

THE EDGE

by James P. Mercurio

GREEN (VO)

Two guys in the woods. In a tent. Big bear comes up, he's gonna eat 'em. One guy reaches in his pack, starts putting on his running shoes. The other guy "you idiot, you can't run faster than a bear..." Guy says "I don't have to run faster than the bear, I just have to run faster than you..."

EVERYONE LAUGHS

ANGLE: INT. THE PLANE

MORSE

You know why that's particularly funny...? (PAUSE) The man would not be in the woods with his running shoes. (PAUSE) He wouldn't take them in the woods. So the joke indicates hostility on the part of the man who brought the shoes. (PAUSE) It indicates, in effect, that he brought the other man into the woods to kill him.

I can do no better explaining the plot of the movie *The Edge* than this early exchange between Bob Green, a superficial fashion photographer, and Charles Morse, a detached billionaire. In David Mamet's screenplay they get stuck in the woods together, and Green wants to kill Morse for reasons you'll soon discover. Possibly the most amazing thing about this fun piece of writing is that it didn't even make it into the movie. In *The Edge*, Mamet and Lee Tamahori, the film's director, use naturalistic, mostly forgettable dialogue to create a sparse, intelligent movie that transcends the bounds of the run-of-the-mill action flick.



I Think Therefore I Am

A lot of reviewers have been calling *The Edge* a thinking-man's action film, because Anthony Hopkins's character Charles Morse dispenses lore about the great outdoors. But I think that a lot of these reviewers are missing the point. Not that Morse isn't an intelligent character, or that intelligent people wouldn't enjoy this movie, but Mamet, greatly aided by Tamahori, makes a point. For all of Morse's planning, scheming and pontificating, almost every piece of knowledge and plan-of-attack that Morse asserts ends up failing. By carefully frustrating viewers' expectations of the genre, Mamet defines his bookworm billionaire, ultimately, as a man of action, and his nemesis, Bob Green (Alec Baldwin), as a character whose specific flaw is inaction.

With naturalistic dialogue that functions as action (even when "supposed" exposition is revealed) Mamet is able to clarify his theme of action versus inaction. And through the use of a tag-line, one simple sentence, and an accompanying image system, his thriller transcends its physical jeopardy into a metaphysical arena.

For all of the information that Morse has learned from his book, *Lost in the Wilds* (The filmmakers wisely chose to let the book get lost when the plane crashes, unlike the draft I read where it remains with them the entire time), the filmmakers carefully contrive such that practically none of that information actually helps them accomplish any of their goals. The compass (trying to magnetize aluminum in the first place, tsk, tsk) leads them right back to where they started. They don't catch a fish. The "fire from ice" trick isn't used. The swinging bear trap doesn't work very well. After reading the first-aid kit

and attending to Green, Morse can't save his life.

Instead of knowledge assisting the characters in their survival, Mamet uses it differently. In this scene, Green, after seeing a rescue plane fly away, drops to the ground, frustrated, giving up.

MORSE

Did you know you can make Fire from Ice...?

GREEN SHAKES HIS HEAD, DEJECTED, MEANING "NOT NOW..."

MORSE

You can make fire from ice. Hello? I'm talking to you... Do you know how that would be done? (PAUSE) Robert? (PAUSE) Robert. Can you think?

GREEN

You Yankees. Isn't it...? Isn't it?

MORSE

Fire from Ice, can you think how?

GREEN

Sit up there... drinks and Golf. Screwing the Maid (PAUSE) But get you in an emergency....

MORSE

...that's right.

GREEN

N'you bloom. You make me sick. You

make me sick, d'you know that...?

MORSE

I'm sure that I do.

GREEN

You make me sick. What the hell puts you off... Jews and Public Speaking, I'd bet.

MORSE

Fire from ice. Can you think how? Can you think how?

GREEN

I don't care how, Charles.

MORSE

Do you want to die?

Even if this scene were in the hands of a novice screenwriter, and he or she had to solve the problem of how to reveal to the audience that Morse knows how to make fire, this scene would be a strong way to dramatize the exposition. The question he asks Green however, is not a question; it's antagonism—an aggressive attempt to push him to think clearly so he can help both of them survive. Although Morse's solution to how to make fire from ice is interesting, it is not the point of the scene. At the end of the scene Morse even says, "But I doubt we'll be reduced... we still have the matches." It's not even exposition, because it is not a setup where thirty pages later you see them saving themselves by making a fire with this knowledge.

In general, any time a movie has a character tell us exactly how a plan is going to go and then the plan goes exactly that way (or at least with no additional irony), the movie is not going to work. But the dialogue reveals Morse as a man who is very strong-willed and determined, and Green as a man who ironically, quite-unironically, does want to die. This is a dramatic scene about a person imploring another person to think, to do, to act, to BE!

Rhetoric as Action

As Charles Deemer wrote in *Creative Screenwriting*, "Rhetoric (storytelling) itself becomes a kind of action, as well as contributing to character development and often to scene tension."¹ Deemer was discussing Tarantino's work, but it's equally applicable to Mamet's. When Mamet has a charac-

ter tell a story, impart knowledge, or tell a joke, he is careful to not give out information for its own sake. It must not stall the script or stop the dramatic momentum. You'll find that when it's done right, rhetoric has, as in the "foot massage" argument and Samuel Jackson's repeated religious diatribes in *Pulp Fiction*, as many of these characteristics as possible:

- Very funny or intrinsically interesting
- Ironic
- Revealing character
- Motif/metaphor/theme-related
- Creating tension for the audience or conflict between characters
- Foreshadowing or setup or pay off

If you can apply the same criteria to long monologues or joke/storytelling in your script, it can help your writing a lot. Tarantino's diatribes (as an actor) in, say, *Destiny Turns on the Radio* and *Desperado* don't work as well as they do in his own scripts, because they aren't functioning dramatically on several levels at once.

The "fire from ice" scene above has almost all of these characteristics. Mamet specifically foils the last characteristic, because we never see them actually rely on the information as a lesser writer might do. The "two guys in the woods" story at the beginning of this article is a textbook example of how Mamet creatively integrates rhetoric/dialogue as action. Not only does it foreshadow the central issue of the movie, it also reveals character: how analytical and perceptive Morse is, and how good he is at reading other people's covert hostility. It's also an interesting insight into the nature of comedy, which Freud says, always has a hostile intention.² The story is also funny, and Morse's response is revealing.

To Be or Not To Be

When Green is on his deathbed, he says to Morse:

GREEN

...Hey. I'm dying, and I never did a goddamn thing.

This might seem like a throwaway line, but it actually joins in with several other of Morse's lines like "Do you want to die?" "You want to die out here?" and "Should we just lay down and die?" to show that Green does want to die, that he is a per-

son unable to take action. This is a subtle and elaborate theme which is set up several different ways in the dialogue, but also in the plotting. Green's failure to bury the bloodied cloth leads to the death of Stephen. Green's failure to put back the note on the door puts them in more danger. He fails to keep the fire going. He can't find his own woman. He doesn't even want to add three hours to determine the time in New York when in Los Angeles. An additional line of dialogue that is not in the draft of the script I read but which is in the movie really helps to clarify this theme. Morse knows that Green is gravely injured and he tells him not to die, and Green responds, "Don't tell me what to do." These are Green's last words before he dies. Passive aggressive. Appropriate. He dies simply because he won't do anything—even live.

The Physical

Why is Morse the hero? And what is it about him that makes him dramatically able to save himself from the physical danger? At one point Morse says to Green:

MORSE

I'm not dense Robert, I just have no imagination.

This is a great line because most of the audience thinks it is said with irony, but the great irony is that it's not ironic at all. For all of Morse's information and ideas, the reason they are still alive is because he's a man of action, a person bold enough, even under the worst conditions, to act to try to change his predicament.

Let's look at the second biggest decision Morse makes. In this scene, the bear has tracked them down again, and they know he is lurking nearby:

MORSE

...he's a mankiller. He's been stalking us from the first. He's toying with us.

GREEN

...what are we going to do?

MORSE

...when they get the scent of blood...

GREEN (STANDS

AND GRABS MORSE)

What are we going to do....?

MORSE THROWS HIM OFF

GREEN

What are we going to do?

MORSE

What do I have a plan? Am I supposed to have a plan...?

Morse moves to a piece of the encircling fire, which has burnt down. He starts to build it up. He takes the note "Gone Bear Hunting, Jack Hawk" from his pocket.

GREEN (PEERING

The five consecutive occurrences of "What are we going to do?" clarify that Green is somebody unable to do anything and it is Morse who will have to come up with the decision.

GREEN

What do we use for bait?

MORSE (ABSENTLY)

...we 'lure' him - you know, Masai boys, in Africa. Eleven years old. They kill lion with spears.

GREEN

Uh huh. (Pause)... how do we lure him?

MORSE

What one can do, another can do. You weakling. Do you want to die out here...? (PAUSE) DO you? (PAUSE) You coward. (PAUSE) Do you hear me? (PAUSE) "I'm going to kill the bear." Say it...

GREEN

...I...

MORSE

Say it... "I'm going to kill the bear." Say it:

GREEN

I'm going to kill'im.

MORSE

And tomorrow I'm going to kill the motherfucker.



OUT PAST THE FLAMES)

What are we going to do Charles...?

ANGLE

MORSE PAUSES. HE TURNS OVER JACK HAWK'S NOTE, AND WE SEE THE 19TH CENTURY ADVERTISEMENT "STRIKE FAST" MATCHES, THE CAMPER'S FRIEND. AND THE DRAWING OF THE INDIAN SPEARING THE BEAR.

ANGLE

MORSE AND GREEN, MORSE LIGHTS THE FIRE

GREEN

... What are we going to do?

MORSE

We're going to kill the bear.

MORSE WITHDRAWS THE SPEARPOINT FROM THE FIRE, LOOKS AT IT, HE NODS AND REPLACES THE SPEARPOINT, REVOLVING IT IN THE FIRE.

MORSE

... and what One can do, another can do...

(Green doubts their ability to kill the bear. In the script, Morse shows Green a picture in the book of how it will be done, but this is excised from the film.)

GREEN

You can't kill the bear, Charles. He's...he's... he's (shakes his head) Been ahead of us, the whole, he's been playing with us, he can read our minds, he...

This naturalistic, repetitive emotional dialogue works on more than one level: it clarifies the theme about doing and being as the two characters reveal their true selves. The note gives him the idea, but he has to think to elaborate on how to do it. And the information Morse knows about the Masai isn't used to solve the problem. He uses the Masai stories to chide and inspire, but the resolution comes from the characters and more specifically their character.

The Metaphysical

Above, I asked the question what makes Morse the hero and why is he able to save himself? We dealt with how he saves himself from physical jeopardy, but how does he save himself spiritually?

After they have killed the bear:

MORSE (resuming a conversation)

...and so I said, and so I said, "if this is my life, then this is my life... but you can change your life. (Pause) Is that true?"

What follows is not in the script, but in the movie:

GREEN

Why wouldn't it be true?

MORSE

Because I never knew anyone who did actually change their life. (PAUSE) I'll tell you what. I'm going to start my life over.

GREEN

Yeah. (PAUSE) You'll be the first.

Morse makes the decision to change. Even after learning that Green has slept with his wife and tried to kill him, Morse makes the most important decision in the film and in his life: he decides to forgive Green and try to save him. The movie becomes bigger than just the outdoors—its physical environment. It gives us hope that people can rise to a higher level. Mamet and Tamahori use small snippets of dialogue, an image system, and a tag-line to help to foreshadow and strengthen this theme.

An “image system” is the term Robert McKee uses to explain a series of recurring images or ideas that help to clarify a theme or mood.³ Some may just call it a motif. The most interesting image system in the movie wasn't even in the script. The opening shot of the film makes the back of a plane and its wings look like a winged-totem or an angel. There are also bookending shots of a totem (which Morse notices and points out) at the lodge when the plane and helicopter land, and even a match-dissolve from Morse's face to the totem.

Morse's wife, lying back, with her arms folded behind her head like wings, ironically looking like an angel, calls her husband an angel and continues, “. . . everything but the wings.” Later, in persuading him to go on the trip, she tells him that it will be good to “get some air under your wings.”

A tag-line also works with this image system to show how Morse transcends the ground and rises to a new height. John Truby defines a tag-line as a line of dialogue that is repeated throughout a screenplay, but has a different meaning each time.

The tag-line “Never feel sorry for a man who owns a plane,” which was not in the draft I read, is repeated twice and meshes well with the other associations of visual and aural images of planes, angels, Morse, totems, and wings. The first time it is used, the line is a jaded remark, but later it raises questions about whether or not material things alone, without love, can make a person

happy. These are non-obtrusive, subtle ways where the dialogue, working in conjunction with the image system, helps clarify the film's theme and the purpose of the character's journey.

Taking Out All the Good Lines

In the preface of his *On Directing Film* (an equally good book for screenwriters), Mamet quotes Hemingway: “Write the story, take out all the good lines, and see if it still works.”⁴ In Mamet's writing, we see the same dramatic clarity. In *The Edge*, a character may be telling a story or imparting knowledge to the audience, but it is always in service of the very basic question: what does the character want? We may learn that Masai boys are good hunters, and that we can make fire from ice, and that bringing your sneakers into the woods indicates hostility, but these interesting and sometimes entertaining tidbits do nothing if they are not in the context of a flesh-and-blood character grappling with his desires and emotions.

Notes

All script excerpts from: David Mamet, *The Edge* (January, 1996).

1. Charles Deemer, “A Tarantino Script” in *Creative Screenwriting* (Vol. 3, No. 4), p. 63.
2. Mamet has made it clear several times that Freud and psychoanalysis have a great deal of influence on his work. He loves to have characters use double-entendres and Freudian-slips which belie something more about themselves.
3. A few examples would be flawed eyes in *Chinatown*, water in *Diabolique*, hats in *Miller's Crossing*, and cigarettes in too many movies.
4. David Mamet, *On Directing Film*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. xiv.

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