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Alejandro G. Iñárritu's note-card method



"Since *Amores perros*, I have carried with me note cards that I make during the rehearsals and preproduction of a film. When you think about a complex, long scene with several characters, it can be about many things. What is its essential meaning? Which point of view am I going to shoot this scene from? How could this character get what he or she wants? What's the right amount of dramatic tension for the scene, given the internal rhythm of the film? I have made these note cards for myself as a small guide, a lighthouse, a kind of compass for each of a script's scenes, one that I can access during the making of a film, while my brain is running crazy and production problems are arising.

These cards contain six columns, the first one being the "**facts**." I try to write down the facts in a neutral way. What is happening in this particular scene? **The second part is that I try to imagine what happened immediately preceding the moment in question.** Where have the characters come from? Although this is not normally written in a script, it is important to know if a character went to the bathroom and had diarrhea before this scene, or if a character just got off an airplane, or if he has come from a meal with someone. Imagining this helps inform not only his physical appearance but also his emotional state, and it can help the actor if you are clear about it—even if it is not part of the script.

The third column details the "**objective**." What is the purpose of this scene? Although a script already has a general direction, each scene, like an atom, contributes to the film's final destination. Here I try to dissect the objective of the scene as a whole and what it's about, as well as the objective of each of the characters who appear. Each one of them wants something. Even a single desireless character—in a silent, plotless, meditative film—needs or wants something. Even to be dead. That's the essence of drama and the reality of our existence. Each character has a need, and it's important for me to know what it is. This will help determine not only the staging and the physical outline of the scene but also where I put the camera, from what point of view I film that scene.

The fourth part of these cards—the "**action verb**" column—is particularly difficult (because the possibilities are endless, and each action verb can change the direction of the scene or the character) and extremely helpful, too, in further clarifying a character's objective so that the actor can execute the scene. If one character wants something from another character, one way of achieving the goal is by seducing the other character. Another way is by threatening him. Another way is by ignoring or provoking him. Within a scene, there can also be several action verbs—these kinds of transitions in tactics for obtaining the same objective are important because they bring a scene to life and add color to it.

For me, words are only the little boats that travel along the great emotional river of a scene. If a scene carries honesty and emotional truth, the space between words can

often say more than the words themselves, and silence can be even more powerful than words. The **subtext**—the focus of the cards' fifth column—is often almost more important than the text. The text can often be contrary to the subtext, and the subtext is what should be very clearly understood. In other words, if one person says to another, "Go away, I don't want to see you again," it is very possible that what they really mean is "I need you now more than ever." The words we use can often oppose what we feel, and I believe that acknowledging this human contradiction can help give great weight to a performance.

Finally, the "**as if**" column. There are two ways I believe one can take on a performance—one is through the actor's own personal and emotional experience, applied to a scene through an association with it, and the other is through imagination. Both are valid. Art has no laws, only principles. I have been in situations where an actor, at a given moment, lacks imagination for some personal reason or does not have emotional baggage that he can refer to. In such a case, I sometimes like to have an image that I can leave with an actor or actress. Our body is the master. Sometimes, with a physical or sensorial experience (a burn, cold, etc.), the actor or actress will know already how that feels, and that can help in channeling that feeling. So sometimes having images, associations, or similar experiences that refer to what you want the performer to understand can help the process a lot. Generally speaking, actors are prepared to jump into the void emotionally, so we have to have something to cushion them.

As Stanley Kubrick once said, making a movie is like trying to write poetry while you're riding a roller coaster. When one is shooting a film, it *feels* like a roller coaster, and it's much more difficult to have the focus and mental space that one has during the writing or preparation of a film. The ideas written down on these note cards, then, often have proved to be helpful for me in a time of necessity."

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