STORYBOARDING AND SCRIPTWRITING
Scriptwriting Theories & Practice

THEORIES ON SCRIPTWRITING

Fundamentally, the screenplay is a unique literary form. It is like a musical score, in that it is intended to be interpreted on the basis of other artists' performance, rather than serving as a "finished product" for the enjoyment of its audience. For this reason, a screenplay is written using technical jargon and tight, spare prose when describing stage directions. Unlike a novel or short story, a screenplay focuses on describing the literal, visual aspects of the story, rather than on the internal thoughts of its characters. In screenwriting, the aim is to evoke those thoughts and emotions through subtext, action, and symbolism.

There are several main screenwriting theories which help writers approach the screenplay by systematizing the structure, goals and techniques of writing a script. The most common kinds of theories are structural. Screenwriter William Goldman is widely quoted as saying "Screenplays are structure".

THREE ACT STRUCTURE

Most screenplays have a three act structure, following an organization that dates back to Aristotle's Poetics. The three acts are setup (of the location and characters), confrontation (with an obstacle), and resolution (culminating in a climax and a dénouement). In a two-hour film, the first and third acts both typically last around 30 minutes, with the middle act lasting roughly an hour.

In Writing Drama, French writer and director Yves Lavandier shows a slightly different approach. As most theorists, he maintains that every human action, whether fictitious or real, contains three logical parts: before the action, during the action, and after the action. But since the climax is part of the action, Yves Lavandier considers the second act must include the climax, which makes for a much shorter third act than is found in most screenwriting theories.

Besides the three act structure, one could also use four or even five acts in a screenplay, though these would be used to suit longer stories than the classic 120 page format.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

The Hero's Journey, also referred to as the Monomyth, is an idea formulated by noted mythologist Joseph Campbell. The central concept of the Monomyth is that a pattern can be seen in stories and myths across history. Campbell defined and explained that pattern in his book The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949).

Campbell's insight was that important myths from around the world which have survived for thousands of years, all share a fundamental structure. This fundamental structure contains a number of stages, which includes

1. *A call to adventure, which the hero has to accept or decline*

2. *A road of trials, regarding which the hero succeeds or fails*

3. *Achieving the goal or "boon," which often results in important self-knowledge*

4. *A return to the ordinary world, again as to which the hero can succeed or fail*

5. *Application of the boon, in which what the hero has gained can be used to improve the world*

Later, screenwriter Christopher Vogler refined and expanded the Hero's Journey for the screenplay form in his book, The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers (1993).

Syd Field's Paradigm

Screenwriting guru Syd Field wrote the seminal book Screenplay, and posited a new theory, which he called the Paradigm. Field noticed that in a 120-page screenplay, Act Two was notoriously boring, and was also twice the length of Acts One and Three. He also noticed that an important dramatic event usually occurred at the middle of the picture, which implied to him that the middle act was actually two acts in one. So the Three Act Structure is notated 1, 2a, 2b, 3, resulting in Aristotle's Three Acts divided into four pieces.

Field also introduced the idea of Plot Points into screenwriting theory. Plot Points are important structural functions that happen in approximately the same place in most successful movies, like the verses and choruses in a popular song. In subsequent books, Field has added to his original list, and students of his like Viki King and Linda Seger have added to the list of Plot Points. Here is a current list of the major Plot Points that are congruent with Field's Paradigm:

Opening Image: The first image in the screenplay should summarize the entire film, especially its tone. Often, writers go back and redo this as the last thing before submitting the script.

Inciting Incident: Also called the catalyst, this is the point in the story when the Protagonist encounters the problem that will change their life. This is when the detective is assigned the case, where Boy meets Girl, and where the Comic Hero gets fired from his cushy job, forcing him into comic circumstances.

Plot Point 1: The last scene in Act One, Turning Point One is a surprising development that radically changes the Protagonist's life, and forces him to confront the Opponent. In Star Wars, this is when Luke's family is killed by the Empire. He has no home to go back to, so he joins the Rebels in opposing Darth Vader.

Pinch 1: A reminder scene at about 3/8 the way through the script (halfway through Act 2a) that brings up the central conflict of the drama, reminding us of the overall conflict. For example, in Star Wars, Pinch 1 is the Stormtroopers attacking the Millennium Falcon in Mos Eisley, reminding us the Empire is after the stolen plans to the Death Star R2-D2 is carrying and Luke and Ben Kenobi are trying to get to the Rebel Alliance (the main conflict).

Midpoint: An important scene in the middle of the script, often a reversal of fortune or revelation that changes the direction of the story. Field suggests that driving the story towards the Midpoint keeps the second act from sagging.

Pinch 2: Another reminder scene about 5/8 through the script (halfway through Act 2b) that is somehow linked to Pinch 1 in reminding the audience about the central conflict. In Star Wars, Pinch 2 is the Stormtroopers attacking them as they rescue the Princess in the Death Star. Both scenes remind us of the Empire's opposition, and using the Stormtrooper attack motif unifies both Pinches.

Plot Point 2: A dramatic reversal that ends Act 2 and begins Act 3, which is about confrontation and resolution. Sometimes Turning Point Two is the moment when the Hero has had enough and is finally going to face the Opponent. Sometimes, like in Toy Story, it's the low-point for the Hero, and he must bounce back to overcome the odds in Act 3.

Showdown: About midway through Act 3, the Protagonist will confront the Main Problem of the story and either overcome it, or come to a tragic end.

Resolution: The issues of the story are resolved.

Tag: An epilogue, tying up the loose ends of the story, giving the audience closure. This is also known as denouement. In general, films in recent decades have had longer denouements than films made in the 1970s or earlier.

The Sequence Approach

The sequence approach to screenwriting, sometimes known as "eight-sequence structure", is a system developed by Frank Daniel, while he was the head of the Graduate Screenwriting Program at USC. It is based in part on the fact that, in the early days of cinema, technical matters forced screenwriters to divide their stories into sequences, each the length of a reel (about ten minutes).

The sequence approach mimics that early style. The story is broken up into eight 10-15 minute sequences. The sequences serve as "mini-movies", each with their own compressed three-act structure. The first two sequences combine to form the film's first act. The next four create the film's second act. The final two sequences complete the resolution and dénouement‡ of the story. Each sequence's resolution creates the situation which sets up the next sequence.

Non-Linear Narrative

A non-linear narrative is one that does not proceed in a straight-line, step-by-step fashion, such as where an author creates a story's ending before the middle is finished. Linear is the opposite, when narrative runs smoothly in a straight line, when it is not broken up.

An example of a non-linear narrative is the 1994 film Pulp Fiction. The film is ostensibly three short stories, which upon closer glance are actually three sections of one story with the chronology broken up.

Another popular non-linear narrative is the Present-Past-Present format which takes the viewer to what is happening "now" and then through the series of events which lead up to that moment. Several of the novels written by Chuck Palahniuk are done in this format, as well as, the screen adaptation for his work "Fight Club."

‡ *the final resolution of the intricacies of a plot, as of a drama or novel. [dey-noo-mah]*