

A Ghost's Tale: Musings on the Film Scenario

Erat Athenis spatiosa et capax domus, sed infamis et pestilens. Per silentium noctis sonus ferri et, si attenderes acrius, strepitus vinculorum longius primo, deinde a proximo reddebatur. Mox apparebat idolon, senex macie et squalore confectus, promissa barba, horrenti capillo; cruribus compedes, manibus catenas gerebat quatiebatque. (Pliny the Younger, 7.27, letter to Licinius Sura)

INTERIOR OF DOMUS. ATHENS. NIGHT. LONG SHOT, establishing that the house seems to be deserted. Long shadows fall across the room. Background SOUND, absolute deathly silence at first, then iron chains faintly rattling and clanging together. The CAMERA tracks around the room slowly, as if acting like a person looking for the source of the sound. Background SOUND increases steadily until frighteningly loud. The CAMERA tracks more quickly around the room, jerking about, finally resting suddenly on the GHOST. MID SHOT, showing GHOST'S aged, emaciated and squalid appearance. CLOSE SHOT on head, focusing on his long shaggy beard and bristling hair. CLOSE SHOT on feet, showing that they are fettered. CLOSE SHOT on hands, showing chains he's wearing and shaking, zooming in tighter and tighter on the chains as the SOUND becomes unbearably loud. BLACK OUT.

Gareth Morgan once suggested in an article entitled "The Teaching of Elementary Latin" (Texas Classics in Action, 1967, reprinted Summer 1994, TCA website at www.txclassics.org under Journal Excerpts) that some Latin can be interpreted successfully and enjoyably via a method he referred to as writing a film scenario. Gareth's words bear repeating:

More profitable, I think, as far as Latin poetry is concerned is the writing of a film scenario. This is particularly useful in reading Vergil (and I may say that you can read Vergil with your students at a much earlier stage than is usual with the traditional methods). Take, for example, the scene of the serpents coming across the sea to devour Laocoon, or the scene where Sinon is surrounded by the inimical Trojans. If you go back and reread these, you will find out, I am sure, how very suitable they are for film treatment. The cutting between one face and another, the cutting between the close shot and the long shot, they are all there. They would delight any modern film director. And the greatest virtue of this exercise is that it forces you and your students to take the Latin poetry in the way in which it was written, and not to go around jigsaw-puzzling at it, looking for a verb here and a noun there.

When I was reading Pliny's tale about the haunted house last Halloween night, Gareth's words came to mind. I saw its immediate application to this tale and began to explore and brainstorm about its practical uses in the classroom. With delight I read and reread the passage, looking for some clues in the Latin that would help me compose the script for my film scenario. What form would this script take? What would be the best way for students to approach this assignment? I finally decided upon my instrument: notebook paper divided into three columns. The first column would contain the Latin phrase(s) or sentence(s); the second column would contain the film scenario; the third column (and perhaps the most important column) would be for the explanation--what was found in the Latin text to support the description of the scene. Of course, with this third column you are doing nothing more than teaching students to provide examples to support their arguments.

A delightful consequence of such a method for examining a text is discovering style--discovering how Romans artfully used their language to paint a picture. For example, the following demonstrates Pliny's use of verb forms and other constructions in creating the atmosphere in this scene (7.27.8-9):

Latin	Film Scenario	Explanation
Initio, quale ubique, silentium noctis; deinde concuti ferrum, vincula moveri; ille non tollere oculos, non remittere stilum, sed obfirmare animum auribusque praetendere. Tum crebrescere fragor, adventare et	INTERIOR OF DOMUS. ATHENS. NIGHT. LONG SHOT, showing the PHILOSOPHER sitting quietly at his table with his lamp and writing materials, everything around him is dark. Background SOUND, silence at first, then iron chains faintly rattling and clanging together in the distance. MID SHOT, showing the PHILOSOPHER at his seat unmoved. Background SOUND, the noise from the chains gets louder and closer. Quick LONG SHOTS in different directions in the house, as if looking for the noise. Back to MID SHOT of the PHILOSOPHER, then back to LONG SHOTS of the house, the pace of this matching the increase in SOUND. CLOSE SHOT on the PHILOSOPHER, demonstrating his determination not to look up, focusing only on his work at hand.	Concuti, moveri, tollere, remittere, obfirmare, praetendere, crebrescere, adventare are all historical infinitives; they quicken the pace of the story at this point and account for the added tension and speed of the scene/camera shots. Most of these verbs are also coming before their objects, giving more emphasis to the action.
iam ut in limine, iam ut intra limen audiri	Background SOUND of clashing chains is very loud now. Tighter CLOSE SHOTS of the PHILOSOPHER'S calm face alternating with CLOSE SHOTS of the GHOST'S chains, first against the frame of the doorway with the GHOST on far side, then with GHOST inside door, then right behind the philosopher's back. Hold CLOSE SHOT on the PHILOSOPHER'S face while the SOUND from the chains become unbearably loud.	Iam ut... iam ut... bring more urgency to the scene, as demonstrated by the alternating close shots.
respicit, videt agnoscitque narratam sibi effigiem.	MID SHOT of the PHILOSOPHER and the GHOST. The PHILOSOPHER slowly but calmly looks up. He views the GHOST with the detachment of a scientist, although the ghost's haggard appearance (see opening description, above) is definitely frightening.	Respicit, videt, and agnoscitque (all present tense verbs) demonstrate the calm, detached nature of our observer, the philosopher, who has been steadfastly writing on his wax tablet the whole time without looking up. The ghost's appearance is exactly the same as described previously--we know this from narratam.

If I were a student and just translating the passage into English, I doubt if I would pay attention to phrasing and word choices, much less care. I'd be too busy just trying to get it "into English" (however bad that might be) and finish yet another translation assignment. But the creativity involved in writing a film scenario can motivate a student to pay more attention to details and phrasing (even inadvertently) and, as a result, to understand more of what the author is trying to communicate.

The writing of a film scenario is not necessarily limited to textual descriptions. Students could complement the written assignment with illustrations in the form of story boards, such as an advertising firm would do when presenting an idea for a commercial. These could also be displayed for other students, faculty, administrators and parents to see. Some students might actually want to film the scene using a home camcorder. The possibilities are endless.

THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE

My friend Dexter Hoyos at the University of Sydney was fascinated by my description for using the "film scenario" and decided to issue me a challenge. He sent me the following sentence (with the preface), which I learned later was Tacitus--a difficult author whose works I had never read previously.

(Nero, planning to kill off his mom, has her to dinner first.)

iam pluribus sermonibus modo familiaritate iuvenili Nero et rursus adductus, quasi seria consociaret, tracto in longum convictu, prosequitur abeuntem, artius oculis et pectori haerens, sive explenda simulatione, seu periturae matris supremus aspectus quamvis ferum animum retinebat.

I confess that it took me several readings to comprehend the Latin, after which I pondered how I would film it. A juicy piece indeed, which I am now convinced that I can more compactly and effectively "film" than translate into good English. Because of the psychological and grammatical complexity of the passage, I broke down the Latin into smaller phrases than I had with the tale of the haunted house. I also tried to imagine all the things that aren't actually mentioned directly, such as guests, slaves, the boat dock, etc.

Latin	Film Scenario	Explanation
iam	SEASIDE VILLA AT BAIAE. LATE AT NIGHT. (Exiting TRICLINIUM and going to) BOAT DOCK (where the specially engineered boat, ready to fall apart, waits for AGRIPPINA).LONG SHOT (from stage left), showing NERO following AGRIPPINA out the door of the triclinium; SLAVES cleaning up behind; Agrippina's SLAVES rounding up her things, etc. (As the scene progresses, the CAMERA will circle around NERO from stage right to stage left, with the final shot from the other side-that side will be away from the GUESTS and viewing the boat.)	The focus of this sentence is what Nero is doing now (iam). It is because of this that I open my scene with a view of Nero, even though he doesn't appear first in the Latin, but is the 7th word. I have the scene set in the triclinium since this is a dinner party (convictu). Convictu also indicates that there are witnesses present-people who are watching this scene take place (and not just the ever present but ignored slaves).
pluribus sermonibus modo familiaritate iuvenili	(FLASHBACKS in the TRICLINIUM; the rest of the shots are on NERO and AGRIPPINA walking out on the BOAT DOCK)FLASHBACK (with a kind of strobe effect with the appropriate sound-like a camera flash-accompanying it; more gentle with the first flashback, but increasing in intensity with successive episodes), alternating MID SHOTS (showing the room is cleaner and neater to indicate that it is earlier in the evening) and TWO SHOTS of NERO and AGRIPPINA on couches in the triclinium, telling stories to each other or gossip, NERO feeding AGRIPPINA (maybe something he's eaten so there's no worry of poison), whispering to her while other guests talk, etc. FLASHBACK to this two or three times, allowing the different food and drink on the table and neatness of the room plus drunkenness of the other guests to indicate how much time has passed.	The use of multiple flashbacks helps to create the image of pluribus sermonibus-that they didn't just have one nice chat but many throughout the evening. Gossiping, feeding each other, whispering, etc., are indications of modo familiaritate iuvenili. I have multiple guests here to help indicate when Nero and his mother are talking just to each other-that there is some intimacy taking place, some filial familiarity. Of course, we need other guests to witness this scene. This whole sentence is about Nero's possible state of mind, his reason for the pose (pectori haerens).
Nero et rursus adductus quasi seria consociaret	More FLASHBACKS/MID SHOTS, this time	This phrase and the last indicate two sides (of

	<p>with NERO discussing serious matters of state, perhaps both with AGRIPPINA and his ADVISORS, and OTHERS who are present.</p> <p>During these FLASHBACKS, NERO and AGRIPPINA continue to walk to the boat with AGRIPPINA leading the way. The ubiquitous SLAVES are present and other GUESTS have followed NERO and AGRIPPINA to see this grand gift (the boat). The CAMERA tracks from stage left to nearly straight on, so that the GUESTS and others can be seen behind NERO and AGRIPPINA.</p>	<p>many?) of Nero's nature: his tender, boyish side and the emperor/serious ruler that his mother has helped him become. Both show his relationship to his mother--his affection and respect. I have guests following them outside because the text (further down) indicates witnesses to these events--that people are seeing possible motivations for his pose (artius oculis et pectori haerens). All of these subordinate clauses and phrases go to Nero's state of mind. Was he just striking a pose (explenda simulatione) or was he truly influenced by the evening? Did it truly touch his heart? Was the one last look at his mother a sincere look?</p>
tracto in longum convictu	<p>FLASHBACK/MID SHOT, showing another course being brought out (with his mother protesting the additional food/dessert or, more likely, wine). FLASHBACK/CLOSE SHOT, showing NERO making a toast and ordering the mix of wine to water.</p> <p>FLASHBACK/LONG SHOT to additional entertainment (DANCERS, POETS), etc, anything to make the dinner party seem long and drawn out.</p>	<p>Tracto in longum convictu is a natural flashback since it is an ablative absolute. This is definitely something that has happened in the past, something that sets the stage here. In longum is important-it indicates, more than tracto, that the dinner party had already gone on a long time, thus emphasizing how noteworthy it is that Nero seems as if he might not want their happy reunion to end.</p>
prosequitur abeuntem	<p>TWO SHOT (straight on) of Nero following AGRIPPINA to the end of an elaborate boat dock (such as are seen in some frescos), garlands and such everywhere for the occasion, torches lit, etc. GUESTS and SLAVES followed them but are standing back. The CAMERA continues to track, moving around to stage left, beginning to show the water/boat in the background. CAMERA tightens on two shot of NERO and AGRIPPINA.</p>	<p>Nero . . . prosequitur abeuntem is the main clause in this sentence; it is the current action; it is the skeleton that all the other participles and subordinate clauses hang on. This is why we are here: to watch Nero as he gives a fond (?) goodbye to his mother.</p>
artius oculis et pectori haerens	<p>TWO SHOT, showing NERO and AGRIPPINA standing side by side on the dock. NERO faces AGRIPPINA and embraces her, gently kissing each of her eyes, then dropping to his knees, burying his head in her chest, clinging tightly to her gown, almost in a pose of worshipping her.</p>	<p>Pectori haerens is why we are here--this pose of Nero is what witnesses saw. This is what they saw before Agrippina was almost killed. So when they saw it at the time, after such a lengthy and seemingly enjoyable dinner party, were they seeing true emotion, or was it an act? This pose is crucial to the scene. It must be handled with care. Tacitus does not have Nero groping his mother openly and even though this is implied by other authors, we must not here. We have been given, up to this point, reasons for Nero's sincerity--reasons why he might be pouring filial love and devotion on his mother. This is what we must portray.</p>
sive explenda simulatione	<p>Freeze TWO SHOT with NERO posed, clinging to AGRIPPINA. Have Nero's SLAVES gradually come closer, as if providing appropriate lighting for a staged scene.</p>	<p>If there is a way to make this look feigned, we must demonstrate it. Nero was an artist after all (artius in the text!)-thus the assumption that people are expecting Nero to fake his affection (certainly when thinking back to this scene later on).</p>
seu periturae matris supremus aspectus	<p>TWO SHOT zoom to CLOSE SHOT on NERO. NERO sighs and looks up briefly at AGRIPPINA. Resume TWO SHOT, showing AGRIPPINA fondly looking down at him and stroking his hair.</p>	<p>This possibility allows Nero to demonstrate somewhat sincere feelings for his mother--that maybe he wasn't faking his feelings or maybe he had a change of heart after such an enjoyable evening together.</p>
quamvis ferum animum retinebat.	<p>CLOSE SHOT, with NERO looking back down and then turning his head toward the sea, all the while clinging to AGRIPPINA'S chest. And what does he see? His boat! The boat that is rigged to fall apart and drown AGRIPPINA. TIGHT SHOT on NERO'S face, from eyes to mouth, revealing a subtle, evil smile ever so slightly creeping across his face. NERO closes his eyes in relief that AGRIPPINA will soon</p>	<p>This is the clincher--no matter whether he was just faking any show of affection or whether he really felt some filial affection (that all good Romans have), he's holding back his fierce nature. He's not letting on (or so he thinks) to all others present what's on his mind, what he's holding back, but we know as we see this final shot.</p>

	be gone from his life. LONG SHOT of boat. SLOW FADE TO BLACK.	
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After I completed the above film scenario, I decided to translate the passage into English. With every attempt I grew more frustrated. I felt inadequate, illiterate, uneducated, beaten. I questioned my understanding of the grammar over and over. In contrast, when I was working on interpreting this passage for the film scenario, I found my confidence building. As I constructed the scene in my mind, each piece seemed to fit together, each piece worked to create this complex psychological picture of Nero. Tacitus' narration is intriguing, exciting, complex. But were I to base my experience with Tacitus on my feeble English translation alone, I would never want to read Tacitus again.

And I think that is the most important lesson to be learned here. Surely our students become greatly discouraged when translating a piece of Latin that doesn't flow easily into English, especially if they are translating Latin day after day. No one likes to work on something that makes him or her feel like a failure. Where is the motivation to become better acquainted with the passage or to focus on Latin in its own word order? Next time, when a particularly challenging passage comes along (or when you just need a change of pace), consider whether a film scenario treatment might be more productive than a translation. Put the SPOTLIGHT where it should be: on reading comprehension. FADE TO BLACK.

** I owe a small debt of gratitude to the autobiography Clinging to the Wreckage by John Mortimer, who demonstrates with humor how to write and typeset a scene for a film script. Tibi gratias ago, Sir John*