

## The Twitch: Objects As Emotions by William C. Martell

Screenwriting is writing for the screen, telling the story visually through the actions of the actions of the characters. Just like in real life, actions speak louder than words. What a character says is usually what they wish were true, or what they want the others in the scene to believe is true. But good stories need characters to wrestle with inner demons, to overcome fears, and to solve emotional conflicts. How do we display a character's emotional conflict on screen without thought balloons or voice overs? How do you show feelings and thoughts on screen?

Though there are at least a dozen techniques to show what a character is thinking or feeling on screen, I use a method I call "The Twitch". Probably after seeing some strange double bill of *\*Once Upon A Time In The West\** and *\*The Pink Panther\** an object could be used as a symbol of the turmoil bubbling within the character's mind. In the original *\*Pink Panther\** movies, whenever Clouseau's name was mentioned around Inspector Dreyfus he began twitching uncontrollably, and we knew how he felt and could easily imagine what he was thinking. In *\*Once Upon A Time In The West\**, Charles Bronson's character has a harmonica on a lanyard around his neck, but only plays it in the presence of Henry Fonda's gunslinger. That harmonica had some hidden meaning, and by the end of the film it would be revealed to us.

A Twitch is an object that symbolizes an emotional conflict or unresolved problem, a Touchstone is an object that is usually used to show memories of a more peaceful time. The cliché Touchstone is that family photo every soldier in a fox hole looks at in the scene before they are killed. That same photo could become a Twitch if the soldier's family had been killed in an attack, and his motivations were revenge. Instead of looking at the photo and feeling peace, he would be feeling anger.

The problem with using a photo is that it's all surface, two dimensional and obvious. Better to find an object with some personality or significance. In Robert Rodat's *\*The Patriot\** before Mel Gibson's character leaves his family to go off to war, his son gives him his collection of lead toy soldiers. As the war goes on, Gibson melts the toy soldiers one-by-one to make ammunition for his musket. The full bag of toys begins to empty. Every time he melts one, we know that he's not only missing his family he is also thinking about how he is losing his humanity... melting those things that make him a good father and husband away to be a soldier. Toy soldiers being turned into something that will kill soldiers. Not only better than a picture of his family, it is also thematic.

I have used wedding bands and money clips and compasses and retirement watches and children's toys... and a Hershey's chocolate bar, which was split between father and son before the boy was kidnaped and for the rest of the script, whenever either eats one of their six sections of the candy bar, we know what they are thinking and feeling. Also, with every section they eat, we know that time is running out.

The key is to find the object that fits the characters and story and theme. Then either introduce that object in a scene that gives it meaning like a father sharing a snack with his son, or turn it into a mystery and reveal the meaning at the end as in the Leone Spaghetti Westerns. Whenever the character pulls the object from their pocket and looks at it, we'll know exactly what they are thinking and feeling. No need for pesky dialogue!

**EXERCISE:** What is the emotional issue your character is struggling with? Usually in a screenplay the protagonist is forced to resolve an emotional problem in order to deal with a physical conflict. Hamlet has to deal with his responsibility issues to avenge his father's murder. In *\*The Dark Knight\** good guy Harvey Dent struggles with his rage after being burned in a fire. In *\*Up\** Karl Fredrickson must deal with the loss of his wife as he goes on the big adventure they never got a chance to take while she was alive. Now make a list of all of the potential objects you can use to symbolize this emotional conflict. Brainstorm as many as you can so that you can select the best. Find the object that also connects to your story's theme, the object that will best resonate with the audience.

Now do it in reverse. Look at some random object and try to figure out what emotional conflict it might be a symbol for.

**BIO:**

William C. Martell is a professional screenwriter with 19 scripts carelessly slapped onto celluloid; including a handful of HBO World Premiere Movies in the action and thriller genres. His out of print book *\*The Secrets Of Action Screenwriting\** has sold for over \$320 used on e-bay. He can often be found on some far off film festival jury or battling bad script notes in Hollywood.