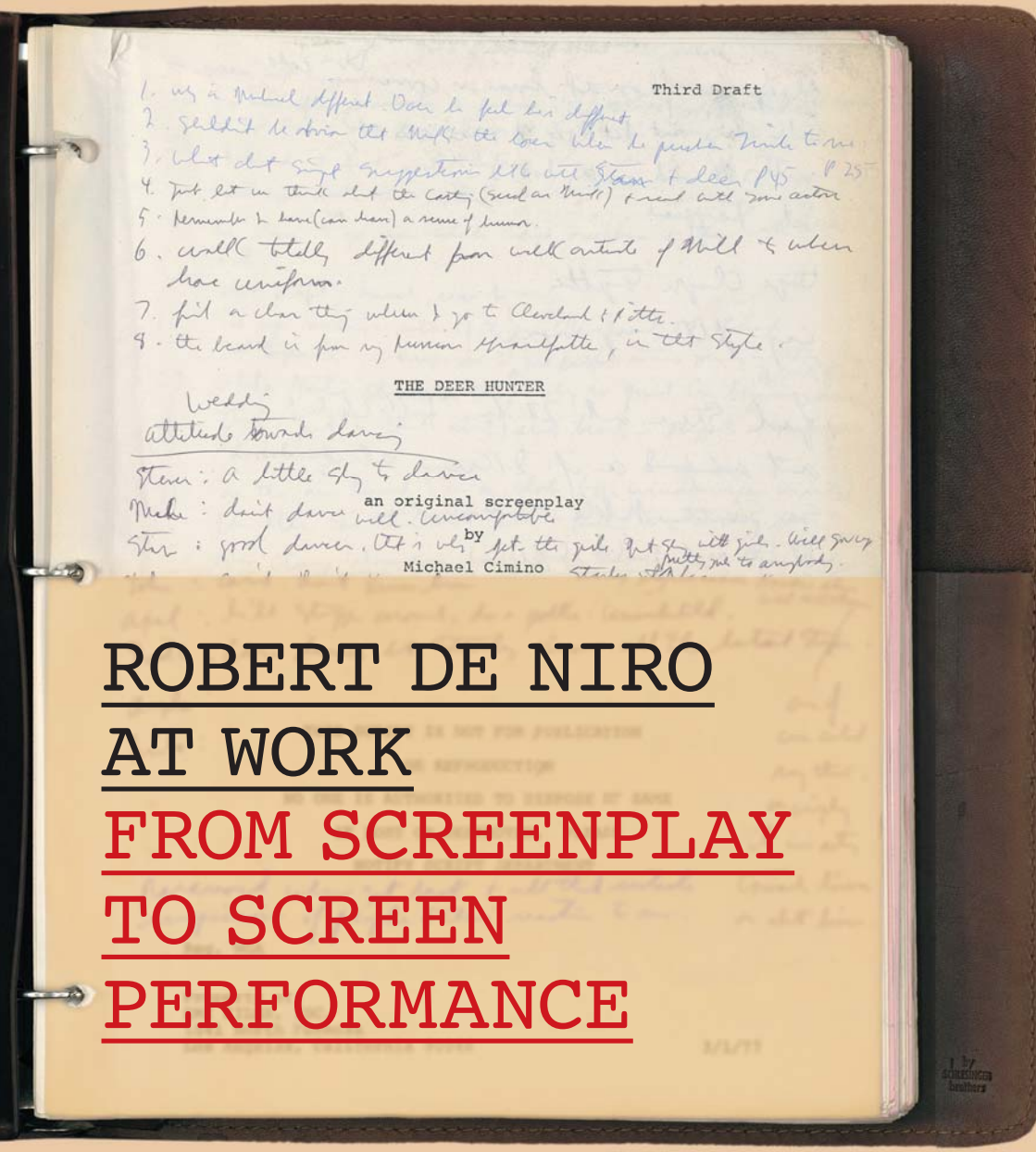

ROBERT DE NIRO AT WORK

FROM SCREENPLAY TO SCREEN PERFORMANCE

Adam Ganz & Steven Price

Palgrave Studies in Screenwriting

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Adam Ganz · Steven Price

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palgrave
macmillan

Adam Ganz
Royal Holloway University of London
Surrey, UK

Steven Price
School of English Literature
Bangor University
Bangor, UK

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Note on the Text

We have consistently presented Robert De Niro's handwritten annotations in italics and inside quotation marks, to distinguish between his comments and the screenplay typescript.

Acknowledgments: Robert De Niro at Work

We wish first of all to thank Robert De Niro for donating his magnificent archive for scholars to study, and for permission to reproduce the images in the book.

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Abbreviations

HRC	The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin
RDN	Robert De Niro Papers, The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book started to become thinkable in 2006, when after some forty years of work on over seventy films Robert De Niro gifted his working papers to the Harry Ransom Center (HRC) at the University of Texas at Austin. De Niro is indisputably one of the greatest film actors of the second half of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and his archive, which was opened to researchers in April 2009 after the extraordinary quantity of materials had been catalogued and indexed, opened up new, more fully informed ways of thinking about how screenplays are written and worked with, how the film text is created, and the role of the actor as writer—not only in directly devising the lines, and as a co-creator of the film text, but also as somebody who literally leaves traces of themselves on the film; indeed, these traces *are* the film, or are at least large parts of it.

These multiple ways in which an actor writes a film have not been studied enough: partly because prior to De Niro's generous donation there were no such archival materials available of remotely comparable significance, partly because De Niro is unique in the range, ways and extent to which he participates in these processes, but also because film studies has tended to think of the film actor as something passive, as something to be looked at, or as a star or celebrity, rather than as somebody who is actively making conscious decisions at every moment about what will appear on film. It is notable, for example, that the first edition of Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1979), the most widely cited academic study of

A. Ganz and S. Price, *Robert De Niro at Work*,
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film stars, makes no mention of De Niro; perhaps not surprisingly, since the three parts of the study look at 'Stars as a Social Phenomenon', 'Stars as Images' and 'Stars as Signs'. The second edition (1998) contains a single reference to him in a supplementary chapter by Paul McDonald, under the resonantly suggestive subtitle 'Stardom as Labour'—but only to dismiss (quite rightly) the 'incoherence' or inadequacy of remarks by other commentators to the effect that De Niro and Al Pacino are 'the finest actors of their generation', or that 'film acting is very complex and psychological, and that people like Pacino and De Niro work in complex and psychological ways'.[1]

The problem with such simplistic constructions is not merely their excessive generalisation, but that they work at the level of affect: De Niro's work appears complex and psychological, therefore he must be working in complex and psychological ways, but we don't know what these are and so we can say no more. Consequently, in journalistic accounts of the actor there is a tendency to fall back on oft-repeated anecdotes about the lengths to which he would go in, for example, transforming his body while preparing to play the older Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull*. The archive can help to change all this, because in its most straightforward sense it represents De Niro's decision to archive his process. It allows the researcher to look at this process in all its complexity, and how it developed and changed as he worked with different screenwriters and directors, beginning with his first feature film *The Wedding Party*, filmed in 1963 and directed by Brian De Palma. Since then he has worked with many of the world's finest directors: apart from his close relationship with Martin Scorsese, with whom he has made eight films—the latest, *The Irishman* (2019), being released as this book was being completed—he has worked with an astonishing variety of other directors, including Elia Kazan, Roger Corman, Quentin Tarantino, Bernardo Bertolucci, Sergio Leone, Barry Levinson, Ron Howard, Penny Marshall and Harold Ramis.

The screenwriters he has worked with are equally illustrious, including Paul Schrader, Harold Pinter and David Mamet. The screenplays of almost all of his films are held in the archive, frequently accompanied by correspondence with directors, writers and other collaborators. The archive also retains many of his costumes and props—the material traces

[1] Paul McDonald, 'Supplementary Chapter: Reconceptualising Stardom', in Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 1998), p. 195.

of an actor's performance. We are able to see his reading lists and look at his notes on original source material and the various forms of annotation he makes on the screenplays themselves, all of which reveal his understanding of character and process. We can see how he develops that working process and how he learns and changes from film to film as he works with different directors and screenwriters on different roles.

The archive raises questions about the nature of the screenplay text and the film text, and the actor's work. It deals with what is or appears 'authentic', 'real' or 'natural', and the work that a performer does to ensure that what they do on screen, or what the audience sees on screen, has the maximum dramatic and emotional effect on its audience. Actors do not only *interpret* a screenplay text and translate it to the screen: in an important sense they embody that text and *become* it as it transmogrifies into a different medium; they leave traces of themselves behind. The means by which De Niro prepares for this may sometimes be improvisational, but they are never accidental. They include the ability to write dialogue; to think about the way dialogue is stressed or spoken; to think about what other actors might be working with, and how; and to undertake different forms of textual analysis, often at a very intense theoretical level. As long ago as 1988, when the archive was unavailable to scholars and this aspect of the actor's work was almost entirely hidden from view, James Naremore could accurately describe De Niro as 'a sophisticated theorist, a man who seems drawn to self-reflexive performances'.[2] The archive makes this aspect of his work newly visible: he analyses texts with the same level of sophistication as a literary critic or a film theorist, but he is also a historian and researcher, using many kinds of primary and secondary materials to find ways he can as an actor interpret, embody and articulate the text.

We write as scholars of the screenplay rather than performance. We are looking at how De Niro interprets a script and realises it in a different medium. And this has suggested useful analogies, such as translation studies or microhistory, on which screenplay studies can draw and through which it can be extended. We are looking at the screenplay not so much as a concept or a 'screen idea'[3] but as a material object, with a

[2] James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 267.

[3] Ian Macdonald, *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

history and a purpose that was used by one person to realise their role in the film.

At the same time as De Niro's archive was going through the process of painstaking cataloguing to prepare it for the use of researchers, a disparate group of scholars was beginning to question the marginalisation of the screenplay in both film and literary studies. Between 2007 and 2010 this group, in addition to publishing their own monographs and articles, established the Screenwriting Research Network, organised an ongoing series of annual international conferences, founded the *Journal of Screenwriting*, and a little later set up the Palgrave 'Studies in Screenwriting' book series in which the present volume appears. The authors of this book have both been extensively involved with these various activities, but one of the things that struck us most forcibly when researching De Niro's archive at the HRC is that there has been remarkably little discussion about what happens to the screenplay for the *actors*: the people who in some cases (certainly De Niro's case) work on it most, whose reading of the screenplay can often determine whether or not the film gets made at all, and certainly will help to determine *how* it is made. The archive is a manifesto that allows us to look at what one particular actor has done in order to make the performances he has made, and it asks important questions about how films come to be, and about how we understand them. In this book we would like to pick up that manifesto, and work with it.

These two contemporaneous developments—the establishment of the De Niro archive and the emergence of screenwriting studies as a new field of research—form the foundations on which the present book is built. In Chapter 2 we look at various theoretical approaches to the screenplay, including as a 'boundary object'—a flexibly heuristic device for thinking about the multiple uses of screenplays and the many different kinds of practitioner who may use the 'same' screenplay for their own particular reasons. Not only screenplays, but also the actor and the archive, can all be thought of as boundary objects, intersecting productively with multiple users and for multiple purposes. We also look at the implications the existence of the archive presents for the study of De Niro as an actor, and for screenwriting studies, with a renewed focus on the materiality of the text and the role of the actor in embodying it and translating it from page to screen. In Chapter 3 we look at De Niro's formation as an actor, and how his approach to both acting and the use of screenplays was influenced by his formative artistic and intellectual experiences.

In these two chapters, we use examples from many different archived screenplays to illustrate particular points; in the remaining chapters we examine De Niro's annotations of particular screenplays in greater detail, with our criteria for inclusion being simply the most interesting texts, or those that exemplify the most interesting questions. Archives are to some extent processes of chance and contingency: things are discovered in there, and the scenes we have chosen to discuss in detail are either exemplary or distinctive. We aim to reveal the development and refinement of De Niro's practice; and if we accept practice as research, in the manner of current emphases in academic research in the humanities, then De Niro is the most profound kind of researcher into the nature of film narrative as it is expressed through his performances.

Our selection is guided by the view that with *Taxi Driver* (1976—Chapter 4) De Niro is finally in a position to do his very best work, bringing together all of the different things he has learned by that point. It is the first time when he is the first writer of the character. The earlier *Godfather, Part II* (1974), for which he won an Academy Award, is arguably a performance of equal stature, and his work on that script is fascinating for a number of reasons explored in our earlier chapters; but by contrast with *Taxi Driver*, for *The Godfather* he is building a character within definite boundaries that have been set by Marlon Brando's prior performance as the older Vito, while De Niro is also eager to learn from the film's director and screenwriter, Francis Ford Coppola, who exerts considerable control over all aspects of the production. On *Taxi Driver* De Niro, taking all of the knowledge he has acquired by this point, is now able to be an active collaborator with screenwriter Paul Schrader and director Martin Scorsese in creating the character for himself.

In Chapter 5 we take a detailed look at *The Last Tycoon*, a much less well-regarded and rarely studied film, also released in 1976. The archive helps to explain why the extraordinarily detailed work De Niro put into preparing for this role did not ultimately result in a more compelling film. As always, however, with *The Last Tycoon* he learned from experience, including what kinds of project were best avoided, and he accordingly re-dedicated himself to the value of improvisation, which he approached in very different ways in each of *New York, New York* (1977), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *The King of Comedy* (1982), all of which we discuss in Chapter 6. In Chapter 7 we look at *The Untouchables* (1987) and *Goodfellas* (1990), two examples of films made after that point in the early 1980s when De Niro changed his working practices and started to take

on more parts as a supporting or cameo actor, and fewer in which he was expected to carry the film as the lead. Instead he gave himself the freedom to select smaller roles that engaged his interest for specific reasons. In our Conclusion we note the various ways in which the kinds of material we have considered in the book continue to demonstrate their timeliness and relevance: a new approach to acting in *The Irishman*, an unusually voluble De Niro giving many interviews to promote the film (and to engage in a revealing and ongoing dispute with President Trump), and his discussion of his father's own newly published and starkly personal notebooks all occurred in late 2019 as we were preparing the final version of this book for publication.

Actors are often ridiculed for the seriousness with which they approach their roles, yet they work in an enormously expensive business where they are often the costliest item on the balance sheet. It is scarcely surprising that a serious actor—and De Niro is nothing if not serious—needs to prepare in order to perform when the camera is rolling. What the archive shows are the various strategies he has employed to play the character in the ways that he thinks will most benefit the film. Film studies has tended to regard the actor as text, or as star or celebrity, or as the object of the spectator's gaze. What these approaches often omit is the actor as collaborator, and co-author, ultimately responsible for carrying the story into the film's own world of light and shadow and convincing the audience to follow them. Actors work, both when they appear in front of the camera and when they prepare. What we have learned about Robert De Niro's preparations, from the marks and traces in his archive, is the subject of the following pages.

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CHAPTER 2

The Robert De Niro Archive and the Screenplay as a Boundary Object

In 2006 Robert De Niro donated his entire archive to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and after three years of cataloguing it was opened in 2009. De Niro's archive is remarkable in its completeness both chronologically going from his very first feature films to the present, and in its depth, with multiple versions of screenplays and other documents. This astonishing resource for researchers gives an unparalleled insight into how an actor engages with a screenplay. For the researcher, it is a reminder that the screenplay is a material text, a working document which accompanies the actor to the set, which is used to organise props and costumes and where the actor prepares their performance, both in discussion with other actors and directors in rehearsal and on their own. The annotations and associated materials reveal the analysis, research and reflection involved in preparing a performance.

What the archive tells us above all is the enormous amount of work De Niro commits to his job as an actor. A film actor has not just to perform the character—they must, to use Francis Ford Coppola's formulation, make themselves sufficiently welcoming that the character can temporarily make themselves at home. As Coppola states,

> the actors do not turn into the characters—in fact, the characters turn into the actors. This might be saying the same thing, but as the actor is flesh and blood, and the character is a spirit-like phenomenon, the process is more

A. Ganz and S. Price, *Robert De Niro at Work*,
Palgrave Studies in Screenwriting,
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> correctly understood as the effort that leads to the eventual inhabitation of the actor by the character.[1]

An actor must also curate the character across the times and spaces of the narrative and the production. The actor has, in consultation with the director, to find the patterns and rhythms of the drama, identify emotional highs and lows and the moments where the drama reaches its peak, and to find ways best to embody this. This therefore involves physical work: the actor has to be able to perform those tasks unexceptionally which are unexceptional for the character, whether driving a taxi, hosting a chat show, speaking a dialect, playing the saxophone, punching an opponent (or being punched by them), or killing someone and burying their body. The archive lays bare some of the work involved in being able to reproduce, many times if necessary, actions and gestures on screen that embody the screenplay and the character.

The actor's job is to be compelling: to be more present, or differently present. That has of course to do with an actor's natural gifts, their looks, their sense of rhythm, and their physical control, but it also depends on the quality of their research, their energy and physical control, the power of their imagination, and their ability to find striking physical equivalence for the dialogue and description in the screenplay. And this involves work. As De Niro said in 1989, in response to the question 'You once said that you wanted to feel that you've earned the right to play a character. What did you mean?':

> To have done enough research on the character to feel that you have the right to play that character the way you see it—bringing what you've experienced, what you've learned, making it your own. An actor hears these words all the time: 'Make it your own, make it your own.' Stella Adler would say, 'Your talent lies in your choice.' It's one thing to know that, it sounds great; it's another thing to really *feel* it. And then you have the right to do it.[2]

[1] Francis Ford Coppola, *Live Cinema and Its Techniques* (New York: Liveright, 2017), p. 39.

[2] Lawrence Grobel, '*Playboy* Interview: Robert De Niro', *Playboy*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (January 1989), p. 83; italics in the original.

The De Niro archive reveals the breadth and depth of the research that De Niro undertook to earn this right. As Steve Wilson, who was then the curator of the HRC's film collections, put it at the time of acquisition, '[t]his is what the Ransom Center is all about, the creative process […] I know of no other actor's archive that is as large and comprehensive as this one'.[3] Moreover, while many writers' archives have been sold to institutions for substantial sums, as for example when Harold Pinter's papers were acquired by the British Library in 2007 for a reported £1.1 million,[4] De Niro *donated* his collection, the value of which initial reports placed at over five million dollars.[5] It was, as a reporter at the time inevitably put it, 'an offer the University of Texas could not refuse'.[6]

For De Niro the archive has been an ongoing project, with the original donation being supplemented with further materials in 2012 and 2018. It comprises a vast range of textual materials pertaining to hundreds of movies, both completed films and projects that never came to fruition. Its physical expanse is enormous: at time of writing its meticulously catalogued holdings are arranged in over 500 boxes, in addition to hundreds of books and other bound volumes, as well as an extensive collection of costumes, props and other personal effects and artefacts. Such a vast deposition required years of processing, and it was not until April 2009 that the collection opened to researchers and the public.[7]

On first viewing it, the researcher may feel an almost otherworldly thrill in being confronted with the handwritten marginalia associated with near-legendary films and artists, and experiencing the erasure of time between that moment perhaps forty or fifty years ago when the actor's pen first

[3] Steve Wilson quoted in Jim Vertuno, 'De Niro Donates to Texas' Ransom Center', *AP News*, 7 June 2006, https://apnews.com/677908d9d6406ff5bfe41daef7a72bfb [Accessed 29 September 2019].

[4] Mark Brown, 'British Library's £1.1m Saves Pinter's Papers for Nation', *The Guardian*, 12 December 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/dec/12/books.theatrenews [Accessed 29 September 2019].

[5] Kimberley Jones, 'HRC Opens the Doors on De Niro: The Harry Ransom Center Bulks Up Its Movie Holdings', *The Austin Chronicle*, 28 April 2009, https://www.austinchronicle.com/daily/screens/2009-04-28/hrc-opens-the-doors-on-de-niro/ [Accessed 29 September 2019].

[6] Vertuno, 'De Niro Donates to Texas' Ransom Center.'

[7] 'De Niro's Film Materials Collection Opens at Ransom Center' (Press Release), *Harry Ransom Center*, 27 April 2009, https://www.hrc.utexas.edu/press/releases/2009/robert-de-niro-collection.html [Accessed 16 June 2019].

scrawled across the page and the tangible immediacy of the document's existence in the present. The HRC goes out of its way to preserve this effect as much as possible:

> Special Handling Instructions: Most of the scripts in this collection have been left in an unaltered or minimally processed state to provide the reader with the look and feel of the original as De Niro used it. When handling unbound scripts, or scripts with inserted materials, users are asked to be extremely careful in retaining the original order of the material. Script pages folded length-wise by De Niro are likewise to remain folded in keeping with original order.[8]

There is an uncanny immediacy in, for example, exploring the contents of De Niro's self-created folder for *The Godfather, Part II* and witnessing the disciplined methods by which the actor organised his approach to creating the role. There are annotated versions of the screenplay in both English and the Sicilian dialect which De Niro's character spoke for the majority of the film. We can read in capital letters in the script: '*CI FÁZZU N'OFFERTA KUN PO RIFIUTARI*' ('make an offer he can't refuse'); when we see De Niro providing a detailed note from his '*Last viewing of other me*',[9] in which he lists strategies to incorporate into his performance the gestures and actions he has absorbed from his latest viewing of Marlon Brando in the previous *Godfather* film, we come to understand the complexity of the process.

Bringing a Text to Life

The modern American screenplay form is characterised by scene headings, minimal scene and action descriptions, and dialogue running down the centre of a page that as a consequence typically has the appearance of containing a large quantity of 'white space'. This then becomes an invitation for different workers to supplement the writer's script with

[8] 'Robert De Niro: A Preliminary Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center', https://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?kw=ronin&x=42&y=8&eadid=00481&showrequest=1 [Accessed 18 May 2020].

[9] *The Godfather, Part II* (1974), Shooting script, with RDN notes, lacks title page; contains 'old script' and 'new script' pages, with additional script pages and extensive RDN notes re character development, undated, Box 182 [RDN].

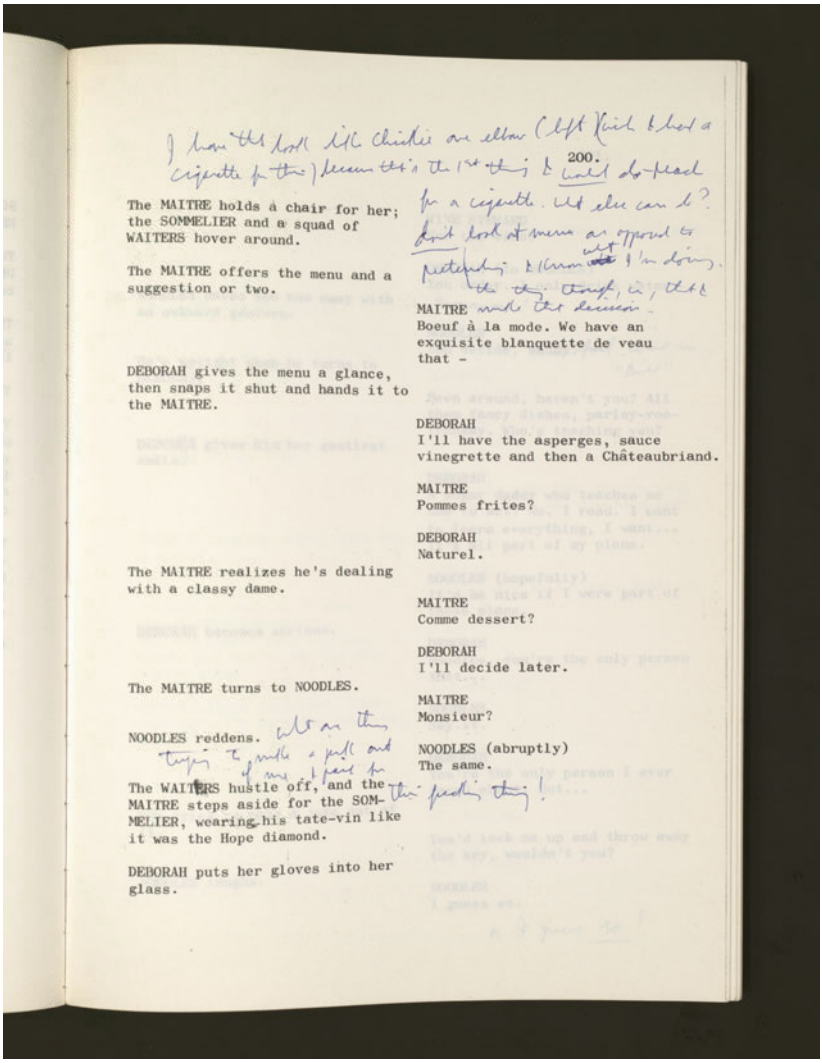
annotations appropriate to their task (a director can turn the master-scene script into a shooting script by adding appropriate directions, for instance), and this means that the 'same' script can have multiple uses for different kinds of worker. For De Niro, white space provides the arena in which he can work out his approach to embodying and performing the character in ways on which the writer's script itself may be silent.

While most of the typewritten screenplay texts De Niro annotates broadly follow the conventional template, there are significant variations. For *Once Upon a Time in America*, director Sergio Leone developed the story with two screenwriters, Leonardo Benvenuti and Stuart Kaminsky. The visual presentation of the screenplay may appear unusual to the Anglophone reader, since it follows the Italian convention that divides the material into two columns, with the scene text appearing on the left-hand side of the page and the dialogue on the right.[10] This format allows De Niro ample room to position his handwritten annotations directly alongside the material on which he is commenting, as is seen clearly in Fig. 2.1.[11]

Once Upon a Time in America offers an excellent introduction to the subtleties of De Niro's annotations. For example, at the beginning of the scene in which the elderly Noodles (De Niro) visits the cemetery where his friends were buried, on the same street where he grew up, Noodles sees (in the words of the screenplay) that '[t]he cemetery next to the synagogue is being torn up'. The writers' final paragraph describes his reaction: 'NOODLES' gaze softens with the nostalgia that even the most desolate places of our past produce in us when we go back to them again. He looks once more towards the cemetery, then goes to the synagogue and enters'. The first sentence contravenes the conventional wisdom that screenplays should avoid narratorial comment: the generalisation about 'the nostalgia that even the most desolate places of our past produce *in us*' cannot be filmed. But in this screenplay, overseen by the director, the affective reading of an image is an essential component of its creation. It is not just that the writer(s) introduce a narrative mode, but that the mode gives a fair indication of how the scene could be filmed, because it

[10] For a recent discussion of some Italian script conventions, see Claudia Romanelli, 'From Dialogue Writer to Screenwriter: Pier Paolo Pasolini at Work for Federico Fellini', *Journal of Screenwriting*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2019), pp. 323–337.

[11] *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), Script in 151 scenes (291 pages); extra scenes laid in, with RDN notes, undated, Box 120.4 [RDN], p. 200.



200.

The MAITRE holds a chair for her; the SOMMELIER and a squad of WAITERS hover around.

The MAITRE offers the menu and a suggestion or two.

DEBORAH gives the menu a glance, then snaps it shut and hands it to the MAITRE.

The MAITRE realizes he's dealing with a classy dame.

The MAITRE turns to NOODLES.

NOODLES reddens.

The WAITERS hustle off, and the MAITRE steps aside for the SOMMELIER, wearing his tate-vin like it was the Hope diamond.

DEBORAH puts her gloves into her glass.

MAITRE
Boeuf à la mode. We have an exquisite blanquette de veau that -

DEBORAH
I'll have the asperges, sauce vinegrette and then a Châteaubriand.

MAITRE
Pommes frites?

DEBORAH
Naturel.

MAITRE
Comme dessert?

DEBORAH
I'll decide later.

MAITRE
Monsieur?

NOODLES (abruptly)
The same.

Fig. 2.1 *Once Upon a Time in America*, Box 120.4, RDN, p. 200

specifically invokes a nostalgic effect that could be evoked in any number of ways (music, soft focus, close-up on the character's face, to mention just some possibilities).

Following Sergei Eisenstein, we may suggest that the screenplay here outlines the 'emotional requirements' of a scene for which the director must find appropriate equivalences—a 'different language', as Eisenstein put in a 1929 article in which, discussing *The Battleship Potemkin* and citing the phrase 'A deathly silence hung in the air', Eisenstein suggests:

> Let the scriptwriter and the director expound this in their different languages. The scriptwriter puts: 'deathly silence'. The director uses: still close-ups; the dark and silent pitching of the battleship's bows; the unfurling of the St. Andrew's ensign; perhaps a dolphin's leap; and the low flight of seagulls.[12]

For Eisenstein it is quite appropriate for the writer to call for an emotional affect that does not have a precise visual equivalent, since finding these is the province of the director and not the writer. The *Once Upon a Time in America* screenplay is similarly written with affect in mind.

Yet it is surely significant that in a film with a justly celebrated musical score by Ennio Morricone, Leone does not use music, soft focus or even extended close-ups of the actor's face to create the nostalgic mood—the soundtrack at this point consists solely of diegetic street sounds, and De Niro is filmed mostly in medium shot from the back and from the side. The sentence 'NOODLES' gaze softens with the nostalgia that even the most desolate places of our past produce in us when we go back to them again is specifically asking for the *actor* to find an appropriate 'language' into which to translate the script, which at this point describes not just an image but an action: the gaze must 'soften'. The script places its faith in the actor to enact a complex evocation of nostalgic recollection that will prompt the appropriate affective response in the spectator.

It is the kind of challenge to which De Niro has responded again and again in his career, and we shall see throughout this book that his annotations typically tease out extraordinarily nuanced and ambiguous emotional responses that he then challenges himself to create on the screen. De Niro's marginal gloss to this paragraph in *Once Upon a Time in America*

[12] Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Form of the Script', in *Selected Works, Vol. 1: Writings, 1922–34*, trans. and ed. Richard Taylor (London: BFI, 1988), pp. 134–135.

is a fine example: '*Almost an* [illegible in the notation—probably 'emotional', possibly 'immaterial'] *reaction to cry. But to stop to hold in my reaction. Because of all those years away + to be happy to see it and also the sadness (yet happiness) to see how it's changed, how I've changed*'.[13]

It is typical of De Niro to write the note with this kind of halting, nuanced syntax, which here mirrors the complex movement of Noodles' response: (1) first to be moved almost to tears, but then (2) to try to arrest his response before the tears can come; and then (3) to be self-conscious enough to analyse the emotion—the 'nostalgia' called for in the script—and the self-restraining desire to hold it in; (4) to locate the cause of this complex, seemingly self-contradictory response—'sadness (yet happiness)'—in the recognition that the character has changed, but also that 'it' has changed, with the 'it' being seemingly the synagogue and cemetery, but also the street scene and everything the street represented in his boyhood; and finally (5) a qualification of the nostalgic response in the 'happiness' arising from the recognition that the changes are not purely of loss: clearly, something must have been gained too. De Niro's annotations show a perception of himself as simultaneously present in and absent from the scene, thereby using this moment as an opportunity to illustrate the structural effect of the film's complex time scheme and Noodles' position within it.

Montage and *mise-en-scène*

The *Once Upon a Time in America* screenplay is fairly unusual in the emphasis it places on emotional affect within the screenplay text. Many of the scripts on which De Niro worked are more conventional in presenting the action as a series of uninflected images; in such cases, as we shall see throughout this book, De Niro frequently conducts the same kind of work we have seen above in order to hypothesise ways of achieving the emotional affect—firstly in the annotations and then in the performance—that his reading of the script regards as being required, if not specified, in the writing.

This brings us to another, associated convention that has developed in connection with screenwriting. A consequence of avoiding the writing of affect is that the script will not usually linger on an image: the scene text

[13] *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), Box 120.4 [RDN], p. 200.

will present an image in uninflected terms, and then move onto the next image. The rule of thumb whereby a page of screenplay text is presumed to approximate a minute of screen time also contributes to this minimalist mode of description (although as Kristin Thompson notes, this convention requires the cooperation of the director).[14]

Nevertheless, it is broadly true that most screenwriters will tend to write the action as an *implied* series of shots, to approximate the anticipated effect of seeing the film as a cinematically constructed narrative. It is in this sense that Claudia Sternberg can describe the screenwriter as a '*hidden director*', writing in such a way that the script suggests, without overtly specifying, a series of cuts and shot types.[15] In our present example, if we were to remove the narratorial comment about nostalgia we would be left with a description that clearly implies a particular sequence of shots: '1. NOODLES' gaze softens [...] 2. He looks once more towards the cemetery, 3. then goes to the synagogue and 4. enters'. We might think that even the shot type is specified (we may see the first shot as a close-up, for example), but in any case, stripped of the unusual narratorial comment it reveals the script as a montage of shots edited in a particular sequence to further the story, without at any point having overtly to specify either editing (cuts), or cinematography or direction (the type of shot) within the screenplay itself.

In these ways the conventional contemporary screenplay tends to prioritise montage (the idea that the meaning of a particular shot is generated by its position within a sequence of other shots, as in the Kuleshov effect) over mise-en-scène (the immanent meaning of the image captured within the frame of the shot). In short, it tends to prioritise editing over such matters as costume and set design—but also *performance*—which are the province of other specialists who may utilise the white spaces of the script, and supply paratextual illustrations, in working on the film. Unwittingly perhaps, screenwriting orthodoxy, like much of film theory, has thereby tended to construct the actor as something passive (Hitchcock's notorious 'cattle'): as something to be looked at, as the object of the gaze, as something manipulated by the plot, rather than as someone who is active, who has to make conscious decisions at every moment about

[14] Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 367.

[15] Claudia Sternberg, *Written for the Screen: The American Motion-Picture Screenplay as Text* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1997), p. 231; italics in the original.