The Three Act Structure

Act I: The Set-Up
  • Catalyst / Inciting Incident: begins the action of the story, something happens
  • Introduce main characters: protagonist, antagonists, supporting characters

Central Question: the film asks a question in the set-up that will be answered in the climax
  • a problem is introduced or a situation that needs to be resolved is presented

Turning Points / Plot Points: moving out of one act and into another, is usually done by an action.

The Scene: the basic unit with which the screenwriter works, a visually composed series of shots showing a dramatic action that usually takes place in a single location.
  • used to push the story forward
  • building blocks for a film story

Act II: Development
  • intensify hero’s problems with complications
  • develops the story and characters more fully
  • 2nd turning point occurs at end of this Act
  • protagonist begins to change and grow

Subplots: adds dimension, pushes the plot along, intersects the main plot line

Backstory: background information of the film story. Can be done with humor, suspense, conflict.

Barriers: when a character comes to a brick wall in their action and must change direction
  • an action point which forces the character to make a new decision

Complication: an action point that doesn’t pay off immediately, adds anticipation

Reversal: changes the direction of the story 180 degrees

Foreshadowing/Payoff: a visual clue or piece of dialogue that is used to set up an action or a piece of information that is paid off at a later time in the story

Recurring Motifs: a recurring image or rhythm or sound that is used throughout the film to deepen or add dimension to the story

Act III: Resolution
  • climax: the big finish, answers the central question
  • ties up the loose ends
  • message, moral of story

Types of Story Conflicts

External: Individual vs Individual, Individual vs Group, Individual vs Society, Individual vs Extraordinary Circumstances (i.e. Nature)

Internal: Individual vs Self, struggles with moral, ethical issues, feelings of insecurity.

Narrative films: films that tell stories and have a beginning, middle and end.

Characters: protagonist (“good guy”, his/her actions drive the story), antagonist (“bad guy”, personifies the conflict) and supporting characters.
**Story:** what the film is about, the set of the events of a film narrative. It is the entire sequence of events that the film’s plot draws on and references. Can be written in a few sentences.

**Plot:** how the story is told, the sequencing of events as shown in a given film.

**The Fictive Stance:** to recognize that film narratives do not necessarily have to be truthful. The audience is willing to suspend its disbelief in order to enjoy an imaginary world.

**Point of View (POV)**

**First-Person Point of View:** the audience sees through the eyes of a character in the film, literally (cinematically) and implicitly. Subjective.

**Third-Person Point of View:** the most common way to tell a film story, we see story through the characters actions on the screen. Particularly we (the camera) seem to be watching the protagonist in an objective manner.

**Omniscient Point of View:** the audience sees all, the actions occurring in the narrative and a character’s point of view.

Multiple points-of-view are often used in films.

**The Classical Hollywood Narrative:** uses a main line of action, subplots and is directional. A main character, the protagonist has a goal, tries to achieve it, encounters obstacles (conflicts). The conclusion is achieved through a climax and the characters goals are or are not achieved in the resolution. Follows the Three Act Structure.

**Alternatives to the Classical Narrative**

- the use of ambiguity, i.e. unresolved endings
- no clearly dominant line of action may be apparent
- loosely organized sequence of events
- story elements may not be clearly spelled out or explained
- no straight-forward protagonist or antagonist
- unstructured presentation of the story
- use of cinematic styles that are uncharacteristic of narrative, i.e. jump cuts, addressing the camera.

**Film Genres:** types of films that have similar characteristics and follow a set of visual and narrative patterns that are unique within the genre. They can share common story themes, conflicts, settings, and character types or visuals styles.

- Film Noir
- Musical
- Gangster
- Horror
- Science Fiction
- War Film
- Western