

Little Things Mean a Lot

The big screen is at its best when its focus is small

[Richard Walter](#)

You have **2** free member-only stories left this month.



Image credit: [Blues Brothers](#)

Whether it's a 1000-seat Auditorium 'A' at a mega-multiplex, your TV at home, or the smartphone in your pocket, the movie screen is big enough to hold the entire world. Haven't we seen just that, the whole world on a screen, that beautiful blue orb called Earth, photographed from satellites in orbit?

Maybe that's why too many screenwriters seem to think that the best use of the screen is to fill it with big, flashy stuff accompanied by noises and oratory roaring at a gazillion decibels.

It is certainly true that movie screens accommodate military battles, car chases, earthquakes and volcanoes, great white sharks, floods and forest fires like no other medium.

Too few writers recognize, however, what movies do best is the opposite of that. What movies do best is to address not what is big but what is small.

A lone and humble gesture, a mere facial expression, can communicate an impact that is more powerful than an ocean liner crashing into an iceberg, an outsized gorilla scaling the Empire State Building, or a dinosaur terrorizing tourists at a theme park.

Abbreviated throw-away lines of dialogue often deliver far more story and character freight than many long winded, self-conscious, shrill, overbearing, weighted, blocky lectures purportedly exploring the nature of that thing we call the human condition.

In Clint Eastwood's *Escape From Alcatraz*, a social worker/psychologist interviews the imprisoned protagonist. She asks him, "What was your childhood like?"

He does not offer a sermon detailing the hardships of his upbringing, the beatings at the hand of his alcoholic father, the terror inflicted by neighborhood bullies, the brutality visited upon him by corrupt law enforcement officials.

Instead, in answer to the question, he mutters but a single word: "Short."

Cannot anyone see how far more powerful that is than even the most eloquent lecture that could emerge from the pen of Shakespeare or even the keyboard of Sorkin?

That magician known as Merrill Streep won yet another Oscar for her performance as the all-powerful central character in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Meaningfully, throughout the picture, she never raises her voice. Indeed, when she wants to wield substantial and significant influence, she lowers it.

Instead of shouting, she speaks her lines in a virtual whisper.

The result?

Instead of backing away, listeners are drawn more closely to her.

The Blues Brothers employs a running gag where John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd are trailed by a psychopath portrayed by Carrie Fisher. She blasts the end of several scenes with a round from a shoulder-mounted bazooka powerful enough to turn a tank into toast.

The brothers are somehow always spared, however, not even noticing the destruction. After one such scene, the brothers traipse across a newly ruined landscaped marked only by a handful of surviving door frames that still stand, however precariously, however wobbly. Aykroyd appears to be on the verge of collapse. A lesser actor would have

pushed it over, sending it to the ground with a loud clunk, providing a rhythmic punch that sweetly ends the scene.

Not Aykroyd.

Underappreciated genius that he is, instead of knocking the door frame to the ground, he adjusts it, resurrects its posture, somehow sets it straight.

This modest motion carries far greater drama, ultimately, than the former ever could, as it pits the frame's ragged, shabby, tentative order, against the setting's overall chaos, thereby underscoring the prevailing chaos.

In *Dave*, Kevin Kline plays a lookalike U.S. president. A key turning point in the plot occurs when the real president's wife, portrayed by Sigourney Weaver, realizes that Kline's character is not her true husband. How does she learn this? By conducting a thorough investigation, with detectives seeking clues, sneaking into the West Wing at midnight and photocopying hidden files?

Not at all.

She realizes Kline is not her real husband, not the true president, when she catches him lustily observing her thigh when it is briefly exposed by a breeze that happens to ruffle her dress. She has not seen her real husband, the true president, regard her in that manner in too, too many years.

Far more powerful than cramming our grand ranging world

onto the screen, smart writers focus upon the little things, the small details that offer big revelations.

[Follow Richard on Medium](#) and [subscribe to his brand new *Get Reel* podcast on Substack.](#)