

Excerpts from: *This Language Thing* by Paula Cizmar. (*Parabasis*, Spring 2003)

If you think of a scene or chapter as a piece of music—one that is crucial in the creation of a larger piece of music—you'll realize that elements of music can be utilized by writers to create vivid work. The sounds of words evoke responses, plus there's an internal rhythm and pace of scenes; and then, of course, there's the art of combining scenes of varying paces to make the larger work more dynamic. Tools such as word choice, imagery, punctuation (in the larger sense), and when to reveal (and when not to reveal) vital information all work together as you build an expressive story.

Words contain surface meaning and embedded meaning; the connotations of a particular word may conjure up political or social or emotional messages which its synonym might not. Look at a few examples: Who sounds breezier, more arrogant—a “flyboy” or a “pilot”? What does “stupor” call to mind that its synonyms, “muddle” or “trance,” do not? (And, by the same token, what do they connote?)

Not only do words have their own rhythm and pace, when used in combination they can create a completely different rhythm and pace. Carefully, thoughtfully chosen words yield writing that is vibrant, alive, and seamless. Words that are used without much attention paid to the emotional punch they pack may yield work that is general or soft or listless. In work with generic word usage, the presence of Life seems to be absent. The words accomplish the bare minimum: They get us from A to Z. Our object, however, is to get from A to Z and make it a hell of a ride.

THIS LANGUAGE THING - Part 1

There was a time when the paintings of Edward Hopper didn't do much for me. I had never seen them live, in the flesh—only reproductions in art books or magazines—so I dismissed them as mere sentimental realism. Corny. Old-fashioned. A step up from advertising art. But when I was living in New York, a dear friend and director I was working with, Stuart White, insisted that as a writer it was absolutely imperative that I go see the Hopper retrospective at the Whitney. Stuart was brilliant, intuitive, charismatic; like many people I would have walked over hot coals for him—but then he would have first walked over them himself. So I forced myself up to the Whitney. The fact that Hopper's stuff was hanging just a floor down from James Turrell's light and space installations was another inducement. After a glance at the Hopper twaddle, I figured, I could go and bask in the avant-garde. Well, Stuart--inspiring, instinctive, magical artist that he was--of course was right about the work of Edward Hopper.

The paintings that my friend insisted that everyone share were brilliant, heartbreaking, soul-aching reflections of the curse and joy of being human; the way Hopper used paint, the way he captured light, the isolation of his human subjects--all showed an artist whose depth of expression was enough to create goosebumps. There it was, on canvas: Loneliness. Poverty. Dignity. A search for some kind of touch, some kind of hookup, some kind of contact with another. The paintings weren't just photo-realism: They went so far beyond that. They provoked an immediate visceral reaction: I could feel in them the streets of places like my hometown, Youngstown, Ohio. A dying rust-colored mill town. I could see the misery and confusion of the old souls that wandered through the towns and rooms of this painter's art.

Hopper's work was so vital that I tacked a quotation of his on the wall above my desk: "I find the great painters...have attempted to force this unwilling medium of paint and canvas into a record of their emotions. I find any digression from this large aim leads me to boredom." For Hopper,

"emotions" didn't just mean, Gee, I feel unhappy today. "Emotions" meant a person's vast and varied inner life that resulted in a personalized view of the world. For Hopper, that inner life was shaped by The Depression and World War II. The people in his paintings—well, not just people, but even the objects—reflect poverty, turmoil, fear.

After I saw the paintings—after I saw Hopper's emotional interpretation of the world—I took on his goal as one of my own. To take the unwilling medium of words and paper and use them to attempt to record a gut-level expression of human life.

Language as a medium for expressionism is a huge pain in the butt. Oh, yeah, language is great for basic communication: I'm going to the store. You're giving me a headache. Go two more blocks and turn left on Pico. I feel pretty, oh so pretty. But who wants to sit for two hours and listen to characters on screen announce their emotions and announce their actions. Audiences don't want to be told it, they want to see it. Feel it.

Music has a leg up in the feeling department—something about sound and rhythm goes straight to the gut. And visual art can pluck the heartstrings, too—color and texture have energy and provoke some kind of nameless feeling, and it's that nameless quality that is truly exciting. But the problem is, words aren't paint. Words are an integral part of everyday life. They have so many mundane purposes. Words can be flat out banal. The trick becomes taking something so ordinary and using it in such an extraordinary way that it packs an unmistakable electrical charge. Evoking something nameless. Something out of this world.

THIS LANGUAGE THING – PART 2

LANGUAGE—CODE CRACKERS

As writers we have to be connected into the conscious, the unconscious, and the non-conscious, the real, the non-real, the hyper-real. Then we get to go to work. Fashioning something wonderful with such an ordinary tool as language requires that we crack the code.

Something—power, energy, passion, light—is hidden beneath these mundane little language units, words, and the sooner we shake them up and tap into the power source, the better. As a tool, when you think about it, language is such a huge, monumental entity with such infinite combinations yielding infinite possibilities. It's staggering. It's awesome. It's better *not* to think about it.

I have some code crackers I use to unearth what's primal and hidden within words. I try not to think about these code cracking devices. I try to feel them. But for what it's worth, here they are:

AX THE ADJECTIVES. Consider this: You have a friend you're trying to fix up with a date. What's the worst thing you can say about the person? He's nice. Kiss of death. It just doesn't tell us anything about him—and leads us to believe there isn't anything to tell. Or consider this: What conveys more? A character who says: I'm unhappy. Or having a character walk into a party, see all her friends, and say, There's no one here. We have to work harder as audience members/readers to try and figure out what she means; in the process, we feel an emotional response. Is the character being funny? Ironic? Do we like her because of it? Does the character mean "the love of my life has left me, therefore it is worthless to be in a crowd"? Or, "there's no one politically important here"? Or ??? Whatever the meaning, it is not an obvious one, not sitting on the surface, and audience members/readers are forced to participate in the search for clues. They are drawn in. One step closer to engaging in the characters' emotional life. Adjectives don't engage. They announce. They keep us at arm's length. They're flat. Hollow. (CONTINUED)

“Adjective-speak” is what I call scenes that are written in announcement style; adjective-speak is the most surfacey type of writing. It is merely expositional: You’re the best one for the job. Isn’t the sunset pretty? I feel sick. This might be the way people speak in day to day life--after all, it’s way more convenient--but remember, we’re not really transcribing real life when we write a scene. (Hitchcock again: Film/characters/etc. are life with the boring parts left out.) We only have our audience a short amount of time, and in that time, we have to pack an entire lifetime of hopes, dreams, disappointments, personal histories. Because of this, we must load every word with as much meaning as possible and string these words into phrases that pack power--yes, that pack a punch. (Think back to an exercise of John Gardner’s: Describe a house in the words of a man who has just lost a loved one. Then describe the same house in the words of someone who is in love.) Adjective-speak merely lists an idea of a possible generic feeling or meaning; it can’t take the audience any further. Adjectives don’t have skin and bone. Axe em. (Well, OK, not all of em. You can choose a tiny select few.) (Then be brutal.) (Chop.)

RHYTHM. Absolutely critical. This is one element we can steal from music. Great writing has great rhythm--varied, specific, hypnotic. Varied? Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, a regular beat, off the beat, clipped, droning, sustained. Specific? You probably did not consciously select a particular word in a line of dialogue, but conscious or not, you know when the word is dead-on right in its rhythm--and you have a nagging sense of dread when it is not. Hypnotic? Irresistible rhythm is a sneaky but very effective way to draw the audience in. How to create rhythm? Syllables and sounds--use them. Vary them. Or deliberately string the same number of syllables and beats together over and over and over again. Bounce words back and forth off the various characters. Verbal ping pong. Or try a waltz. Let the words just roll along. Try repetition for effect. Whatever makes the language sing. Or punctuate with words. Single syllable words can stop a breathless speech on a dime--and if you want to cut through a forest of obfuscating words, why not do it in a single blow?

PACE. Is the scene moving along? Is the story in general moving along? Are events and ideas unfolding or unraveling in such a way that the audience has to keep on their toes to stay caught up--but not so slowly that they get ahead of you and sit around waiting, and not so fast that they get frustrated or overworked and just give up trying? Remember the principle of varying lengths and tones--another matter of balance. If you get the audience on a roll and hit them with one terse dialogue line after another and you lull them into thinking they’re onto you, what do you do next? Throw a wrench into the works, of course. Slow down; take a breather; add a speech that explores character or that languishes in an image. Or build your dialogue lines up to a mini-climax and stop on a dime for a while. Avoid bouncing around from quick exchange to character wallow pointlessly or from fast pace to slow and back again without emotional reason. You are expressing feelings through pace, presenting tension and suspense through pace. It should not be accidental.

EDGES. Writing has its own geography: sharp peaks, low valleys, and rolling hills that caress and soothe. All these diverse edges are a must in expressing atmosphere, tone, and a character's inner life. Think of how “s” sounds; then contrast it with “b” or “p.” Think of words that end in “k”--now contrast them with words that end in “n.” Does this matter? Yes, especially in scriptwriting, where the words will actually be spoken. The sounds of words can assault. Or lull. Sharp edges pack a punch. When you’re building suspense, or conveying rage, for example, the words need to cut, batter, and slap. Go for the throat. Attack the ears. Short lines, the physical nature of the chosen words, the use of hard consonants like k's, p's, b's, the no-nonsense approach (i.e., no “and's”, “well's”, “uh's”, “you know's”) all add up to solid hard edges. Think of a love scene written with such edgy sounds: It’s less common, but it might tell us something about the

characters' relationship, or their economic class, or the nightmarish situation they're up against. Then there are times when the words must just flow, they must soothe or seduce, inspire confidence. To soften edges up, let the sounds be more smooth. Reverse the hard-sharp edge process and let the words glide. And mix it up. No one note in music is so awe-inspiring that the audience is content to hear only that one sound. Scene writing shouldn't be one-note either. But a word of warning: Here's where balance comes in, the old not one, not two again--Think about using words for your edges but don't think about it. Let your intuition guide you. Too much overt effort on this point can make your writing self-conscious. And tedious. Always balance. Balance.

PUNCH. The emotional wallop. The power of a true and unique expression of what is going on. Simply, make sure you select words that go for your audience's gut. Forget about aiming at the heart; the writing will just get all squishy. And if you aim for the gut, the brain can't help itself: It will get involved, too. If you aim solely for the intellect, however, the brain won't share. Your audience will nod and say, Oh, interesting, and then go in search of more thrills elsewhere.

POETRY FOR POETRY'S SAKE--NOT. Writers generally have at least some touch of the poet within them. It may vary by degrees, with playwrights and novelists probably having slightly stronger poetic leanings than screenwriters. But let's face it: Writing in any form is not an easy task. Playwrights tell a story using only action, behavior, and dialogue on a set everyone knows isn't real using live actors who are about four feet away from the audience in a little (or large) darkened room with about a third of the inhabitants rattling paper or picking the most dramatically devastating moment to sneeze; if you're writing novels you must write so vividly and specifically that a reader sitting in a hot apartment on the day the leaf-blower guys come can feel the emotional pain and hear the voices of your characters who are traversing a deadly glacier in the Yukon as their lives flash before their eyes--even though the voices are only in the reader's head and no live person speaks them. And if you're a screenwriter you must create an entire world, an entire vision, not only just a picture of what's going on in the foreground but what the camera will catch in the overall milieu while compressing the dialogue to such a point that the audience can pick up the essence of the characters without the story grinding to a halt while they're distracted by that weird crawly mark on the projection screen and the supersized Coca-Cola that spilled three rows away and is rushing toward their shoes.

Each genre has its own limitations: Fiction writers don't have the benefit of sound and pictures; their words are the whole show. Scriptwriters don't have the benefit of interior monologue--they don't get to use narration in the same way. No, scriptwriters have this stage thing or this screen thing, these actor people, and these words. Which have to sound like real speech, except they're not, they're hyper-real, 'cause real speech, when you think about it, would be a REAL bore and a half. No matter the genre, to pull off writing takes something really special.

So tell me a memoir writer or a playwright or a nonfiction writer isn't a poet? I can't hear you. Anyway, the point is: We already use poetry in our work. With any luck, it is skillfully woven into character and story. Axe all the rest, the lines that just sound pretty or artsy or poetic for the sake of it. Axe that--and the poetic is distilled down to its primitive essence. And that's what we want.

And finally: **PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION.** This is the easy one. Find paintings. Look at them. Approach writing as if it has color, texture, movement. It does.

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