There Will Be a Story

There will be story. But you must be patient, you must bear with me, give me some time. It’s..., it’s not easy, you know. There’s so much that has to be done, so many details that must be vividly described in order to create a strong mental picture in my audience’s mind. But vivid description is not enough. I must also somehow elicit an emotional or intellectual response to that mental picture, that image. It must convey some kind of idea—and I’m not speaking of a symbolic idea—some kind of abstraction like “love” or “courage” or “digital”—but of something more immediate and visceral.

- A dust covered aluminum film canister, tucked away on a shelf behind a pile of old magazines, that catches your eye in the dim, yellow light of the projection booth of an adult movie theater;
- the sound of an empty whiskey bottle and a tube of lipstick as they fall 9 floors down the garbage chute of a high rise apartment building at three in the morning;
- the halting breath of a young boy as he lies in bed, beset, while asleep, by nightmares, and while awake, by the distant and echoey voices of his parents fighting somewhere in the house;
- a woman in an evening dress, standing in a kitchen, reading a letter from her lover, who has betrayed her, as a Styrofoam to-go container of Hungarian goulash—left over from a late lunch downtown—drops from her hand and splatters on the floor.

These are all good, fine images, and have a certain intrinsic value. They stand on their own as interesting and evocative, original and unexpected, eliciting a potentially infinite number of subjective responses. But they only imply a story. And just in case anyone gets the wrong idea here, let me just say that this is not some kind of clever, “postmodern, “post narrative,” or postwhatever story, where the audience is saddled with the responsibility of making sense of it all, of “creating the story,” or “participating in the creative process of narrative.” No. That’s not what this is at all. There will be a story, and I’ll be the one to tell it.

But there’s just so much to do. So much background, so much context. And where do you stop? Where do you begin? Each detail, each image, must contribute its part to the whole, must be made to make sense, must be placed into the narrative continuum somehow. Now, storytellers frequently disguise some detail’s significance within a narrative, passing it off as a bit of verisimilitude, a minor, realistic detail intended to support and maintain the illusion of plausibility and reality. But if the detail or image appears more than once, we can assume that the storyteller intends it to do more than simply contribute to the story’s realism, but wants to call the audience’s attention to it as a significant detail, as the repository of meaning. The storyteller wants the audience to 1) realize that they have seen or heard this image or detail before, 2) recall the context of the previous instance of the detail or image, and, 3) compare and contrast the meaning or effect of the detail or image in each of the contexts that it has occurred. We call this a motif, and it’s a basic structural component of literary narrative.

But what if the details and images, however original, arresting, or vividly described, fail to cohere? Fail to tell a story? The audience wonders “What has this got to do with anything? Why am I being told this? Where is this going?” They rise suddenly from their armchair, turn the
radio off with a flourish and exclaim “What nonsense!” But in the hands of a seasoned professional, like myself, details and images that appear random, unmotivated or pointless, will eventually come together in a seamless pattern of meaning that seems inevitable, that is at once highly complex and devastatingly simple. But it takes time and patience. There is so much to do. There will be story. But you must be patient, you must bear with me, give me some time. It’s..., it’s not easy, you know. There’s so much that has to be done.

For example—a boy running on a beach. I’ve spoken those words, and they have evoked an image in your mind. But what does it mean? Its potential meaning derives, certainly, from some missing narrative context, but it also derives, in the absence of further helpful details and guidance from me, from the listener’s own choices. When I spoke those words—a boy running on a beach--and evoked a mental image in your mind, what did it look like? Did you see the boy from the perspective of the land (with the sea in the background) or from the perspective of the sea? How far away from you was he? Did you see him in close-up or from a long distance? Did you see him from an aerial, bird’s-eye view? How high were you? Was he running from you or towards you? Did you see him from a stationary point of view, or did you see him as if you were running alongside him, like a camera tracking a character in a movie? Was he running quickly, as if frightened and trying to escape from something, or was he running joyously and playfully? Or, perhaps he was simply jogging, getting a little bit of exercise. What was he wearing, if anything? A bathing suit? What kind? Trunks? Board shorts? European-style competition briefs? Or was he wearing a school uniform? Was he barefoot or wearing shoes? Was he crying? How old was he? Was he holding anything in his hands? Were there other people on the beach or was he alone? Was it day or night? Was it raining? And did you notice the small sailboat, about 200 yards off shore, and the woman standing on the forward deck, waving?

Matthew Hurt
2016