

How to analyze a Film Script

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Research Question: What are the criteria for a fabulous and efficient film script?

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1. Introduction

In my exchange semester in California, USA at the San Diego State University I attended a course called Film, TV and Media Criticism. The Professor teaching was Stuart Voytila, a scriptwriter, producer, actor and author of two books on storytelling. Stuart's lessons were very inspiring in terms of storytelling, structure and character design. He also taught us to look on all different types of media texts to apply the theories we learned in class. This course will be the base for my paper about script analysis.

I will apply theories about storytelling and structure on film and television scripts. I decided to extend my research also on television as it's very similar but at the same time so different. And if you have to deal with scripts in your profession most of the time you will have to deal with both of them.

1.2. Basic Terms [1]

Before jumping right into the matter of script writing I want to introduce the basic terms on storytelling. There is a certain language used to talk about scripts and it's important to understand them.

- *Explicit*: That's the image presented on the surface telling the viewer what the scene/image/story is about.
- *Implicit*: This describes what's lying under the surface, it means the association each individual viewer has based on the explicit story.
- *Story*: The story contains all narrative events explicitly presented on screen and all implicit events.
- *Narrative*: The narrative is the way how the story is been told. It's the selected arrangement of the story events in a cause-and-effect-sequence order to achieve the biggest impact.
- *Plot*: The Narrative

- *Main plot*: The main plot is the primary action of the narrative. The main plot is established in the beginning and is solved in the end. In television the main plot is called A-Story.
- *Sub plot*: The sub plot is the subordinate sequence or action. There can be more than one sub plot. In television the sub plots are called B-Story, C-Story and so on.
- *Diegesis*: The diegesis is the world of the film story.
- *Diegetic sound*: atmosphere and original sound of the scene (source of sound is visible or gets explained)
- *Non-diegetic sound*: music, sound effects (there is no actual cause for the sound)
- *Blow*: comic term to describe the final hard hitting joke of a scene/act/episode

2. Progression and Structure

The first step to analyze a script is to break it down to its structure. The structure of a story is like its skeleton. It's giving the story the main shape. There are many different theories in the script writing world about structure. I will focus on the oldest and most established ones. This chapter is split up into film and television structure. This is a point where those two types differ from each other enormously.

2.1. Progression

Scripts are written to create the impression of things moving. This act of getting somewhere doesn't always mean a chronological but sometimes a psychological one. The feeling of this motion is created by a dramatist's method of topping the event that happened before. Every event has to be more dramatic and important than the one before. If this isn't the case the audience feels uncomfortable and loses interest. We as the viewers are not even satisfied with maintaining on the same level of action. Forward motion is essential. Also important is that a plot doesn't always move in the same speed. For this kind of matter it's fundamental to use a working structure: the topic is introduced and continues to develop to an emotional climax and after the peak another topic starts to grow.

2.2. Film Structure Theory and Models

2.2.1. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

Aristotle was born in Greece as a son of the royal physician Nichomachus. First he studied medicine but was send to Athen to study philosophy at Plato's Academy later. It's said that Aristotle wrote over 150 philosophical treatises but just 30 survived. Those are ranging over different topics as physics, biology, politics and narration. His work *Poetics* is the corner stone of storytelling ever since. [3]



Picture 1: Aristotle

3 Act Structure by Aristotle

Aristotle wrote that "A satisfying story, tragedy, is the imitation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain magnitude". By his definition "a whole is that which has a beginning, middle and an end". [4]

Based on this point of view he created the first theory of narrative structure. It's nowadays called the 3 Act Structure and is used in every story being told. The 3 Act Structure is the base for every other narration theory. No matter if they are split in 3, 8 or 12 parts, they all have a beginning, a middle and an end.

Dramatic Structure:

Act I - The Beginning: The beginning follows not anything but something naturally follows

Act II - The Middle: The middle follows something and is followed

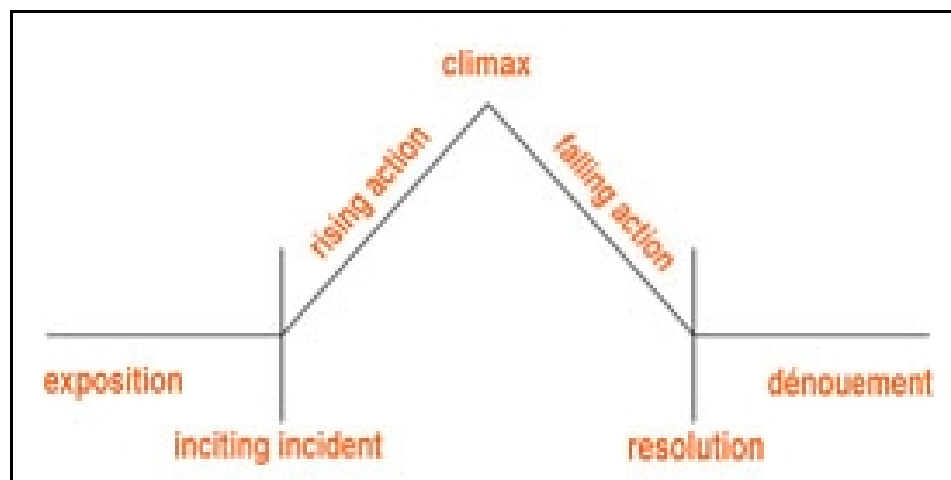
Act III - The End: The end follows something and is followed

Unity of Action:

Important is that the cause and effects relationship binds the parts together. And the series of events are directed towards a single end, the resolution.

2.2.2. Gustav Freytag (1816-1895)

Born in Kreuzburg, Germany Gustav Freytag studied philology and worked as a novelist and playwright. He studied the classic narration used by the greeks and developed the Dramatic Pyramid to structure a story. [5]



Picture 2: Freytag's Pyramid

Freytag's Dramatic Pyramid [6]

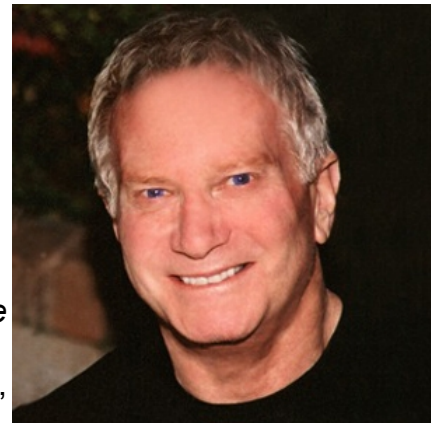
1. *Exposition:*

The exposition contains and introduces the background information about characters, the setting of the story and the basic conflict. This sequence of scenes end with the inciting incident changing everything.

2. *Inciting Incident:*
Something happens to bring the story in motion. It's a life changing event causing the protagonist to leave his comfort zone.
3. *Rising Action:*
After the inciting incident the rising action takes the primary conflict to the next level. Additionally secondary conflicts occur providing complications to drive the story.
4. *Climax:*
The climax is the top but also turning point of the main action. It's also seen as the turning of tide for the protagonist's primary conflict.
5. *Falling Action:*
During the falling action the central conflict moves toward resolution with the protagonist winning or losing against the antagonist.
6. *Resolution:*
The resolution is the event that starts untying the main conflict
7. *Denouement:*
The denouement is the untying of the knot, the catastrophe and its aftermath. In a comedy the protagonist is usually winning or better off then in the beginning. If it's a tragedy the protagonist is usually losing something or somebody and is worse off then when he started.

2.2.3. Syd Field

Sydney Field works as writer, producer, actor and teacher. His name is one of the names you have to know when it comes to Hollywood Screenwriting. He helped a lot of screenwriters in Hollywood to rarefy their work and his 3 Act Paradigm is the base for nearly every script turned to a movie nowadays in Hollywood. Some studios insist on his 3 Act structure. CNN gave him the nickname "Guru of all screenwriters". He published several books about screenwriting, the most successful ones are *Screenplay*, *The Screenwriter's Workbook*, and *The Screenwriter's Problem Solver*. He taught at Harvard, Stanford, UC Berkeley, UCLA, USC the AFI. Now he travels the world giving workshops. [7]



Picture 3: Syd Field

2.2.4. Joseph Campbell

Campbell was an mythologist, writer and lecturer from White Plains, New York in the United States. His best known works are coming from the field of comparative mythology and comparative religion. Campbell developed the 'hero's journey' to exemplify the different stages of a story and its protagonist. [8] Nearly every story also fits in this structure. It has a lot of similarities to the other theories I explained earlier. The hero's journey consists 12 different stages the hero has to pass in order to fulfill his quest.



Picture 6: Joseph Campbell

The circle of the hero's journey [9]

ACT I: Separation – The ordinary world

The hero gets introduced to the audience, he doesn't seem like a hero at this point. He lives an ordinary life in his ordinary world. Then something happens to rattle up his world and he needs to leave his safe place to follow the call to adventure. First he refuses to follow the call due to self doubts and fear. He meets a person, a mentor, who helps him overcoming his doubts and fear and after some struggling he decides to take the challenge. When he walks out of his ordinary life he's crossing the threshold to Act II.

1. Ordinary world
2. Call to adventure (inciting incident)
3. Refusal of the call
4. Meeting with the mentor
5. Crossing of the threshold (plot point I)

ACT II-A: Descent – The special world

As soon as the hero crosses the threshold he enters the special world. He needs to learn the rules and laws of this world. He will be tested if he's dignified for his quest. He will meet allies and enemies, sometimes not knowing who's who. During his way towards his quest the hero will have setbacks and needs to over think his way and adapts to the new rules of the special world. At the descent he reaches the mid point of the story also known as Taste of Death. This doesn't always mean the physical death of the hero. It could also be the hero feeling lost and abandoned. Through his near death experience the hero finally sees what really matters and what's the real goal of his journey.

6. Tests, Allies, Enemies
7. Approach the inmost case
8. Ordeal (1st crisis, Mid Point, Taste of Death)

ACT II-B: Initiation – The special world

The hero survives death and overcomes his fear. He earns now his reward (love, power, honor). After mastering all his challenges it's time for him to return to his ordinary world. Sometimes the hero refuses to return first as he has seen a bigger scope of the world. Finally he understands that it's his destiny to return to serve the ordinary world. He sacrifices his own will for the good of the society. On the road back he has to defeat one last enemy and he's able to do this because of the lessons he learned in the special world during his quest.

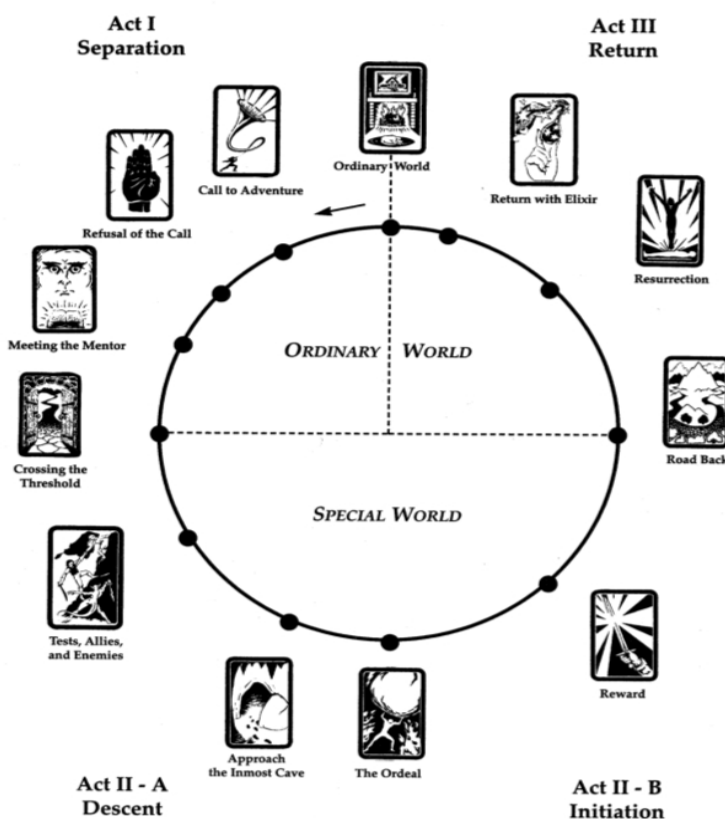
- 9. Reward
- 10. Road Back (2nd crisis, plot point II, final crisis)

ACT III: Return – The ordinary world

The resurrection happens on the road back and is the actual last fight, he faces death again. The hero has to prove what he has learned and that he is worthy the trust of the ordinary world. After the climax the hero finally returns to the ordinary world with the elixir he was sent for. The elixir doesn't have to be a physical object it can also be knowledge or wisdom. With that elixir the hero is now able to help the ordinary world.

- 11. Resurrection (Climax)
- 12. Return with the Elixir

Picture 7: The circle of the hero's journey



2.3. Television Structure

For Television series the structure is different to movies due to length of the show and the fact that an episode follows an episode and is followed by another episode. Except the pilot and the season finale. This means the characters don't have to be introduced in every single episode. Because of the limited time it's also not possible to have a whole circle of travel like in the hero's journey. It's possible to apply some of the movie structures on TV shows as well but they need to be adjusted and cut down to the most important points.

Warner Bros. Sitcom Paradigm [10]

Warner Bros. created a model for breaking down sitcoms which is standardly used in TV business. It is consisting of 2 Acts and is using a simple story to explain it's step.

ACT I:

1. Our character wants to climb a tree (the goal)
2. The protagonist confronts a hive (1st obstacle)
3. He needs to flee but he can't, he is stuck on the tree (things get worse)

ACT II:

1. The character gets stung by a bee, he reacts allergic and while trying to flee he moves to a branch where he is stuck (things are getting worse before getting better)
2. A rainstorm takes care of the bees but the protagonist is still stuck and drenched (twist and turns to find a solution)
3. Somehow he figures out a way to get off the tree (resolution)

3. Characters

The base of a good story is of course a character which allows the audience to emphasize and identify with the protagonist. During his journey the hero will meet many different characters, supporting or counteractive.

3.1. Character Archetypes [11]

Joseph Campbell developed some archetypes of those characters in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. An Archetype is a model something is based on, a recurring pattern of a characters behavior or actions. Joseph Campbell's archetypes are rooting in myths and legends used in many cultures but especially by the Greeks. Every important character can be placed in one of the archetypes. Archetypes can be people, animals or objects, they can be external (action) or internal (belief, conscience) and they can be positive or negative.

- **The Hero**

The hero, most of the time it will be the protagonist of the story, is willing to serve and to sacrifice. His essence is not about bravery or nobility but the will to sacrifice his life for the bigger cause. The mythic hero must pay a price to reach his goal. Depending on the genre of the story the sacrifice can be his life, his love or his own happiness. During his journey the character of the hero grows from a self centered ego to a new and better identity. This grow is just possible by separation from his ordinary world and his safety zone which most of the time means his family or another kind of group. He is send out to a challenging new world full of strangers and jeopardy to finally return to his old ordinary world but with an extended view. The heart of the story often builds around the life lesson the hero needs to learn during his travel. He will learn that lesson through another character often the mentor or the lover but sometimes it could also be the antagonist or villain who teaches the hero.

Also other characters can have heroic features. Especially the antagonist and counterpart of the hero often has an heroic side. The villain is willing to sacrifice everything to obtain his goal which is contrary to the hero's one.

It's important to understand that the hero doesn't have to be a hero in the classical greek manner. He could be an innocent Star wars loving computer geek drawn into a journey by stepping into the wrong door at the wrong time. In the beginning there will be nothing heroic about the main character. But his grow and his travel will lead him to heroic actions and self sacrifice.

- ***The Herald***

The main function of the herald is to announce the challenge. This announcement is the key event sending the hero to his journey. The herald is the person or the piece of information which rattles up the hero's ordinary world. The herald can have many different shapes; it could be a person, an event, a force, the start of a war and so on. The second function of the herald is to warn the hero while he is sent off to his challenge.

- ***The Mentor***

The mentor could be the drill instructor, the older police officer, the aged warrior, a grandparent and so on. He represents the wise and grown qualities of mankind. The main role of the mentor is to teach and to guide the hero when ever he struggles. The teacher sometimes seems to be a foolish person but offers the right gift at the right time. The gift can be whatever the story needs like medicine, weapons, a key or an missing important information. Typically the hero needs to pass some sort of test to be dignified to receive the gift by the mentor. Often the gift seems to be an object without any significance but turns out to be the key to go on. The hero doesn't always appreciate the help and assistance of the mentor. Best example I can think of is Obi-Wan Kenobi in George Lucas Star wars. He acts as a mentor for Anakin and Luke Skywalker. Both of them sometimes struggle with him and often don't appreciate his help but in the critical moments they always turn back to his guidance.

- ***The Threshold Guardian***

The first barrier the hero has to overcome, also known as the first obstacle, will be appear in the shape of the threshold guardian. His main role is to block the hero's road and to test him. The threshold is the gateway from the ordinary world to the special world and the guardian is its gatekeeper. He is usually not the antagonist but a henchman or employee of him. This clash of the threshold guardian and hero is just the first initial test which the hero will have to face on his path to the arch-villain. The threshold guardian can also appear as a neutral or an ally testing the hero's worthiness. Another role of the guardian is to show that the road will not be easy and that the hero needs to grow to be able to resolve all challenges. The encounter between threshold guardian and hero will be early in the story, typically soon after the call to adventure.

- ***The Shapeshifter***

The shapeshifter is the by far the most uncertain and question raising character. He jumps in between different personalities often in very significant ways. The changeability of the shapeshifter is the core of it's archetype. The hero is uncertain about the shapeshifter's aims and allegiance and so is the audience. The truth of his claims are often disputable. The shapeshifter can be male or female but is commonly from the opposite sex and the hero shows romantic interest in the shapeshifter. Sometimes the shapeshifter can appear as a buddy figure of the same sex. The main role of the shapeshifter is to drive the story by adding suspense about the character. This happens because the hero and the audience question and doubt their own beliefs and assumptions about the character. The changing nature of the shapeshifter causes the hero to change along with him. Like other archetypes it is possible for other characters to use some features of the shapeshifter at different times in the story. A often common example is the hero taking the role of the shapeshifter to pass an obstacle. Also mentors often have a shapeshifter side.

- ***The Shadow***

This archetype represents all the things we condemn and deny. The shadow is the negative force in the story often taking the form of the antagonist. But only if the antagonist is also the villain. Sometimes the antagonist is a descent person but his intentions disagree with the hero's ones. But if the antagonist is the villain than he is also the shadow. The hero needs to battle against the shadow to reach his goal and the fight goes until the deadly end. The shadow doesn't see himself as a villain. He thinks that he is the hero and the story's hero is the villain.

- ***The Trickster***

The main role of the trickster is to provide a comedy relief for the story to offset heavy dramatic tension. Often the trickster is an ally or the sidekick of the hero or the villain. He uses the force of cunning to win against stronger and more powerful opponents. The trickster the clown of the story. He's responsible to keep things in proportion.

4. Given Circumstances

There are many terms used to describe the beginning of all plays – social context, playwright's setting, local detail or literary landscape. The given circumstances are the certain conditions of time and location of a story. The circumstances are often ignored for being insignificant but the truth is that the given circumstances are the glue of the plot as they set the characters and the story into the 'here and now'. They influence the characters, create the environment and also can be responsible for creating tension through complications. Smart playwrights can use given circumstances to give certain clues for other parts of the play. For understanding the force of circumstances it is necessary to divide it into its parts.

4.1. Time

The time of given circumstances has three different aspects.[12]

- ***Time of Composition***

This aspect of time is not part of the written play. It's the the actual time era the writer wrote the script. It's important to know this time because it influences the writing style of the author. The life and the world of the author mold his work and it's essential to take it into consideration when it comes to understanding a script.

- ***Time of the Action***

In the majority of scripts and plays it is fundamental to extract the exact time period the story takes place. That can happen by mentioning the year in an opening sequence or by using well known references to events like politicians, wars or sport events. The introduction of the season could be by a scenic shot over a snow covered town. This aspect of time gives the plot more realism and accuracy and it helps the audience to understand the dramatic situation. The time of action can also provide material for conflicts. An historic event can help starting the story. The dialogue needs to be adapted to the appropriate language of the time setting. This explains why a proper research on the time period is crucial element of preparation before start writing a script.

- ***Dramatic Time***

The dramatic time is the total time that passes during the whole script. Some movies cover just one single day while other stories go on over three years. Some scripts provide very precise determination while others like to confuse the audience by using different references. Those references can be placed by dialogue, natural climate, by time typical habits and the list goes on and on.

4.2. Place

The physical environment of the story influences the action, the characters and the movement of the plot dramatic. Some people think that the mis-en-scene should be illustrating the physical environment but it also transports the script's inner spirit. The place is therefore an extremely important part of the story experience. [13]

- **General Locale**

The first subdivision of the place is the general locale, the country, region, or district the story takes place. Information on this general locale are normally given in the beginning of the script. It's important that the knowledge about the place is communicated to the audience by dialogue or the mis-en-scene early in the story. Otherwise the audience could end up confused and distracted. Smart playwrights can use this factor to add more meaning to their story by choosing an interesting and conflict providing location. People tend to have emotional associations with certain places. Writers choose certain general locale not just for emotional associations but also for realism and authenticity.

- **Specific Locale**

The specific locale is the specific place where the single scene takes place like a bar or an apartment. In every scene this specific locale is described in the scenery notes. Similar to the general locale the specific locale needs to be introduced to the viewer by dialogue, setting or/and montage.

4.3. Society

The society inside a story is a closed system because the society has been isolated from the world of objective reality. A story can follow standardized rules similar to the real world or the society can have their own rules and regulations. The choice of the social group of a plot gives the story it's personality. The communication and the behavior inside a family is significant different to the public ones. The consequences of the choice of the social group are humongous and complex. [14]

- **Family**

The most common and most important social group of the most stories is the family. This step is the most logical one as we all have a family. This social group is typically the closest one which means also the one with the most potential for conflicts. The family is the basic social unit of every society. The variety of feasible clashes are endless: From fights and dramas between husband and wife, over psychotic relationships between parents and children to competition among siblings. There are a lot of existing associations and prejudices as everybody has experiences

with his own family. Expectations on certain relationships are perfect soil for future conflicts. Families give complex structures and strong bonds to work with in the writing progress. In many modern dramas family love or its absence are the dominant topics.

- **Friendship**

“Friendships are sympathetic social bonds outside the family.” [15] Friends can be allies and companions during certain events and time periods. Friendships have, like family relationships, emotional expectations. Those expectations can be proofed right during the action of the play or the friendship can be tested by situations and incidents.

- **Love**

The biggest bond of all is love. It can be the love between a heterosexual couple, as it also can be a homosexual one or the love of a mother to her child. One of the most common used and also the most loved topic is destructive love. Love is always a good explanation for acting stupid or doing unexpected things. And everybody can emphasize what love is in his own way. A story always confirms or refutes existing expectations of the audience in the most dramatic way possible.

- **Occupation**

This social group is defined by how the characters earn their living and their correlation to others with the same or different occupation. An occupation group offers different dynamics than families or friendships. The occupation of a character can help defining who he is. An example is Patrick Bateman, played by Christian Bale in American Psycho. He belongs to a group of business man who care most about table reservation and business cards.

- **Social Rank**

The social rank is specified by a character's position or his standing in a certain society. Nowadays this standing is assigned by values like wealth, power, formal education and material issues. The system is based on more fortune groups giving orders to lower social ranked groups. Those groups have different behaviors and habits but also rules and structures. Disputes and conflicts between different social ranked groups already existed in the past and they always will be. In the past the groups were divided by aristocratic birth, nowadays it's because of education and income.

- **Social Standards**

Social Standards are the generalities, codes and common beliefs of a society. A character is expected to follow those standards without questioning it. Those standards can include individual rights, antisocial behavior, prohibition against dishonesty and the belief in hard working and being a productive part of the society. There is no need to proof those standards because the character accept them anyway. The violation of these standards would cause shock and moral revulsion which would justify the use of extreme punishment.

4.4. Economics [15]

Financial struggling and economic problems often appear together with social rank issues. Gaining and losing money is one of the biggest issues of our society. It's all about the money. The financial system with the most potential for a good story is the capitalism as it is common in the United States of America. Capitalism is based on the freedom of the individual and a free market. A perfect playground for successful rich businessman but a never ending struggle for those without luck and start up money.

4.5. Politics and Law [16]

The political institutions, legislation and legal authorities are not just dominating the Television News. Political institutions and authorities always existed and have always been subject of discussion. Some people, no matter voted or by violent overtaking, having the right to judge and determine on somebody's life or destiny.

5. Background Story

The Backstory is a term used for Television and film to describe a behind-the-scene look of a production. Directors, actors and crew members provide further information about the show to let the audience understand how much work, love and sweat a show actually needs to work. It's similar with scripts.

A story tells just a part of somebody's life. But everybody has his past and this experiences and memories create the character's personality. His past makes the person to what he is now. It is also like this with the characters in a script. They have a life before the story and often after the story as well. In case it's not a story about somebody's death. A good scriptwriter uses dialogue and actions of characters to show what happened with them in the past. It helps the audience to understand what drives the character and why is he behaving the way he does. Here it's important to find the path between the risk of not understanding the character and let character carrying the past like a clumsy heavy weight. If we give to much insight into the past, the background story draws to much attentions from the main action and the movement of the story is endangered. They main goal is that the story stays dramatically compelling. To do so, there are several arrangements to be made. First figure out what is important, not just for the character but also for the audience. The question of "Does the audience need to know this?" should be essential to every fact of the past added to the script.

There are three main forms the background story can occur during the main story. [17]

- **Events**

As the name already points out, something happened in the past. This event has to be significant for the further action, life changing or the source for a conflict occurring later on in the story. The event in the past can have different versions as every character has it's own point of view on something. This doesn't mean that one of the characters is telling a lie. Past events have big potential to be the source for further conflicts.

- **Character Descriptions**

Introducing a past event often includes a description of the characters involved. Even though some of this information will not make into the final movie it's an essential source for the crew and everybody involved to understand the character's actions. The information making it into the final draft has to be crucial for the emotional understanding of the character.

- **Feelings**

To understand how the past events have influenced the character it's needed to know how the character felt about the event. The past feelings explain why for example somebody feels ashamed for something while another person doesn't care about the action at all.

6. External and Internal Action [18]

The plot, also known as the dramatic action and the arrangement of incidents have two big parts. As I explained earlier, progression of the action is the key for a successful plot. The action drives the story forward. If this forward motion is slowed down or comes to stagnation the interest of the audience fades.

- **External Action**

First of all the plot need to give information about the external action. This is the actual physical action which is going on in the story. It's like the first plan of the story. Every story starts with physical action of a character but he develops to deal with internal and psychological issues. The external actions is the source of knowledge about the environment and the mis-en-scene.

Blocking: It is the movement and positioning of the characters in the scene. It helps understanding the relationships between characters and reveals the emotional mind-set of the scene. It can be indicated in the dialogue where the characters are positioned or by describing the external action.

- **Internal Action**

Strong plots often contains a lot of external action: fights, a lot of exits and entrances, rescues, secrets, lies and crimes. But a plot is more then just those events happening one after another. The internal action adds depth to the character's actions. It's also known as internal dimension or psychological action. The focus lies on the changeability of the character's internal motives and his mental, spiritual and emotional impulses.

7. Conclusion

To analyze a script successfully, four big key elements needed to be inspected: The external action, the internal action, the progression and the structure.

Those are the big four abutments of a plot. The shaping of the characters, the dialogues and so on are just the finishing and the smoothing of the raw material. If the external action does not drive the plot forward the progression is not guaranteed and the audience will lose interest. The internal action helps the audience to emphasize and truly understand the character's inner kernel. The structure helps the viewer to follow the story. Like a map, the structure guides the audience through the story. If this key elements work together, the script will be an enjoyable read.

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