

CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

THE 100 MOST POWERFUL FILM CONVENTIONS
EVERY FILMMAKER MUST KNOW

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SECTION 1

SPACE

SPACE: 2-D & 3-D SCREEN DIRECTION

Film space refers to the spatial dynamics inherent in the film frame. A film frame is both a static snapshot and part of a moving picture. When coupled with motion, screen direction becomes a powerful story element.

Static Image and Motion

Like a painting, the static image of the frame presents inherent storytelling opportunities. Because a movie is a motion picture, the composition of the frame continuously changes. This added characteristic affords two important story elements — that of screen direction and comparison. Screen direction can suggest antagonism, individualism, and conflict, for example. A moving frame might be used to represent change, similarity or dissimilarity, or its opposite, stasis.

Screen Direction

Screen Direction refers to the direction a character or object is travelling.

X-axis refers to the line that cuts the frame horizontally. Objects can run left-to-right or right-to-left along the X-axis.

Y-axis refers to the line that cuts the frame vertically. Objects can move up or down the Y-axis, that is, from the top of the frame to the bottom and vice-versa.

Z-axis refers to the axis that runs from the foreground-to-the-background or background- to-the-foreground in the frame. The Z-axis is what gives the audience its sense of 3-D space or depth-of-field.

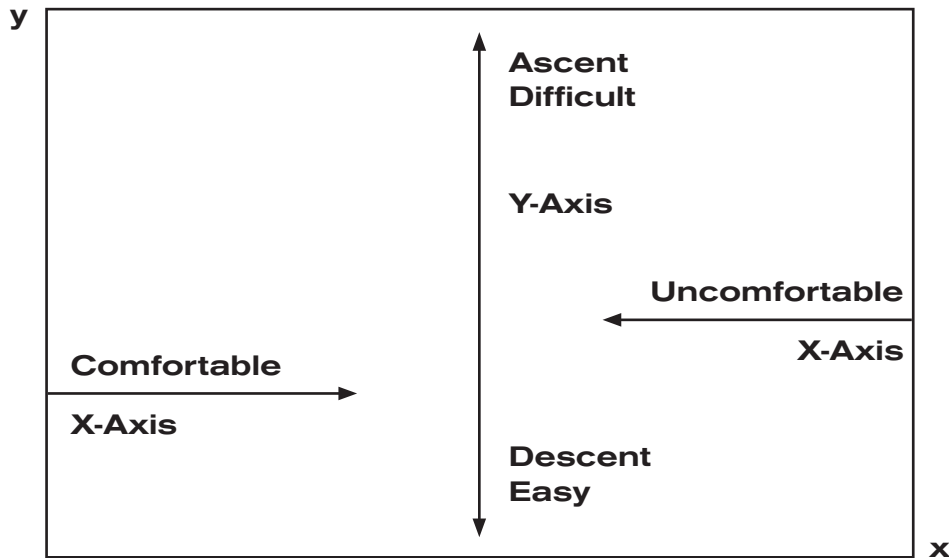
Here's how screen direction expressed six different ideas.

Film Element: Screen Direction

- | | | | |
|----|---------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. | X-axis (Horizontal) | <i>(Strangers on a Train)</i> | Pending Conflict |
| 2. | Y-axis (Vertical) | <i>(Strangers on a Train)</i> | Detouring |
| 3. | XY-axes (Diagonals) | <i>(Metropolis, The Piano)</i> | Descent |
| 4. | Z-axis (Depth-of-field) | <i>(Citizen Kane)</i> | Separate Time Zones |
| 5. | Z-axis (Planes of Action) | <i>(Dolores Claiborne)</i> | Change of Size |
| 6. | Z-axis (Rack Focus) | <i>(The Graduate)</i> | Shifting Perspective |

Fig. 1

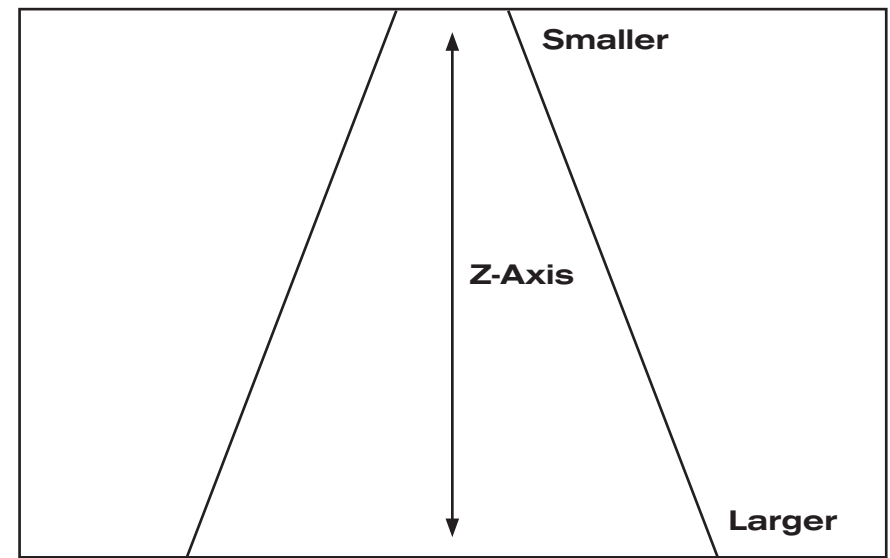
2-Dimensional Screen Direction



Movement in Flat 2-Dimensional Space

Fig. 2

3-Dimensional Screen Direction



Movement in Depth Along the Z-Axis

X-axis: The eye moves comfortably from left to right as this mimics reading. The eye is less experienced to move the opposite direction and is therefore less comfortable.

Y-axis: Moving an object down the screen appears easy as it is aided by our sense of gravity. Moving an object up the screen will appear difficult because it is assumed it will be resisted by gravity.

Z-axis: When an object moves along the Z-axis the object appears to move in 3-D space moving from front-to-back or back-to-front. Image size will change depending on where the object appears on the trajectory and which lens has been used.

1. Film Element: X-Axis (Horizontal)

Left-to-Right

As Westerners we read left-to-right. If you rented fifty studio-made movies, there's a good chance that the "good guy" will enter screen left every time. When the "good guy" moves left-to-right our eyes move comfortably. Subconsciously, we begin to make positive inferences.

Right-to-Left

Conversely, the antagonist usually enters from the right. Since our eyes aren't used to moving from *right-to-left*, the antagonist's entrance makes us uncomfortable. The screenwriter exploits this by transferring our learned discomfort to the character. The subtle irritant directs audiences to see the character negatively. In the same way we code a black hat as a negative symbol, we can also code screen direction negatively.

Conflict

When these two forces are aimed at each other, we naturally anticipate some kind of collision. Here's how this was exploited in *Strangers on a Train*.

Film Example: *Strangers on a Train*

The opening scene shows a man exiting a cab at a train station. Then it cuts to a second cab and another traveler exiting. Both travelers are shot from the knees down. One wears the two-tone shoes of a dandy, the other, conservative lace-ups.

The dandy walks from right-to-left, the direction associated with the antagonist, while the conservative walks from left-to-right, suggesting he's the protagonist. Then their walk is inter-cut. This makes them appear on a collision course. But at the last minute they go single file through a turnstile. We are disappointed. Then seconds later our wish is granted. They do meet. Under a train table, one knocks the shoe of the other. Now we are nervous. Visually, their meeting has already implied collision. This makes us lean in all the more as we suspect, it is all going to be bad — *very bad*.

Dramatic Value

By using screen direction to graphically suggest a pending collision, the film has set up conflict and character, and peaked our fears — all in under sixty seconds.

Script Note

Director Alfred Hitchcock lengthened the scene written by Czensi Ormonde and Raymond Chandler by extending the intercutting.

Other Films

Kill Bill (direction of footsteps)

Dances with Wolves (protagonist rides in the opposite direction of the soldiers)

***Strangers on a Train* (1951)**

Screenplay: Czenzi Ormonde, Raymond Chandler.

FADE IN:

EXT. UNION STATION, WASHINGTON, D.C. DAY

LONG SHOT THE CAPITOL DOME IN THE B.G. AND THE AUTOMOBILE ENTRANCE TO THE STATION IN THE F.G. LOW CAMERA.

Activity of cars and taxis arriving and discharging passengers with luggage, busy redcaps, etcetera.

We FOCUS on a taxi pulling up and stopping, The driver hands out modest looking luggage, including a bunch of tennis rackets in cases to a redcap. CAMERA PANS DOWN as the passenger gets out of the taxi so that we see only his shoes and the lower part of his trousers. He is wearing dark colored brogues and a conservative suit apparently. The feet move toward, the entrance to the station and out of scene. Immediately a chauffeur-driven limousine drives up and an expensive piece of airplane luggage is handed out of this, and the passenger alighting from the back is seen to be wearing a black and white sports shoes which, as seen before, are all we see of him. The sport shoes start off in the wake of the brogues.

INT. STATION LOBBY

CAMERA FOLLOWS the sport shoes and the brogues across the lobby into a passenger tunnel. There is the usual activity of passengers walking to and from, a loud-speaker announcing trains, etc.

EXT. PASSENGER TUNNEL

As the brogues and the sport shoes pass separately down the aisle, the sport shoes turning in at a compartment door and the brogues continuing toward the parlor car.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. PARLOR CAR (PROCESS)

The brogues come to rest before a chair as the owner sits down. A moment later the sport shoes come to rest before an adjoining chair.

The legs belonging to the sport shoes stretch out, and one of the shoes touches one of the brogues.

MAN'S VOICE (over scene)

Oh, excuse me!



1.



4.



2.



5.



3.



6.

2. Film Element: Y-Axis (Vertical)

As we said in the previous section, the *Y-axis* is the line that travels from top <--> bottom in the frame along the north-south axis.

When an object runs along an axis in a straight line, and moves at a fixed speed, we automatically assume that the “good” destination is somewhere along the trajectory. Staying on track is a deep-felt virtue. Detouring or being sidetracked has negative connotations. Children’s fables are filled with mishaps that occur when characters venture away from established routes. Hitchcock translated these assumptions pictorially in *Strangers on a Train*. Once the protagonist and antagonist meet in their train compartment, Hitchcock immediately cuts outside to the trainyard. Here he uses graphics to foreshadow the bumpy road ahead.

Film Example: *Strangers on a Train*

After already graphically suggesting that the meeting of the men will result in collision, Hitchcock cuts to an exterior insert shot. Hitchcock takes us to the train tracks upon which the men are traveling. At first we see only the clean linear lines of the track. The train is “on course” like the conservative protagonist. It moves with a fixed speed and an unobstructed route ahead (Image 1). Then we come upon a second track (Image 2). The train, like the protagonist, is being offered the option to take a detour, one that moves away from the main route. The detour heads toward the side of the frame previously occupied by the antagonist, screen right. See Film Element 1. The last shot (Image 3) is chaotic, a web of confusing tracks. This is the state in which our protagonist will soon find himself after he opts for the detour and enters the world of the antagonist.

Dramatic Value

By using the Y-axis to set up a linear established route, one that represents safety and normalcy, Hitchcock could also establish its opposite — the dangerous detour. The metaphor is also a succinct synopsis of the plot: What happens to a good man when his path is suddenly diverted?

Script Note

The insert to the train tracks was not included in this version of the script. Instead the scene between the men in the train car continues with the two men chatting about their backgrounds for several more pages. In the final film, the insert gives visual rest from the talking heads and acts to foreshadow the road ahead.



1.



2.



3.

3. Film Element: XY-Axes (Diagonals)

In addition to the X, Y, and Z axes, a frame also contains four diagonals.

Descending Diagonals

Gravity aids the motion of descending diagonals. The descent seems easy, possibly inevitable. Once the motion starts, it's hard to stop. The left-to-right is an easier descent as it moves in the direction of the reading eye.

Ascending Diagonals

Gravity works against the ascending diagonals. It is easier to fall downwards, then move upwards. The right-left ascent is the most difficult of all screen directions: It goes against the reading eye and works against gravity as well.

Film Examples: *Metropolis*, *The Piano*

Both shots on the right exploit the “inevitability of the descent.”

Metropolis: Workers are seen robotically making their daily descent “beneath.”

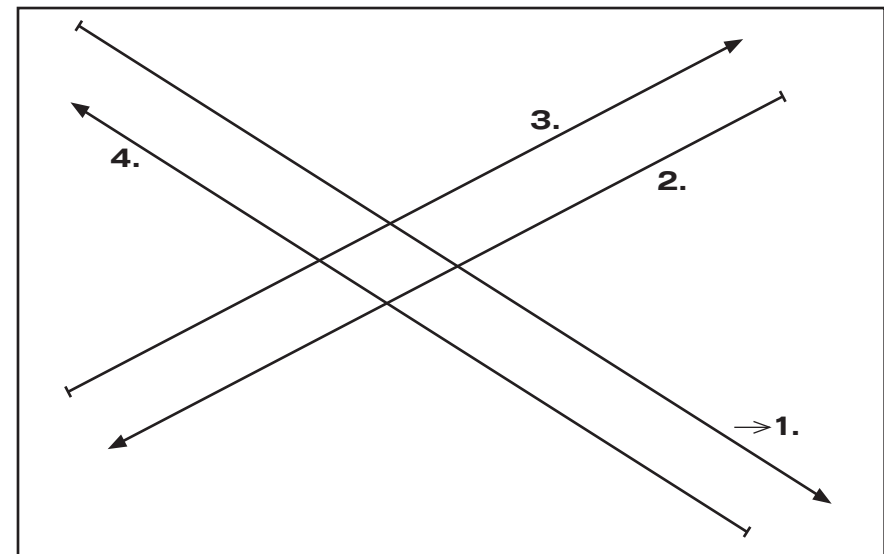
The Piano: In realizing his wife has betrayed him, Stewart, Ada’s husband, rushes with axe in hand to punish her.

Dramatic Value

Because gravity aids the descent, we know that nothing but a major intervention could stop the course of events.

Metropolis and *The Piano* are like textbooks on the use of graphics. Both are phenomenal films worth multiple viewings.

Fig. 3
Difficulty of Movement



1. Easiest
2. Less Easy
3. Hard
4. Hardest

***The Piano* (1993) (Page 60)**

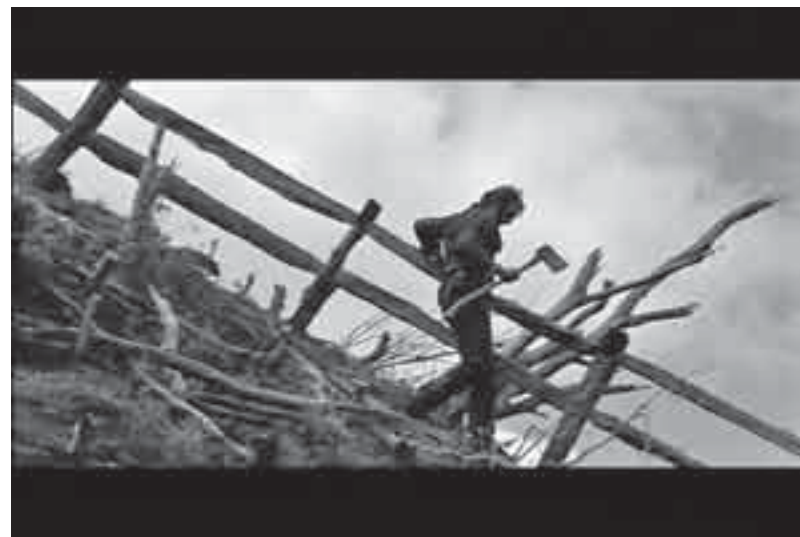
Screenplay: Jane Campion, 4th Draft 1991.

Sc 117 EXT STEWART'S DAY

The sky is dark and rain is falling heavily as STEWART strides fast towards the hut, his axe swinging in his hand. FLORA is far behind him, her angelwings sodden.



Metropolis



The Piano

4. Film Element: Z-Axis (Depth-of-Field)

The Z-axis is the line that runs from foreground <--> background. It's what carries the illusion of depth. Technically, depth-of-field refers to the distance along the Z-axis that is in focus, or focal length. The wider the lens, the longer the focal length. Generally, a deep depth-of-field is achieved by two things: a wide-angle lens and lighting that will generate a higher f-stop.

The combination of a wide-angle lens and deep depth-of-field provides an intriguing visual characteristic: The distance an object moves along the Z-axis will appear foreshortened. For example, when characters move from the foreground to the background their height is diminished more quickly than expected. When they return to the foreground they seem to leap towards the camera, becoming larger, faster than the eye expects. The reverse is true with a telephoto lens.

The success of the following scene relies on two qualities:

- a) the inherent foreshortening quality of the wide-angle lens and
- b) the extended depth-of-field that keeps objects in the foreground and background in focus simultaneously.

Film Example: *Citizen Kane*

Though not included in the original screenplay, the scene between Kane, Thatcher and Bernstein is one of the single most ingenious scenes in cinema history. Here's the setup.

Kane has just learned from his guardian, Thatcher, that the Crash of '29 has wiped out his estate. Kane, a grown man, has been returned to the state of boyhood. Once again he is dependent on his guardian.

On hearing that he will be put on an allowance, Kane walks into the foreground of the frame, a huge, massive figure. He then travels down the Z-axis towards the back wall. Each step makes him appear smaller. He reaches the back wall and turns (Image 4). His diminished size reflects his diminished power. He looks like a schoolboy, and like his days as a schoolboy, finds himself once again financially controlled by his guardian. Then Kane walks back toward Thatcher. With each step he regains some of his former stature. When he stands beside Thatcher, now appearing "full size," Thatcher suggests that the economic problems are just temporary. Without a word of dialog from Kane, director Orson Welles has communicated Kane's inner turmoil.

Dramatic Value

Depth-of-field can

- a) change a character's size as they move within the frame and
- b) represent a character's size relative to other characters within the frame.



5. Film Element: Z-Axis (Planes of Action)

As discussed in Film Element 4, the *Z-axis* is the line that runs from foreground ↔ background. It's what enables us to see the illusion of depth. Painters often employ this property by dividing their canvas into three planes. These are *foreground*, *middleground* and *background*. Theatre has named these planes *upstage*, *middlestage* and *downstage*.

Filmmakers can use these planes by positioning story elements along the *Z-axis* and exploiting the depth a film frame offers, which is even more elastic than the medium of their predecessors. These might represent different characters, locations, psychological states or time periods. A character might be upstage in the present, observing their childhood which plays behind them downstage. A masterful use of staging in-depth, also known as staging along the *Z-axis*, is a flashback scene in *Dolores Claiborne*.

Film Example: *Dolores Claiborne*

In this scene, protagonist Dolores Claiborne realizes that her twenty-something daughter has no recollection of being sexually abused by her father. Dolores stands in the foreground; her daughter is seated at a table in the middleground. Dolores reacts to her discovery by looking over her daughter to the background where the front door is positioned. On her look, a flashback begins in the background *only*. Dolores' husband, now twenty years younger, enters. He moves around in the background in one time zone, that of twenty years ago, while Dolores and her daughter are situated in the foreground and middleground, in another. As Dolores' daughter continues debating with her mother in the present, Dolores watches her dead husband causally walk behind her daughter into another room — and into a full flashback.

Dramatic Value

By exploiting the three planes of action, the past and the present can play alongside each other. Staging can help further externalize the subtext of the script. In this scene, for example, Dolores faces the past straight on while her daughter has her back to it.

Other Films

Citizen Kane (Susan's overdose scene)

Citizen Kane (snowball scene)

***Dolores Claiborne* (1995) (Pages 29-30)**

Screenplay: Tony Gilroy, Third Draft 3/11/94.

Based on the novel by Stephen King.

Dolores silently clearing the table, when her eyes move past SELENA suddenly, toward the door and --

DOLORES'S POV -- FLASHBACK

The front door will open. The bright base of a summer sunset will blow out the landscape beyond. This light will come only through the door. The rest of the house -- still in the "present" -- will remain dark.

JOE ST. GEORGE will enter the house. He is thirty-five. A scrappy build. A bad haircut. He is coming home from work. He's thirsty and dirty. Standing in the doorway unlacing his boots.

(Note: Selena has no idea what her mother is seeing beyond her. Dolores will continue to relate to Selena as if this were not happening, trying to ignore this "presence" as the scene progresses.)

SELENA

Look, let's face it mother --
we barely know each other.
We've hardly spoken in years.
And that's as much your doing as mine.

Joe in stocking feet, banging the mud from his boots in the doorway.

(Selena continues talking while Dolores stares at the image of Joe from the past in the background--- the scene continues briefly then into a ---

FULL FLASHBACK

THE HOUSE. Suddenly full of light. The décor different. We are in the Summer of 1972. SELENA, hearing her father rushes out from the kitchen. She is nine. A gorgeous child.



6. Film Element: Z-Axis (Rack Focus)

A *Rack Focus* shot, also called a Pull Focus, requires a shallow depth-of-field. This means that only a narrow plane along the Z-axis can be in focus at one time. When the camera operator “pulls focus” he/she shifts the focus from one focal plane to another. In so doing, the audience’s attention shifts from objects situated on one plane to objects on another. By creating a shallow depth-of-field, the in-camera effect can selectively redirect the audience’s attention anytime during the scene. Here’s how it was used in *The Graduate* in a pivotal scene at the end of Act Two.

Film Example: *The Graduate*

Ben, the twenty-something protagonist, has just returned home from college. On his return he has an affair with one of his parents’ friends, Mrs. Robinson. The problem is that Ben soon falls in love with Mrs. Robinson’s daughter, Elaine.

At the end of Act Two, Ben rushes to confess to Elaine. He breaks into her parents’ home and finds Elaine in her upstairs bedroom. Before he can tell her, Mrs. Robinson’s approaching footsteps can be heard. Elaine faces Ben with her back to the open bedroom door behind her. As Ben starts to explain why the identity of the older woman is important, Elaine’s mother appears at the door (Image 3).

Unseen by Elaine, who is still facing Ben, Mrs. Robinson stands in the doorway. Mrs. Robinson is out-of focus and ghost-like. When Elaine spins around, Mrs. Robinson is pulled into focus and Elaine is thrown out of focus (Image 4). Every line of Mrs. Robinson’s defeated face now shows. After a beat, Mrs. Robinson disappears from the door. When Elaine turns back to Ben, her face remains momentarily blurred externalizing her confusion. At the moment of recognition, her face is pulled back into focus.

In this scene, pull-focus does two things:

- a) Reveals identity, in this case, that of the “older woman,” Mrs. Robinson. Mrs. Robinson physically answers Elaine’s unanswered question by suddenly being pulled into focus.
- b) Externalizes Elaine’s confusion by waiting for her moment of recognition to pull her back into focus.

Dramatic Value

Rack focus allows you to redirect the audience’s attention from one object to another. It is often used to effect surprise through a sudden reveal, usually an important plot point. Since it heavily underscores the reveal, it should be used sparingly.

Other Films

Last Tango in Paris
The Professional (Leon’s dying scene)

Historical Note

D.W. Griffith experimented with “rack focus” in the opening shot of *A Corner of Wheat* (1909), as well as *Musketeers of Pig Valley* (1912) and *The House of Darkness* (1913) (Jesionowski 35).

***The Graduate* (1967)**

Screenplay: Calder Willingham and Buck Henry, 1967.

Novel: Charles Webb.

INT. ELAINE'S ROOM-DAY

Ben pulls ELAINE around behind the open door. They stand in the angle formed by the door and the wall as though they were hiding from someone. MRS. ROBINSON'S footsteps can be heard coming up the stairs.

BEN

Elaine--I have to tell you something.

He holds her against the wall in the corner.

ELAINE

What is it?

BEN

That woman--

ELAINE

What?

BEN

That woman. The older woman.

ELAINE

You mean the one who--

BEN

The married woman--it wasn't just *some woman*--

ELAINE

What are you telling me?

The footsteps stop.

ANGLE - CLOSE ON ELAINE

Back in the corner. Mrs. Robinson's face appears in a crack in the door at Elaine's shoulder. Elaine looks from Ben's face to the crack through which she can see her mother's eye staring.

ELAINE

Benjamin, will you please tell me what this is all about.

She looks back at Ben, then back at her mother's face again. Mrs. Robinson's eyes watch her through the crack in the door. Elaine looks away.

ELAINE

Oh no.

1.



2.



3.



4.



Chapter Credits By Film Element

1. *Strangers on a Train* (1951)

Writers: Czenzi Ormonde, Raymond Chandler (Screenplay)
Writer: Whitfield Cook (Adaptation)
Writer: Patricia Highsmith (Novel)
Director: Alfred Hitchcock
Production Company: Warner Brothers
Distributor: Warner Brothers

2. *Strangers on a Train* (1951)

Same as above.

3. *Metropolis* (1927)

Writer: Thea von Harbou (Screenplay)
Writer: Thea von Harbou (Novel)
Director: Fritz Lang
Production Company: Universum Film A.G. (UFA)
Distributor: Kino International

3. *The Piano* (1993)

Writer: Jane Campion
Director: Jane Campion
Production Company: Australian Film Commission, CiBy, New South Wales Film and Television Office
Distributor: Miramax Films

4. *Citizen Kane* (1941)

Writer: Herman J. Mankiewicz (Screenplay) and Orson Welles (Screenplay)
Writer: John Houseman (Screenplay) (Uncredited)
Director: Orson Welles
Production Company: Mercury Productions
Production Company: RKO Pictures
Distributor: RKO Pictures Inc. (1941) USA Theatrical
Distributor: Warner Home Video (DVD)

5. *Dolores Claiborne* (1995)

Writer: Tony Gilroy (Screenplay)
Writer: Stephen King (Novel)
Director: Taylor Hackford
Production Company: Castle Rock Entertainment
Production Company: Columbia Pictures Corporation
Distributor: Columbia Pictures

6. *The Graduate* (1967)

Writer: Calder Willingham (Screenplay) and Buck Henry (Screenplay)
Writer: Charles Webb (Novel)
Director: Mike Nichols
Production Company: Embassy Pictures
Production Company: Lawrence Turman Inc.
Distributor: MGM Home Entertainment (DVD)