The Mechanics of Manipulation in Dramatic Writing

A writer's tool for mapping character action through practical systems of force, pressure, and control. Developed by playwright Sheila Callaghan.

trigger	function	force	energy	objective
BUTTON	initiate	pressing	sudden	provoke - ignite - disrupt
CLAMP	restrain	squeezing	dense	restrain - incapacitate - immobilize
CRANK	sustain	grinding	repetitive	exhaust - antagonize - weaken
DIAL	modulate	calibrating	tempered	amplify – diminish - desensitize
FUSE	rupture	detonating	volatile	tyrannize - overwhelm - intimidate
JOYSTICK	redirect	steering	erratic	disorient - agitate - divert
KNOB	permit	twisting	guarded	beguile - deny - undermine
LATCH	secure	sliding	deliberate	ensnare - restrict - neutralize
LEVER	compel	wrenching	driving	incriminate - intrude - exploit
PULLEY	offload	straining	lopsided	displace - entangle - unnerve
PUMP	inflate	swelling	escalating	embolden - intoxicate - cajole
SPRING	rebound	launching	coiled	startle - eject - ambush
SWITCH	reverse	flipping	disruptive	subvert - deflect - disorient
THROTTLE	suppress	thrusting	compressed	stifle - sabotage - suppress
VALVE	release	venting	regulated	withhold - pacify - placate

WELCOME TO THE MACHINE! This tool can be used for character building, scene hacking, story analysis, conflict escalation, and/or any other means of narrative disruption.

Imagine the machine represents a dramatic arc or a core relationship or a power structure or a logic/belief system. The "triggers" (left column, in grey) are how your characters use the machine to get what they want. The "function" (second column) is how the trigger operates mechanically. The "force" (third column) is the type of pressure applied. The "energy" (fourth column) is self-explanatory. And the fifth and final column, "objective," is the desired outcome. When used to describe actions your characters impose on one another, triggers can reveal or determine status, desires, vulnerabilities, resilience, ethos, corruptibility, psychological wounds, self-worth, empathetic capacity, etc.

When applied dynamically, the machine can fuel momentum or set internal rhythms or modulate tensions or identify structural issues. If a scene falls flat or sags in the middle, ask yourself the following: Who stands to lose the most when the gears get stripped? What will your characters do to take/keep/weaponize the control panel? Who is an expert operator? Who is a neophyte? Who chooses to disable/override/ignore the triggers? What happens when the motor burns out?

Other ways of engaging the tool:

• Give a character a signature trigger and flip it mid-scene with no warning.
• Use competing triggers to crash out a stagnant relationship.
• Chart a character's shifting tactics and swap one out for fresh energy.
• Stack triggers to stress-load the machine until it starts to overheat.

HAVE FUN!