Three Act Structure: An overview of screenwriting theory

There is a whole industry now dedicated to screenwriting – a multitude of books, magazines, courses, software packages and websites offer guidance to would-be professional writers.

The screenwriting books on the market essentially attempt to communicate to the aspiring screenwriter what makes a good story and how to tell that story. Some emphasise the mechanics, the craft of screenwriting, others stress the need for the writer to develop as an artist and some persuade us that stories are widely understood through shared archetypes. They are all, to varying degrees, predicated on the notion that a 'good story' is universal and that, although some are blessed with the talent to do it instinctively, it is possible, through investigation of the form, to acquire the necessary techniques.

It is useful for teachers to have access to some of these texts for reference and, although they may be a bit daunting for many students, they would be of interest to those who are particularly creative and motivated – especially those producing screenplays for AS/A level Film Studies.

Below are summaries of some of the key texts which have informed, and continue to inform, contemporary screenwriting.

- **Syd Field, *Screenplay***

First published in 1979, and for some time *the* scriptwriter's bible, *Screenplay* is a practical 'how to' book from a Hollywood insider with experience of screenwriting, script reading, producing, consulting and teaching. Field takes a practical approach to the craft of screenwriting and insists that his book will 'enable the reader to sit down and write a screenplay from the position of choice, confidence and security.' (p5)

Central to *Screenplay* is the concept of the Three Act Structure – the paradigm (based on a two-hour/120-page Hollywood film) which Field argues is fundamental to a successful screenplay and which comprises:

Act I: Set-up, 'a unit of dramatic action that is approximately 30 pages long' in which 'the story, the characters, the dramatic premise, the situation … the relationships between the main character and the other people who inhabit the landscape of his or her world' are all established. (p10)

Act II: Confrontation, 'a unit of dramatic action that is approximately 60 pages long' in which 'the main character encounters obstacle after obstacle after obstacle that keeps him from achieving his or her dramatic need.' (p11)

Act III: Resolution, 'a unit of dramatic action that goes from the end of Act II,

approximately page 90, to the end of the screenplay' which 'resolves the story.' (p12)

Field uses this schematic, perhaps even mechanical, model to argue how the writer must create the transitions between acts through the use of 'Plot Points' – 'a Plot Point is any incident, episode, or event that "hooks" into the action and spins it around into another direction.' (p115)

PLOT POINT I

Field says that Plot Point I should occur at the end of Act I and uses examples from *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, US, 1974) and *Witness* (Peter Weir, US, 1985) to illustrate it:

- In *Chinatown* 'the arrival of the real Mrs. Mulwray is what "hooks" into the action and spins it around into Act II. Jake Gittes must find out who set him up, and why. It happens at about page 23.' (p13)
- In *Witness*, when John Book has reached an investigative impasse, the boy Samuel points at a picture in a newspaper article in a trophy cabinet. 'Book nods his head in understanding. He knows who the murderer is. Now he has to bring him to justice. It is Plot Point I. It occurs on page 25 of the screenplay.' (p13)

PLOT POINT II

This Plot Point functions in a similar way, but spins the action around into Act III. Field argues that 'it usually occurs at about page 85 or 90 of the screenplay' and uses moments from the two films above as examples:

- In *Chinatown*, Plot Point II is when Gittes 'finds a pair of horn-rimmed glasses in the pond where Hollis Mulwray was murdered and knows they belong to Mulwray, or to the person who killed him. This leads to the resolution of the story.' (p14)
- In *Witness*, Field suggests that 'after Book learns that his partner has been killed, he knows it's time to go back to Philadelphia and bring the guilty policemen to justice' and that this, therefore, constitutes Plot Point II, as it precipitates the final act shoot out between them all.

The waters are muddied slightly when Field suggests that

> 'when your screenplay is completed, it may contain as many as 15 plot points. How many you have … depends upon your story. Each plot point moves the story forward, toward the resolution' (p115)

However, he is clear and insistent that the key Plot Points are the ones which precipitate Act II and Act III respectively. He argues that these are the anchors of the story and that, before one begins to write, one must know four things: the ending, the beginning, the plot point at the end of Act I and the Plot Point at the end of Act II.

Essentially this book is about how to tell stories for the screen in such a way that they stand a good chance of being successful Hollywood movies. Criticisms might be that it is a prescriptive, formulaic approach to a creative activity, that it is biased towards the mainstream Hollywood film and that it leaves little room for deviation from a conventional linear mode of storytelling. Nevertheless, it does not prescribe substance or content – 'the paradigm is a form, not a formula; it's what holds the story together.' (p14)

These perceived limitations of Field's approach, however, could be seen as strengths when devising exercises for students, who will find some security in the inflexibility of the Three Act paradigm. Despite the reservations above, it does offer a reliable method of organising a story for the screen and ensuring that the requirements of a mainstream audience are kept in mind. A useful exercise is to identify Plot Points in a range of films in class and discuss in detail how narrative machinery operates.

The Three Act Structure is a useful basis for work on film narrative, even if, initially, some students argue that they are not interested in developing conventional fictions. As suggested previously, it is probably unwise to allow students to pursue more esoteric or abstract works before they understand the principles of conventional story telling. Some students will seek to avoid conventional modes of narration and insist that their ideas cannot be creatively constrained, but it is unlikely that their knowledge of convention is sufficiently sophisticated to challenge it successfully. Although we do not want simply to collude in the perpetuation of orthodox work, allowing students to side step narrative work can deprive them of the opportunity to demonstrate skills in the manipulation of film form.

• Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey*

Starting life as a seven-page memo when the author was a story analyst at Disney, Vogler's book has acquired legendary status. Inspired by the mythologist Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which Vogler describes as 'not an invention, but an observation ... a recognition of a beautiful design, a set of principles that govern the conduct of life and the world of storytelling the way physics and chemistry govern the physical world', *The Writer's Journey* emphasises the importance of mythic structure and mythic archetypes when constructing screenplays. With reference to Jungian and Freudian psychology it also attributes redemptive and restorative powers to the most popular stories to account for their appeal.

Vogler argues that great films are such because they 'have an appeal that can be felt by everyone, because they well up from a universal source in the shared unconscious and reflect universal concerns'. He schematises the universal pattern of 'The Hero's Journey' thus: