is also psychological aspect to Neo's separation from Morpheus and his team. During their confrontation, The Merovingian makes repeated allusions to Neo's "predecessors", setting up a key plot point in the *Matrix* franchise: Neo is not the first Chosen One, and if things don't go his way, he won't be the one to end the war, but rather one more link in a long chain of false hopes dealt by the machines to men like Morpheus as a way to control their rebellious impulses.

Furthering this growing doubt in Neo's ability to aid his friends is a key moment in the fight between him and The Merovingian's crew. Neo's hand is cut by one of their blades. Seeing a drop of

blood fall from Neo's hand to the floor, The Merovingian makes a dire declaration: "You see? He's just a man. Kill him."

While the audience knows that Neo is going to survive this encounter, this is after all the halfway point of the second film in a trilogy or which he is the main character, this physical and conceptual separation between Morpheus and his savior help to set up the primary oppositional tenet of this sequence. Even with his incredible powers, Neo may just not have what it takes to pull his friends out of the fire.

Worse yet, The Merovingian is not just a formidable villain, he is a diabolical and supernatural figure unlike any adversary previously seen in the films. Not only is the Merovingian described as a "very old and powerful program" (foreshadowing the idea that this is yet another version of The Matrix in a cycle that has been going on for longer than our characters realize and thus the human revolution is pre-destined to fail), all of his henchmen, we are told, are creatures from earlier versions of the Matrix in which werewolves, vampires, and ghosts roamed the land.

In an escalation from the beginning of this film, and the film that preceded it, Neo is not just fighting armed rivals, he is fighting mythological monsters who may just either kill or at least detain him long enough to prevent Morpheus from getting away with The Keymaker.

Of course, being a man of faith, Morpheus takes this physical separation from Neo in stride. When Trinity asks "what about Neo?" Morpheus offhandedly replies "he can handle himself".

Now come the escalating, and increasingly Byzantine physical challenges to Morpheus' success. The two ghosts are first. They can fly through solid matter, cannot be killed by knives or projectile weapons, they have a Cadillac Escalade SUV the size of a Sherman Tank, and they carry extremely heavy duty combat grade machine guns.

Once we have seen the Ghost's formidable abilities as illustrated by Morpheus and company's narrow escape from the parking garage, the conditions of the scene are established: they need to get to the Winslow overpass. Immediately, the Ghosts come up in their own vehicle, firing their own heavy ordnance.

At the same time, the entirety of the city's Police is tasked with stopping Morpheus, which adds a considerable of police

vehicles and armed cops to complicate the pandemonium. Almost simultaneously, Link, Morpheus' operator, gets a call from Niobe, Morpheus' ex-girlfriend and a loyal soldier of the resistance. She explains that she has been sent into the Matrix with the task of arresting Morpheus for the insubordinate action of going after The Keymaker.

Almost as soon as our heroes enter the freeway with all of these nemeses on their six, a fourth and even worse complication rears its head: Agents. In the lore of the Matrix, the black suited, sunglass-wearing Agents of the Matrix simply cannot be defeated in combat. They are the manifestation of the machines' unstoppable mechanical will in its purest form. What was once simply mayhem is now full-on bedlam.

As the chase develops, Trinity and The Keymaker separate from Morpheus, leaving him on foot - alone on the freeway to face the Ghosts with nothing but a samurai sword and a handgun - while they try to escape on a Ducati. After dispatching the Ghosts in an astonishing display of courage, resourcefulness, and badassery, Morpheus winds up with The Keymaker again as Trinity makes her own exit from the freeway... on top of a semi truck, fighting an Agent in hand-to-hand combat in a moment that climaxes with the Agent driving the truck in a collision course with another semi truck also driven by an Agent.

All through this ordeal, and up to this point, the few lines of dialogue spoken by Morpheus all speak to undying faith in spite of growing peril. Morpheus assures Trinity that Neo can handle himself, he tells his operator "remember what I told you," a callback to the very first lines in the movie, in which Morpheus admonishes Link to trust him in all things.

Finally, when Trinity reminds Morpheus that he has always advised his people to stay off the freeway because being in such a contained space with no place to run is suicide, Morpheus simply replies "then let us hope that I was wrong".

Nearing the end of the truck chase, it is clear that Morpheus has finally found himself in a no-win scenario that can neither be changed by his own strength, courage, or ability, nor by any of his comrades. If you doubt the truth of this, there is one final and tell-tale sign that Morpheus has hit rock bottom.

If there is one thing for which these films are known it is their relentless commitment to cyberpunk aesthetics, most saliently in

the clothes worn by the characters, typified by long leather overcoats and sunglasses, all at the bleeding edge of fashion. There is not a single moment in this sequence in which Trinity, Neo, Morpheus, take off their sunglasses... up until the moment Morpheus has to fight an Agent on top of a moving truck.

As the fight with the Agent progresses, Morpheus loses his sword, his coat, and his ever-present, character-defining, signature pince-nez glasses. Metaphorically, the man has been laid bare. When Morpheus speaks his last line, the audience is looking straight into his eyes: they might as well be looking at his soul.

And so, in the last few seconds of this sequence, the only thing that can save Morpheus and The Keymaker from inescapable doom is faith, leading to:

#### **4. CLEAR RESOLUTION BASED ON CHARACTER**

One of the cleverest tricks the Wachowski sisters pull in this sequence is to bench Neo for long enough to make us forget - at least for the moment - that Morpheus and company basically have Superman in their corner. This is crucial for the audience's understanding of the stakes of the chase.

The climax of the first *Matrix* movie saw Neo dispatch an Agent, making it clear that there is very little that is impossible for him. That said, the laws of physics still (mostly) operate in the Matrix, and even the Chosen One with his ability to fly cannot change the five-hundred miles of distance between himself and the action.

The upshot of this is that in the final moment, when Morpheus finally says something that betrays a chink in the normally adamant armor of his faith, the audience actually wonders, for the split-second between the sequence's Darkest Hour and its character-based resolution, whether he will make it out of this seemingly insurmountable situation. This alone is a pretty amazing achievement. Here's what Morpheus says:

"Neo, if you're out there, I could use some help".

For the potential last words of a man standing on top of a speeding semi truck barreling head-on against another semi truck, both driven by invulnerable Agents who have nothing to fear from



the approaching lethal collision, this line is two things. One, it is a lovely bit of understatement that proves once more why Morpheus is straight-up-no-chaser one of the coolest badasses in the history of narrative storytelling.

Two and more importantly, the line shows that Morpheus is at the end of his rope physically and emotionally. The exertions of the last twenty minutes have taken up all of his resources and neither the remains of his stamina nor his tactical skill can change what's coming. This is the first time in the entire *Matrix* trilogy in which Morpheus - a man who leads his people with fearless certainty - finds himself asking his higher power for help.

Which is exactly why - when the trucks crash, erupt into a massive fireball whose shockwave that throws both Morpheus and The Keymaker up into the air over an inferno... and Neo flies in at supersonic speed, grabs both Morpheus and The Keymaker by their collars, and spirits them far away from the destruction - the audience feels a palpable thrill.

The end of this sequence is, without a doubt, a *deus-ex-machina*, a plot device that many writers are taught is somehow "cheating". Given the set-up, development, and thematic exigencies of this scene, the *deus-ex* is completely earned and dramatically satisfying. The sequence always centers Morpheus (and his undying faith) as he and his team go deeper and deeper into the abyss. The sequence continually showcases Morpheus' strengths, and gives him a number of victories... right before landing him at an endpoint where his only recourse is prayer.

Concurrently, the sequence also pulls the aforementioned sleight of hand of benching Neo just long enough that his final appearance registers as a genuinely surprising reward for Morpheus' trials, all while setting up the renewed resolve that propels Morpheus into the film's third act. While this sequence is almost entirely about plot, plot complication, plot escalation, and plot convolution, the resolution is strictly based on one character's complete and undying devotion to his cause, the filmmakers' ability to temporarily fool us into thinking that his faith may not be reciprocated, and a final thundering moment of redemption that tells both Morpheus and the audience that his faith was never misplaced (the cruel and tragic irony being that by the end of the film it becomes abundantly clear that his faith was, in fact, misplaced).

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One of the inviolate rules of giving advice in any field is that an army of "well actuallys" immediately rises up to gainsay anything anyone ever has to say. So let me just do it for them: I am certain that there are many successful and entertaining action sequences that do not follow the pattern described above.

Movies like *John Wick* and its sequels (all of which, for the record, I enjoyed enormously and consider to be a gold standard) feature a fair number of action sequences that earn their keep entirely on the technical creativity of the writers, and the visual virtuosity of the directors and their stunt and VFX teams.

Specifically, John Wick is not a dynamic character, and every one of the films in which he features follow a very specific pattern. By the thirty minute mark, John Wick has learned whose ass he needs to kick at the film's end. He then spends the rest of the film kicking every ass standing between him and the final ass.

John Wick kicks ass, kicking that ass puts John Wick in a position to make a devil's bargain that causes him great suffering but puts him on the road to the next ass up the ladder, he kicks that ass, he bargains and suffers some more, he kicks the next ass, and so on and so on until the end of the fourth movie, in which John Wick finally dies... not because someone kills him, but because he seemingly decides to!

Every action sequence in which John Wick takes part is a test of a single aspect of John Wick's character: he is an endlessly creative killing machine and is pathologically incapable of leaving anyone standing who gets between him and the final boss. Frankly, I see the John Wick films as sort of "reverse slasher films". The main pleasure of seeing the *Friday The 13th* films, for instance, is seeing the increasingly creative ways the film makers devise for Jason Voorhees to slaughter the promiscuous teenagers that always seem to invade his peaceful lakeside camp.

The pleasure of the *John Wick* films is that we not only get to see some truly tasty kills, we also get to see them from the point of view of - and feel the justification of - the mass murderer at its center. These films are endlessly and inventive. Every carefully choreographed head shot delivered to a villain by Mister Wick is a beautifully wrapped present for the audience - proving beyond a doubt that style and spectacle alone can carry not just one film, but an entire quartet and multiple spin-offs.

But are these the action sequences we remember? The ones that hit us both in the adrenalin receptors and the feels? I have seen all of the *John Wick* films multiple times, and while I love the character for his steely-eyed determination, impeccable style, and the sheer audacity with which he delivers kill shots the audience has never seen, I still have a hard time remembering which action sequence goes in which film and why.

In contrast, consider the climactic light saber duels in the George Lucas-era *Star Wars* films. Each of these battles, regardless of the quality of their fight choreography or any of the other physical aspects of their execution, carries with it an enormous amount of story and character. Nothing is ever the same at the end of any one of these duels: Obi-Wan Kenobi loses his master and winds up custodian to a Chosen One he won't be able to control, that Chosen One, Anakin Skywalker loses his arm and begins his journey toward becoming a soulless cyborg warrior for evil, Obi-Wan Kenobi is forced to face Anakin and injures him so badly that he becomes Darth Vader - the aforementioned soulless cyborg warrior for evil - nineteen years later, Darth Vader finally kills his old master only to see him become more powerful in death than in life, Darth Vader cuts off his son Luke Skywalker's hand and reveals his paternity, Luke defeats Darth Vader in light saber combat only to redeem him by refusing to deliver a death blow.

These are all moments of heavy, archetypal drama that alter not just the lives of the characters, but also the fate of the galaxy they inhabit. While the *John Wick* films have rightfully earned their keep in the pantheon of entertainment, the *Star Wars* literally changed the face of popular culture for the entire world and have remained dominant as a cultural touchstone for almost five decades.

I believe that the reason for this is that *Star Wars* makes its action count by favoring sequences of combat that lead to shocking turns of character and destiny. The exploits of an unstoppable hitman as he mows down armies of bad guys on his way to exacting revenge on a world-wide criminal syndicate are without a doubt smashing entertainment. The saga of a family's journey from good to evil and back, and how it changes the history of an entire galaxy, is the stuff of modern-day myth.

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There is only one absolute in storytelling: the audience must be entertained. Not everyone's definition of entertainment is the same, for some it's tasty kills and creatively staged mayhem for its own sake. Be that as it may, some entertainment transcend mere boredom-killing, as Paddy Chayefsky put it, and that only happens when all of the elements of established jeopardy, escalating stakes, plot, and character come together into a singular, cohesive, and integrated whole.

This truth holds across all genres and types of scenes. What matters most is that the action - whether it depicts the end of a marriage, or the destruction of dozens of vehicles and the expenditure of hundreds of rounds of ammunition in an effort to extract a program from a virtual reality Matrix which serves as the lynchpin for a war between humanity and artificial intelligence - places the characters in a situation from which they could not possibly emerge unscathed, and then proceeds to scathe them to within an inch of their lives until the very contents of their soul bring about a resolution that changes everything in their lives. It is at this intersection that storytelling truly comes to life; and it is at this intersection that those of us who strive to entertain our audiences fully should try to live.