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Film Structure and the Popular Novel

This essay is about the coat hanger, and not the dress or the fashion designer. This

essay is about the painter's palette, and not the painter or the painting. Film is

obviously about visual images. The power of the written word is ignored or at

times even denigrated by directors, industry honchos, critics and analysts. For this

reason (among others), the Writers Guild of America almost went on strike in the

Spring of 2001.

Raymond Chandler, mystery novelist and twice Academy Award-

nominated screenwriter of *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and *The Blue*

Dahlia (George Marshall, 1946), said: "The basic art of motion pictures is the screenplay; it is fundamental. Without it there is nothing".[1]

A film script is a remarkable tool. It delivers a story to an audience. Thus, it is both a story and a delivery system for that story. A film script is both prose and drama. It has two distinct first cousins: the novel and the play. The play is a dramatic delivery system. The novel is a narrative delivery system. The script differs from both because it both "shows" a story and "tells" a story. More importantly, a script is a story. Without a strong story, it cannot be filmed, cannot be made into a movie. A script is a sort of DNA molecule, the basic building block or schematic to a story. It is a skeleton that needs to be fleshed out before the story becomes "blood-warm," as Ralph Waldo Emerson called the best of literature.[2]

The script piggybacks off its cousins. The novel was the first mass-produced story for a mass audience. The play, one of the oldest forms of story telling, depends upon an audience to garner its greatest impact. The script is governed by the principles Aristotle first proposed twenty-five centuries ago in his masterwork *Poetics* for the Greek theatre. Unlike theatre, film can roam all time, all space, describe the most implausible situations, and reproduce them as a coherent picture to many millions around the globe. By combining elements of both forms, the script creates one of the most potent forms of story-telling humanity has ever witnessed.

A script must first tell a story, just as a novel or a play must. If it fails that, it fails completely. Yes, almost all scripts are plot-driven, but unless each is also character-driven, the audience yawns. Even the episodic events of Forrest Gump's life need a park bench to rest upon. The function of Plot is to translate character

into action. The actions of the characters are credible only by the type of persons they are shown to be. As Aristotle himself said twenty-five centuries ago: "Character is that which reveals moral purpose: it shows what kinds of things, in case of doubt, a man chooses or avoids". He also noted that, "The most beautiful colours, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait".[3] Plot works as a loose and easy harness. The horse is not hobbled by it, but the rider chooses the directions.

Format

A script has its own distinct format. Hollywood can "read" a script held upside down and across the room and decide not to "read" any more, knowing that what is being held upside-down and across the room is not a workable script. The dialogue is completely contained within a three-inch column centred on the page. The stage directions run the entire width of the page, from margin to margin. The scene header (that is, the information that differentiates one scene from another) is a single line of typeset with all of its letters capitalised and all of its "coded information" in discrete detail. These three are carefully kept separated from each other. Each snatch of dialogue is carefully categorised by the actor's name in capital letters. An actor need only scan the centre of a script to locate his or her own lines and see how many scenes his or her character appears in. Or, as Hollywood wags have said for years, to "count" the lines and scenes and see who gets the most on-screen time. By the same token, billing and therefore salary are also negotiated by how the script is written.

A script is a listing of each and every scene in the chronological order it occurs. As in a play, the basic unit of a script is the scene. A scene is a smaller version of the story itself. Like a boxcar, it is self-contained. It has a beginning, middle, and an end. In the hands of a master of suspense, a scene can take a delicious forever to play itself out. A script is a listing of all the camera shots. The script "sees" as the camera "sees". It lists all the locations the camera will be in. A production manager can read the first three letters of a scene header and know whether a scene will be shot indoors or outdoors. (INT. for interior and EXT. for exterior.) By separating all interior shots and all exterior shots, a shooting schedule can be created. By combining all interior shots which use the same location, a shooting schedule can be crafted efficiently and therefore (hopefully) economically.

A script must always be economical. A single word— "ESTABLISHING"—in a scene header permits a production company to buy and insert stock footage of the White House or the Pyramids, of a plane landing or taking off, into a film, without necessitating a crew on location. An establishing scene automatically posits the audience at that precise setting. A set designer needs only to read the first word in a scene header to know if the scene necessitates the creation or fabrication of an "interior". The last word on a scene header describes whether the action takes place during the day or the night, which tells the crew how the scene will be lighted.

A script is one of the most practical tools ever fashioned to tell a story. A script is a sales pitch. Show business is, after all, a business, and before anyone invests time, money and effort into a story, they must not only be convinced the story is worthwhile, but also that it is marketable. A script is also a budget. ("We

can't afford these special effects".) A script may start with a single individual, but in order for the film to be successful, it may involve several hundred master craftsmen. A script is a work schedule, a pay scale, choreography, and a list of lighting requirements. It exists as a guide to the cameraman, the lighting crew, the set designer, the location scout, and everyone else in the cast and crew. (The Steven Spielberg movie *Jurassic Park* (1993) is not 2 hours, 7 minutes long; the story is two hours long, and the cast and crew credits for it crawl for an additional seven minutes. James Cameron's 1991 film *Terminator Two* has more than 750 names in its final credits.) The script even gives audio instructions, telling the sound crew whether they should pick up the sound now during the filming of the scene, or insert in later as a voice-over (V.O.) or off-screen (O.S.) A script evolves and shows its evolution with eminent practicality. In a shooting script, the pages come in different colours to show where new scenes have been inserted or where old scenes have been rewritten or deleted.

A script is also made up of recognisable "moments". What exactly a "moment" is is difficult to describe. Generally, each is very visual and over within...a moment of screen time. A great movie is said by the industry to include seven such "moments". If you think of your favourite movie, what do you remember most about it? Is it a small boy telling a child psychologist that he can see dead people? Is it a T. Rex looking into a car window on a dark and scary night? Is it a morose Bogart hugging a drink in a deserted cafe? Is it a giant of a man punching a horse in the nose and knocking it to the ground? Is it an Elephant Man's hood being yanked off by a hostile crowd? Is it two lovers kissing on board a doomed luxury liner? These "moments" are not just carefully crafted, but they are also delicately inserted into the entire script. They are integral elements in a

holistic enterprise. For instance, that memorable scene in the 1985 movie *Witness* (Peter Weir) where an eighteen-wheeler semi is caught in traffic behind an Amish horse-drawn buggy was in the very first draft written by William Kelley and Earl W. Wallace back in 1980, before Peter Weir was hired to direct it. Because of that moment and the other "moments" within the script, Paramount Studios "knew" that the script was Academy Award-winning material. The entire process that began with a first draft took almost five years to bring that "moment" before an audience. *Witness* did win the Academy Award for the Best Original Screenplay.
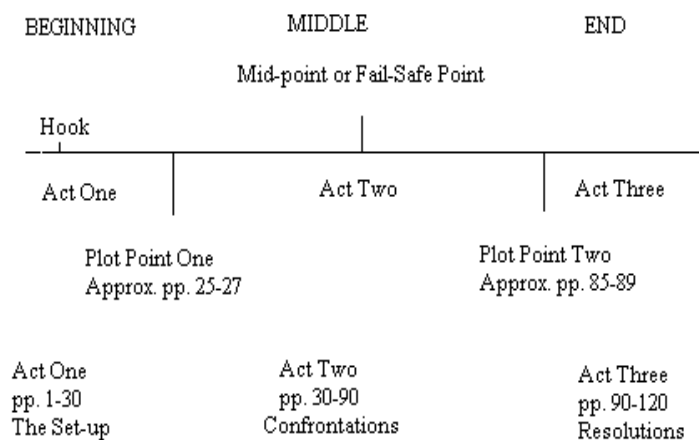

Structure

William Goldman, winner of two Academy Awards for Screenplays (*Misery* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*), is blunt: "Screenplays are structure." To know how a film is structured is to unravel its mysteries. In Goldman's view, this is "the single most important lesson to be learned about writing for film."[4]

Greek and Elizabethan tragedy both contained five acts. Gustav Freytag, the 19th century German who analysed Shakespearean tragedy, created what has since become known as Freytag's Pyramid. The pyramid, he said, consisted of the rising action, the crisis, and the falling action. He noted that each act has its own name: Act I is Exposition; Act II is Complication; Act III is Crisis; Act IV is Reversal; and Act V is the Catastrophe. The structure of film is the same as for Shakespeare and the Greeks. Screenplays have definite beginnings, middles and ends. However, in scripts structure comes in three acts that for convenience sake should be called the Set-Up, the Complications, and the Pay-off. In Aristotle's words: a Beginning, a Middle, and an End.[5]

There is a contemporary paradigm, of course, a model, a pattern, a conceptual scheme, a variation on Freytag's Pyramid, which affords an overview of the structure of the screenplay. While many have claimed they created the paradigm, yet it seems essentially an instinctive strategy for humanity as a whole to both tell a story and to visualise and internalise it. This paradigm has been popularised most effectively in recent years by the author Syd Field in two books, *The Scriptwriter's Workbook* and *The Screenplay*.[6] Each story is organic. It follows its own path. But the paradigm keeps things focused. It is the bucket that carries the water. The paradigm works. Compare this system to most movies currently available at a videotape store. Take a stopwatch and time the moments. Assume one minute of film equals one page of script. A 120-minute movie is 120 pages of script. A 90-minute movie is 90 pages of script.

An appalling diagram:

BEGINNING	MIDDLE	END
	Mid-point or Fail-Safe Point	
Hook		
Act One	Act Two	Act Three
Plot Point One Approx. pp. 25-27	Plot Point Two Approx. pp. 85-89	
Act One pp. 1-30 The Set-up	Act Two pp. 30-90 Confrontations	Act Three pp. 90-120 Resolutions

Plot Point, or Turning Point

Every script must have its Big Moments which connect together the incidents which occur and which lead up to the main action of the story. The Hook and the two Plot Points are the Big Moments. The Plot Point is sometimes called the Turning Point. It is an incident or event that hooks into the story and spins it around into another direction. The Turning Point in a story means the protagonist is at a crossroads in his or her life, and the story deals with how he or she navigates these Turning Points. Most importantly, the Turning Point is a PHYSICAL EVENT. A Plot Point is a sock in the jaw. It is a physical event off which the hero (and thus the story itself) ricochets. The hero finds he or she has turned, is now travelling in a new direction. Think of it not as a moment frozen in time but as a motion—a ballerina's pirouette—perhaps a series of scenes that are linked like boxcars in series. A Turning Point should push you into the next act. The First Turning Point should lead right into Act Two. The Second Turning Point should set up the climax, which is Act Three.

Act One

Act One is the Beginning. It is the Set-Up. Act One is the first thirty pages that set up the story. Act One must be constructed with great care because this is where the story begins and must involve the audience and hold them. The act follows the action of the main character. A classic first act is in Frank Marshall's

1990 movie *Arachnophobia*. The spider loses his mate, kills the photographer who kills his mate, hitches a ride from South America to Oregon, sneaks out of the funeral parlour, gets picked up by a crow, who dies from the spider's bite, conveniently dropping the spider in the field across from the hero's house. In Arachnophobia the first act is seamless and inexorable.

The Opening Image

The Opening Image obviously is the first image we see. What we see first should set the tone, tell us what the movie is about. For example, in *Terminator Two* we witness a children's playground and then atomic war. The movie is about a battle in the present to save the world in the future. The opening image of a movie is very carefully planned, as you might imagine. Examine, for instance, the opening image of *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982). We are in a suburban American home. A television set is on, and the TV station is just going off the air. The only sound we hear is "The Star Spangled Banner". The camera pulls back to the man asleep on the couch, just before the family dog goes upstairs to the little girl's room. The final image on the TV set is the famous film clip of the American flag being planted on Mount Suribachi at Iwo Jima during World War Two. This opening image is a foreshadowing of what comes later in the movie. It connects us with "something American" being planted on foreign soil. The movie is a horror tale; these suburbanites are living on a home built on an Indian burial ground. The spirits of the dead rise up and haunt them. The opening image sets the tone. The first *Back to The Future* movie (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) began with rows of

clocks. The script was about time. In John Hughes' movie *Home Alone* (Chris Columbus, 1990), we view a very wealthy house in a wealthy suburb, and like all its neighbours it is festooned with Christmas decorations, connoting money, stability, festivity and traditional family values. In the first Addams Family movie (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991) we first see Christmas carollers singing in front of the Addams mansion. Then the camera pans up to the roof, where the Addams family is set to pour boiling oil down on the carollers. Another sort of traditional family values. Let's look at *Jurassic Park*. Its opening image is some "thing" with a heavy growl approaching through the tropical foliage rustling in the night. Armed men with guns and tasers wait suspensefully for the bushes to part. "The thing" is an animal carrier being delivered by an unseen towmotor, a crate containing an unspecified creature. During the transfer of the creature to a larger pen, a man dies horribly, despite all efforts to save him. The only dialogue is "Shoot her! Shoot her!" In *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995) the Opening Image is Batman putting on his costume. One of the most famous opening images is in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), where first we see Princess Leia's ship and then the gargantuan Imperial cruiser. Occasionally there are teasers. These are action sequences unrelated to the main plot, but they introduce the audience to the protagonist in a very action-packed way. *Indiana Jones* and James Bond movies are the best examples; most of the others have little else than gratuitous violence to recommend them.

The Hook

Act One contains the Hook. The movie has ten minutes to capture, to hook its audience. Who is your main character? What is the premise of your story? What's the situation? In the Hook, usually we discover the main problem of the story that provides the dramatic thrust that drives the story to its conclusion. The Hook begins the action of the story. The Hook sets the main character in motion. It is the first crisis. The world of the hero is disrupted or altered somehow. The Hook orients the audience to what the story is about. We discover the main problem of the story that provides the dramatic thrust that drives the story to its conclusion.

In M. Night Shyamalan's 1999 thriller *The Sixth Sense* Dr. Malcolm Crowe (played by Bruce Willis) is shot by his mentally disturbed patient Vincent; in the very next scene the child psychologist has his first glimpse of Cole Sear (played by Haley Joel Osment,) the small boy with "acute anxiety", who is "socially isolated" and who may have a "possible mood disorder". In the classic movie *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) the Hook comes when Rick Blaine (played by Humphrey Bogart) both learns about and acquires the bloodstained letters of transit from Urgatti (played by Peter Lorre.) In *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), Sam Spade (also portrayed by Bogart) learns from the police that he is their chief suspect for the dual murders of Miles Archer and Thursby. In *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) the Hook (what is the meaning of "Rosebud"?) comes one or two minutes late; the newsreel footage of the deceased publisher runs long. But, then, Orson Wells was always expansive. In *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), the Hook is that magical moment when rookie FBI agent Clarice

Starling (and the audience) first meets Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lector (played by Academy-Award winner Anthony Hopkins.) There is even a Hook in Steven Spielberg's 1991 film *Hook*. According to Todd McCarthy in his review of *Hook* for *Variety*, "Peter is a workaholic corporate attorney so busy he sends an underling to videotape his son's Little League games."[7] When Peter does arrive, the playing field is empty. That Peter Pan has lost the art of playing is indeed a Hook. The Hook in *Terminator Two* is when the Terminator (played by Arnold Schwarzenegger) has the clothes, the boots, the shotgun, and the bike. He rides off while the soundtrack plays "Bad To The Bone". *Jurassic Park*'s hook occurs when the billionaire John Hammond (played by Richard Attenborough) interrupts top paleontologist Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) and paleobotanist Dr. Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern) at their Badlands dig to invite them to his Isla Nubar retreat.

The Central Question

The Central Question appears in Act One. It raises the central question of the story. We're showing the problems facing the hero. "Can the child psychologist help the small boy with the big secret?" "Will Rick and Ilsa escape together from Casablanca?" "Will Grant and the others escape Jurassic Park?" "Will Indy get the ark?" "Will the Ghostbusters bust the ghosts?" This Central Question is what is raised in the audience's mind as a response to what has occurred. Once the Central Question is raised, everything that happens must relate to it. The Central Question will be answered by the Climax. (It better be!) Once the Central Question is raised, Act One and the Set-Up are completed. Act One is almost over

when Plot Point One appears on pp. 25 - 27. (Approximately one-fourth into movie.)

The First Turning Point

The First Plot Point or Turning Point should lead right into Act Two. In *The Sixth Sense*, Cole Sear tells Dr. Crowe, "You're nice", but "You can't help me". In *Hook*, Peter Banning is visited by Tinkerbell and after 36 long minutes into the 144 minute long movie he is finally transported to Neverneverland. In Casablanca Rick discovers Ilsa in his Cafe Americaine. In *Terminator Two*, John Connor (played by Edward Furlong) realises that Arnold Schwarzenegger is a Terminator, but "You're not here to kill me," and the android answers, "I've been sent here to protect you". Moments later, as part and parcel of the action, John says, "You have to do as I say". (One of the interesting sidebars that comes from studying the structure of the movie's script is to discover that the star with the biggest billing is not always the protagonist of the movie. For example, in *Terminator Two*, Arnold S. gets top billing, but the story is centred on the boy John Connor. He makes the crucial decisions. Arnold, or rather the Terminator, is actually a rehash of all the old "a boy and his dog" stories. Nowadays, a boy wouldn't be caught dead with his dog. But a robot? In *Terminator Two*, Arnold is playing Lassie's role.) The turning point should be a natural development in the story and never forced. The first turning point in *Jurassic Park* begins when Grant, Sattler, and Hammond's grandchildren begin their tour of Jurassic Park.

Act Two

Act Two would run from page 30 to page 90. With a total length from 45 to 60 pages in all, it is fully one-half of the story's length. Act Two is called the Confrontation part of the story because the basis of all drama is Conflict. If the First Act defines the needs of our characters—that is, we find out what he wants to achieve during the story, WHAT HIS GOAL IS—then Act Two creates obstacles to that goal. The hero has to overcome these obstacles. ALL THIS IS THE DRAMATIC ACTION OF THE STORY. It is the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist that leads to a seemingly unsolvable problem. We see how the hero deals with the problem. The dramatic action of the story is dictated by the obstacles that the hero needs to overcome. To paraphrase Todd McCarthy's review in *Variety*, in *Hook* Peter Banning (in reality, a grown-up Peter Pan) is humiliated by Captain Hook and is granted three days to prepare himself for his battle with the eager captain who has been waiting ages for his rematch with the fellow responsible for his losing his hand to a crocodile. But Peter Pan is woefully out of shape and still unaware of his previous identity. Peter's oafish efforts to recapture his former self are intercut with Hook's devilish and initially successful attempt to win the love of young Jack and convince him that Peter is a bad father.

The Mid-Point

Just as every plane in transit has a mid-point in its journey, a fail-safe point where it must either turn back or go on, every story too has its mid-point. At this point in the text, the protagonist must choose to either go on with his or her quest or turn back forever. Once the protagonist commits him or herself, the mid-point becomes the Point of No Return. The Mid-Point of the story is sometimes called the Fail-Safe Point. There is no turning back for the hero. Something has happened to change the direction of the quest. The hero cannot go back. Knowing the paradigm we can trace the hero's progress. We can see how the character changes from the start to the finish. The protagonist's change of fortune is the centrepiece of a narrative's sequence of events. Aristotle took this precept as assumed when he wrote that "the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad."[8] Using the paradigm, we can extrapolate and point out, for instance, that yuppie Charlie Babbitt (played by Tom Cruise) and not his institutionalised savant brother Raymond (played by Dustin Hoffman) changes in Barry Levinson's 1988 movie *Rain Man*. Yet Dustin Hoffman won the Oscar for Best Actor, while Cruise wasn't even nominated for Best Supporting Actor. (We should note that, in the case of *Rain Man*, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences rewarded the stretch between Hoffman's star persona and the retarded character he played and ignored the stretch marking the Charlie Babbitt character's progress in the film. The Oscars clearly discriminate according to these other factors. The paradigm, on the other hand, does not valorise acting and characterisation—that gap between the actor and the role—but only the emotional distance the main protagonist travels

from the start of his journey to the end.[9] The mid-point should be read therefore purely in terms of structure and content and not in terms of aesthetic qualities like acting ability.) Is the mid-point when all problems are resolved? No. It is the point of no return. There is no turning back. The rising fortunes of the hero peak. All things start to fall apart. The moment of last suspense. The denouement. We begin to untie the knot.

The midpoint in *The Sixth Sense* has the small boy telling the child psychologist, "I see dead people". In *Hamlet*, the midpoint of the play is known as "The Mousetrap scene", the play within the play. Hamlet sets it up "to catch the conscience of a king". The climax comes as a double moment of epiphany, a moment of mutual recognition. The king knows that Hamlet knows the king killed his father. From now on, Hamlet and Claudius are at cross-purposes. They are out to kill each other. The midpoint of *Jurassic Park* is a remarkably long scene that begins when the T. Rex breaks through the electric wire barrier, includes the now-classic flashlight "moment" and the death of the lawyer on the toilet, and culminates with Grant and the two children trapped within the Park itself. In *Hook*, after 97 interminable minutes, Peter becomes "the Pan" and takes wing. He flies! And goes off to battle with Captain Hook.

The Second Plot Point

The Second Plot Point should set up the climax, which is Act Three. It is when the rising action becomes the falling action. From here Act Three rushes downhill to the resolution. In *The Sixth Sense* the Second Turning Point starts when Dr. Crowe

asks, "What do you think the ghosts want when they talk to you?" Cole Sear

admits, "Just help", adding, "They just want help, even the scary ones". Crowe

tells him, "Just listen to them". The very next scene takes place at night with the

small boy at first seeing his own breath in a pup tent in his dark bedroom and then

meeting the dead girl Kyra Collins. In the following scene Cole and Dr. Malcolm

arrive at the dead girl's funeral to confront her grieving parents, at which point

Cole is taking direct responsibility for both his talent and his future. In *Terminator

Two* John Connor reverses his course and takes command of his situation. He tells

the android, "We've got to stop her (his mom, Sarah played by Linda Hamilton)

from killing Dyson." John Connor takes responsibility for his actions. "The

killing has to stop now". The chip has to be destroyed. The Second Turning Point

in Jurassic Park is remarkably long. It not only includes Ellie Sattler's mad dash to

turn the power switches back on, but also Grant and the two children's escape over

the electric wire barrier, the two raptors stalking the children, the powering up of

the door locks, and finally culminates with Grant on the phone to Hammond,

saying, "Mister Hammond, the phones are working...Tell them to send the damn

helicopters!" One special note: If all stories are a quest, a journey of self-

discovery, all stories start with a man's capacity for self-delusion, and his isolation

in the face of that truth. If a story is "a man being revealed to himself," then

Turning Point Two is the "moment of illumination," when the hero must

reassesses his life—to confront the past and his failures—to discover who he is.

Let me rewrite those last three sentences: One special note: If all stories are

a quest, a journey of self-discovery, all stories start with a woman's capacity for

self-delusion, and her isolation in the face of that truth. If a story is "a woman

being revealed to herself", then Turning Point Two is the "moment of

illumination," when the hero must reassesses her life—to confront the past and her failures—to discover who she is.

The protagonist could be male or female, and the paradigm is not gender specific. Better theorists and critics than I can examine this paradigm to see how indebted to the patriarchal hegemony this paradigm is. Hollywood's most brilliant women scriptwriters, including Diane Thomas (*Romancing the Stone*) and Callie Khouri (*Thelma and Louise,*) use this paradigm to great success.

Act Three

Act Three, which usually runs from pages 90 through 120 is the Resolution, or the Avalanche. This occurs approximately three-fourths into the movie. The main character is locked in battle with the forces that must be overcome to achieve the goal. Everything that has occurred has been to lead us to the final confrontation, to surmounting the final obstacle. Act Three must move quickly. Everything has been set-up, the audience knows what's at stake, who wants what, etc. Now It is the PAY-OFF! How does it end? What happens to the main character? The action provides a solution to the problem. In terms of flow, one of the smoothest and one of the finest Act Threes ever written and filmed is the train sequence at the end of *Back To The Future Part III* (Zemeckis, 1990).

In the Third Act, the protagonist must take control of his or her life. The final half-hour of *Back To The Future Part III* is seamless, almost a single long continuous shot. Notice how the camera locks itself onto the two protagonists, Marty McFly (played by Michael J. Fox) and "Doc" Brown (played by

Christopher Lloyd) as they commandeer a train. Each protagonist must take action

deliberately and consciously at every step, or doom will follow. We cannot take

our eyes off them. There are no interruptions, no distractions, in the flow.

The Climax happens one to five pages from the end. The Central Question

is answered. Does Sam Spade catch his partner's killer? Does Grant escape from

Jurassic Park? Does Batman defeat the Joker? Does Indy get the Ark? Most

often the answer is YES. The audience WANTS the hero to succeed. "They all

lived happily ever after". Another special note: The Climax is the end of the Plot,

but not the end of the story. The end of the story is the Resolution. The

Resolution ties up the loose ends. It gives an indication of the Fate of the

characters. In *Casablanca* the Resolution marks "the beginning of a beautiful

friendship." In *The Silence of the Lambs*, it is Hannibal Lector's phone call to

Clarice.

The Structure of the Novel

Knowing how a script is structured is also beneficial to the study of other forms of

literature. Obviously plays, but also novels. Most traditionally told stories

instinctively follow the same structure. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, its

first turning point occurs when Scrooge is visited by the first of the three spirits,

the Ghost of Christmas Past. Its midpoint has the Ghost of Christmas Present

whisking Scrooge over the London cityscape and depositing him in front of the

Cratchit house, where the old miser will see Tiny Tim for the first time. From that

point on, Scrooge's life will never be the same; he can never go back to his old life.

The second turning point is when the Ghost of Christmas Future lets Scrooge learn that Tiny Tim is dead. From there, the reader, like Scrooge himself, learns how the miser's life is linked to one small child.

Consider each plot point as a ghost from *A Christmas Carol* and us as Scrooge. With each ghost's help, Scrooge sees an aerial view (if you will) of his life. Imagine Scrooge as the average reader, the average audience. For the average reader, the average audience, most stories begin in the beginning and then wind inexorably through the various obstacles in the middle to reach a satisfying end. For the average reader, the average audience, the ending is not in sight. Another way to say that point is to say that most stories are cunningly designed mazes.   Once begun, the maze must be completed before the reader or the audience finds a sense of resolution. The audience, the reader, suspends its disbelief and willingly invests time and energy on the maze. This contract between storyteller and audience is mutually agreed upon. The denouement is our reward for the journey. The denouement must be aesthetically satisfying and thus worthy of that time and effort invested. Consider how reluctant we are to resume reading when we are told the end of a mystery. When we are told the ending of the story, we might consider it an irritation, a disappointment, an insult to our intelligence, a disgusting development, even an outright dismissal that the story is suddenly beneath our contempt. Listen to the disdain in our voices when we pronounce judgement: "What a stupid story!" A maze is two-dimensional when we walk it. However, the paradigm raises us up, we see as an outsider sees, as Scrooge sees his entire life, and we now have an aerial view of the structure. The maze disappears. Instead we clearly see the beginning, the path, and the goal. The obstacles have been diminished and devalued. In one sense, the paradigm exists as

a demonstration that a continuum exists, that no action does not have a prior cause or a future effect. To link us all with John Donne: "No man is an island".

Should this overview, this aerial view of the turning points in one's life, in and of itself, be valorised? Consider Albert Camus' 1955 "The Myth of Sisyphus", where Camus writes, "Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory."[10] For Camus, "At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined with his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death". The reward for this awareness, Camus concludes, is that we "must imagine Sisyphus happy".[11]

The paradigm itself is ancient, is an outgrowth of classic playwriting, and can be found nestled comfortably within Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Oedipus' first turning point comes when he meets with Tiresias, who shocks the young king by proclaiming: "You weave your own doom". The mid-point of the play comes when Oedipus remembers aloud the drunk who told him he was not his father's son. In a breathless speech Oedipus then relates how he spoke with his parents, then with the oracle at Delphi, and lastly how he fled Corinth, which set up on the inescapable road to Thebes. The second turning point comes when Oedipus learns from the shepherd the truth of his birth. To paraphrase Aristotle again, the paradigm of Oedipus Rex is "the essence of the plot; the rest is episode."[12]

As we drown, we may see all the events of our life flash before us. Aristotle notes that, "Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist of the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which

cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action."[13] Rather, a story revolves around a single action, as Aristotle notes: "so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole shall be disjointed and disturbed."[14]   To Aristotle, the plot "manifestly ought [to] resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it."[15] With the paradigm, we can ask if the action is complete and if it has a certain magnitude that compels us to care about its outcome.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was first published in 1719 and thus may be the first mass-produced story for a mass audience. The novel is not plot-driven; it seems at best a series of anecdotes or vignettes during quarter-century imprisonment. Yet the paradigm gives quite a different overview of the story. The castaway begins his journal at the first turning point; here he starts his calendar, names the island (Despair!), and begins his salvage of the ship that brought him to the island. The mid-point comes when Crusoe sails completely around the island. His circumnavigation paints his first overview of his true predicament. The second turning point of the novel tells how Crusoe teaches Christianity to Man Friday and how the two become partners in their desperation.

In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the hook appears at the end of the first chapter with the appearance of Mister Hyde. The first turning point is the Carew murder case, where a Member of Parliament makes Hyde's choice of victims note-worthy enough to attract and engage the attention of the police. The mid-point of the novel is when Jekyll kills himself because he has discovered that he has been thoroughly contaminated and cannot go back to being

his original self. While one might suspect that the death of the main character essentially kills the storyline too, the second turning point is the discovery of "Henry Jekyll's full statement of the case," wherein all is explained in greater detail.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a gender variation on George Orwell's dystopian 1984. It is also contemporary fiction following the same paradigm. The first chapter introduces us to a handful of fertile women who are now prisoners of the Republic of Gilead, in what used to be the United States of America. They are guarded over by "Aunts" with electric cattle prods. The hook at the end of that chapter reveals that these handmaids have had their names taken away from them. The first turning point starts when Offred (for that is the narrator's new name) dreams of how she was caught while trying to escape with her husband Luke and her young daughter. This scene leads into the very next chapter where Offred waits for the (infamous) Ceremony to begin. The novel's mid-point comes at the end of Chapter 24, when Offred, having returned from her first illicit rendezvous with the Commander of the house, in now alone in the privacy of her own room. She is afraid that she will break out into hysterical laughter because the Commander wanted only to play Scrabble with her, which, while a clear violation of the Gilead laws, was not the sexual advance she had expected. In the second turning point she makes contact with the underground resistance that may rescue her.

Knowing film structure can alter one's perceptions of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.* The original novel was mislabelled and should have been titled with the (admittedly) unwieldy Frankenstein's Monster, for he, not Victor Frankenstein, is the central character of the novel. The midpoint of the story is the Monster

recollecting how he chanced upon and then decided to observe a family living in the woods. From that perspective, the first turning point is not Victor Frankenstein waking up and "seeing" his creature alive for the first time, but rather the reverse. The monster "awakens", begins its search, and discovers as its first fellow being its creator, who flees, stricken with horror over what he has created. The second turning point is when the monster discovers his creator destroying the female being which should have been its mate. The novel's goals are not changed, but they are more clearly defined.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of Baskervilles* affords another good example to see the paradigm at work. At the first turning point, Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson discover who is eligible to inherit the Baskerville fortune and that one of Sir Henry's boots has been stolen by persons unknown. At the midpoint Doctor Watson observes the scientist Stapleton haranguing Sir Henry on the moor for wooing the lady Sir Henry thinks is Stapleton's sister. The second turning point begins with Holmes telling Watson that Stapleton is the murderer and ends with the violent death of the escaped convict who was wearing some of Sir Henry's cast-off clothes.

Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* has always been criticised for its apparent lack of structure. But the midpoint of the novel is the breaking of the pickle dish. The first turning point is when Ethan reaches under the mat for the house key and is surprised by his wife Zeena. The second turning point is when Zeena tells Ethan that Mattie must leave. The novel's structure is solid; no criticism is warranted.

An author need not be a trained scriptwriter to use these plot points. The midpoint of Voltaire's *Candide* is, naturally enough, when Candide and Cacambo decide to leave Eldorado. But then Voltaire was one of the great playwrights of

the Eighteenth century. An author need not be Western, either. The Egyptian

Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz' *Adrift on the Nile* adheres perfectly to the

paradigm. The first turning point is when Samara joins the hashish smokers on the

houseboat. The midpoint is when she questions their rationale for this aimless

existence. The second turning point is when the group decides to go for a

midnight drive, which results in murder.

Most traditionally told stories would be unconscious couriers of this

paradigm. That our lives can be changed by external forces, that we find we

cannot return to our old ways, and that therefore we must consciously and

deliberately take control of our lives (as best as we can) makes instinctual sense.

The paradigm is a strategy on how we can survive that "change of fortune" which

Aristotle was so concerned about; the paradigm follows a pattern basic to human

psychology.

Unlike stories, our daily lives rarely have such obvious turning points. Oh,

these turning points do exist; we each have them in our lives, those crossroads

where our lives move into new and different pathways, but life itself is not so

precisely defined as in stories. Stories are how we order the universe to make it

not only intelligible to us but also suggests how we can best approach it and keep

sane. Stories are how we place a pattern over a Chaos we cannot comprehend.

Even Aristotle spoke about this human need to select and pattern events: "The

tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by

accident, for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design.

We may instance the statue of Mitys at Argos, which fell upon his murderer while

he was a spectator at a festival, and killed him. Such events seem not to be due to

mere chance. Plots, therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best."[16]

We crave order in a chaotic universe that is too grand for us to contemplate. Structure provides comfort. Structure tells us that there is a pattern to life, not random happenstance. Like plant tropism, we bend toward narratives that provide us with comfort. We crave stories because we need stories to help us frame our daily lives. Our lives are intensified by stories. We become part of a greater imagination. For some there will be great enlightenment or moments of great illumination. Stories give us weapons when we fight with our angels for possessions of our souls. Story is as important as food.

Stories are necessary to life. They give us an overview of the situation. The characters "char-actors" in this novel or that film "act out" their feelings in these stress-filled situations. What we get from these stories is a heightened awareness of who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. Each of us constantly compares and contrasts our personal fictions with the real world (as we perceive it). We do this because the real world never stops pouncing upon us.

These seemingly innocuous stories touch our nerve endings. We repeat them in other guises and in other media. They are that important to us. While it's a story that's never been written, a suggested title "Indiana Jones Sails Up The River Of Death" shows how readily we as individuals or we as a culture can automatically visualise a basic story motif. We may each see the particular elements of the story differently, but almost instantaneously we catch its drift. The hero sails up the river of death to discover what lies within his own heart: i.e., how much moral and physical strength he has to face the chaos of tomorrow and the threat of mortality. Popular fictions put our monsters on trial. "The Hero Kicks

Death in the Crotch" is no different than "Indiana Jones Sails Up The River Of Death," or whatever the next title is. Aristotle says that "we must not, therefore, at all costs keep to the received legends, which are the usual subjects of Tragedy. Indeed, it would be absurd to attempt it; for even subjects that are known as known only to a few, and yet give pleasure to all."[17].

Also, in stories, dramatic conflicts usually escalate into great crescendos of conclusions, followed by waterfalls of purged emotions. The emotions in stories are real, just not "so much" or "so often" as in real life. Real life is not often that emotional, not that melodramatic. "Real life" is not as emotionally intense as "reel life." We learn at an early age (the cliché says) to hide our emotions from the crowd. Almost all of us wear social "masks" in public. Rarely do we come across someone who wears his heart on his sleeves . . . and when we do, we make mention of it.

In stories, however, all reactions are exaggerated, heavy-handed, overblown and thus visibly evident . . . so that the audience can see them. (In narratives the reader is "told" what the important reactions are. In drama, where "showing" is more important than "telling", the same rules still apply, albeit on a different level. In the theatre actors are taught to act so that the back of the theatre catches the emotional meaning. In the movies, where close-ups rule, the stage actors must be re-taught to "react" for the camera lens to catch it.)

We seek to order our sensory input. Memory and perception help shape these. Not just dreams, but also false memories and paranormal experiences may simply be the subconscious' attempts to explain the inexplicable in fictional scenarios, according to values and priorities that are contemporary.

In our best stories we find strong characters in a desperate situation that rings true and comes alive. (To tighten that sentence, Shakespeare wrote about fascinating characters in intriguing situations. In addition, desperate people make the best stories, so the best stories are always a matter of life and death.)

In real life, most critically, we don't even get to see our own closure. We're dead. Because we're dead, we miss the moral of the story. After all, how are we going to die AND THEN once the curtain is down, walk out of the theatre of our lives, and reflect on what happened to the hero (us) and the meaning of our life, and then say to our friends, "What did you think about that ending? Me, I thought it was..." Unfortunately we die, and that ends our interest in tonight's story. The trouble with real life is that it goes on without us AND without remembering us.

Contemporary popular fiction often follows this same paradigm. Robert Waller's *The Bridges of Madison County* is one of the most popular novels of our times. In its 146-week reign on the Best Sellers List, it sold over nine million copies in hardcover alone, and then spawned the 1995 movie of the same name, starring Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep. What makes the novel most interesting is that Francesca Johnson, the wife of an Iowa farmer and the mother of two teenagers, is the central figure of the novel; it is she who decides to commit adultery and it is she who is controls the course of the entire episode. Returning to the novel's beginnings, the Hook is designed to "grab" its readership, and the first chapter of Bridges introduces the readers to Robert Kincaid. He has been "wandering around on gravel roads that seemed to lead nowhere except to the next gravel road" in Madison County. In the last paragraph of Chapter One he drives into her yard, discovers her on the front porch, "and looked at her, looked closer,

and then closer still. She was lovely, or had been at one time, or could be again. And immediately he began to feel the old clumsiness he always suffered around women to whom he was even faintly attracted."[18] That chance meeting is the Hook. The First Turning Point in *Bridges* occurs when Francesca and Robert have been discussing their lives; she realises how bored she has been, and she asks him to stay for supper. The mid-point of the novel occurs later when Francesca is physically aroused "for the first time in ever so long" that she wills herself onward into an extramarital affair; this is her Point of No Return.[19] The Second Turning Point occurs two pages after the affair is over, after she actually says good-bye to him, and he leaves her life forever. Francesca and her husband Richard are returning from a shopping trip to the store. Coincidentally, she finds Robert Kincaid ahead of them at a four-way stop sign on his way out of town. Francesca sees she has a choice: she can stay with her husband, or run to Robert Kincaid and a new life. She stays with her husband.

Not surprisingly, the paradigm works in both hardcover and paperback, for a story (like water) fits the container it is in. A change of font that is uniform throughout the manuscript will not change the location of the plot points.

The Paradigm's Pay-off

This essay is about the coat hanger and the painter's palette, with traditional storytelling as the bench mark that all else is tested against. A tool is only as good as its utility. Perhaps the paradigm has greater scope. What might have dazzled us

in a story may impress us less after we analyse its plot points. A story may reveal itself as more style than substance, or worse yet as posturing shtick.

We can compare and contrast novels with their film adaptations. Rare indeed is the film that follows the novel or play every step of the way. We can see the choices being made. We can see what is amplified, exaggerated, denigrated, ignored, privileged or valorise. We can then ask if these choices were conscious and/or deliberate. That time and budget constraints, of course, can greatly alter a story is a given. More Importantly, what seems a matter of personal artistic opinion might reveal itself as something much bolder or cruder under closer scrutiny. For instance, Alice Walker's 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Colour Purple* was adapted for the screen and became Steven Spielberg's *The Colour Purple* (1985). Spielberg's version (written by Alice Walker and Menno Meyjes) is 154 minutes long. The film begins with a different opening image than Alice Walker's novel. We see a close-up of a daisy, then two young girls playing, and then we fade to a pregnant Young Celie (played by Desreta Jackson.) The words "Winter 1909" appear on the screen. Young Celie's baby is born and then taken away. Not until four minutes into the film do we hear the novel's opening quote from the fourteen-year-old child who is writing to God. Seven minutes into the movie we discover Young Celie has had "two children by my daddy." At the hook Young Celie is married to Albert (played by Danny Glover.) When she is injured by a rock, her new husband is more interested in whipping his small son Harpo (played by Howard Starr) than in tending to her wounds. In the movie Whoopie Goldberg appears for the first time as Celie at the first turning point and finds the word "sky" written by her younger self seven years after it was on the curtain. Apparently seeing Whoopie Goldberg as Celie for the first time on screen

is itself a major Turning Point for Spielberg, whereas in the novel the first turning

point comes when Celie hears Harpo's wife Sofia announce she is leaving her

husband because "He don't want a wife, he want a dog." At this point Celie

realises her pitiful status and that, unlike Sofia who has a sister with a farm, Celie

doesn't have "somebody to run to." Is Spielberg more interested in celebrity than

the real drama of spousal abuse? Now, the two mid-points do have similarities:

The mid-point in the novel begins when Celie discovers Albert has been hiding her

sister Nettie's letters from Africa in a locked trunk, reads them, and then tells her

lesbian lover Shug Avery, "How I'm gon keep from killing him?" At the Mid-

point in the Spielberg film, after Celie shares her first kiss with Shug Avery

(played by Margaret Avery) and discovers she can't go back to the woman she

once was, Celie announces, "I'm going off to Memphis," and walks out of Mister's

life. The second turning point comes almost 100 minutes into the movie, when

Celie finds a steel box of money and the letters from Celie's sister Nettie that

Albert has been withholding from her all these years. Celie discovers in the course

of this scene that her children are alive and being taken care of by missionaries in

Africa, in an interesting reversal on the Middle Passage. But a Turning Point must

be a physical action that the audience witnesses, so Celie knocks down a dress

dummy on anger and then after ten long minutes decides NOT to kill Albert with a

razor. She still goes to Memphis to make pants, but while moving to Memphis is

the second turning point in the book, it has less importance in Spielberg's vision

than punching a dress dummy does. That emphasis too might merit discussion. A

moment of visual violence does not equal the protagonist creating a new direction

in life? Is Spielberg again "not getting it"? Is he subconsciously out to short-

change (or worse, sabotage) a feminist narrative? Let me repeat that a story

revolves around a single action, as Aristotle notes, "so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole shall be disjointed and disturbed."[20] Was the film version "disjointed" or "disturbed"? Does the movie not understand the messages of the novel? Has the moral of the story remained the same? We may have noticed this curiosity without the paradigm, but the paradigm makes discovery easier.

Sometimes the book and the movie that is based upon it have different agendas, and so the turning points are different. Consider Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* with the classic 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming). (A friend of mine once summarised the plot by saying that "Dorothy lands in a foreign country, kills one of its leading citizens, and has to clear her name before she can go home.") In the film, the opening image is Dorothy racing home from school, her anxiety a parallel with the gathering storm. She has had a run-in with a foul neighbour; she is fearful her dog will be taken away. In the book, on the other hand, we see a different relationship between Dorothy and her Aunt Em. Baum tells us that Aunt Em once was vivacious and colourful, but now she is as gray and colourless as the Kansas landscape. In the book Dorothy's entire cosmos is a depressing landscape. Is the book an indictment of the American Midwest? (Does it matter that Frank Baum took his earnings from the Oz series and moved from the Midwest to the Pacific Palosades, where he invested his energies in his later years at the poolside cocktail hour?) The hook in the novel comes at the end of the first chapter, when the tornado takes Dorothy away, while in the film the hook is Dorothy running away from home. The hook in the novel emphasises escape from a location, while the hook in the film is a dangerous

mistake by a troubled adolescent. The first turning point in the movie comes after Dorothy has landed in Munchkinland and she hears that she must "Start at the beginning. Follow the Yellow Brick Road." The first turning point in the novel happens when Dorothy meets all three of her sidekicks and they hit the Yellow Brick Road together. This scene, however, is not the mid-point of the movie, for that midpoint is actually when the quartet arrive in Oz to see the Wizard. Because the structures are so different, the audience's (the reader's) experience is different.

But let us set that aside and more closely examine the tornado, which is one of those Big Moments all audiences and readers remember. The tornado brings an unconscious Dorothy to the Land of Oz. In the book Dorothy simply falls asleep while riding the tornado. She's a little girl; she's had a traumatic experience; she falls asleep; that she falls asleep hooks the reader and makes the reader want to keep on. In the movie Dorothy is knocked unconscious by a flying object while riding inside a tornado. But this Big Moment is not valued as one of the major Turning Points of the Hollywood version. Hollywood recognises the value of Spectacle. On the other hand, Aristotle never went to the movies:

> Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of Oedipus. But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids.[21]

At the climax both in the book and in the movie Dorothy returns home, of course. But in the novel her trip to Oz was accepted by all as a literal reality, while all the adults in the movie tell Dorothy "It is a dream." The novel was written in 1900,

while the film comes at the tail end of the Great Depression. After the events of the Great Depression, can America trust fantasy? Or perhaps, who didn't the filmmakers want to offend? Would Hollywood's mass audience feel insulted if their lives were portrayed as dull and colourless as Baum saw them?

To extrapolate in another direction: A film version of Dante's *Divine Comedy* could have the greatest special effects in cinema history. How compelling it could be might be another story. Is the narrative a matter of life and death? What urgency does the poet express on his journey? In short, what is compelling in prose may be visually disappointing. In the other hand, what is melodramatic on the page can be emotionally satisfying on the silver screen. A first person narrator might disappear into the crowd and be faceless on the screen. Regardless, the paradigm gives us touchstones, like taxonomy gives us templates, to enhance and enrich the aesthetic experience.

Consider another famous literary adaptation, the case of *Washington Square* (Agnieszka Holland, 1997) and *The Heiress* (William Wyler, 1949). The novel *Washington Square* (1881) was one of the few Henry James wrote about New York City. In some ways, it is a Freudian-gothic tale of child abuse and revenge that reads like a novel Nathaniel Hawthorne could have written. The story is based upon an anecdote James heard about an impoverished man who jilted an heiress upon learning she will be disinherited if she persisted in her relationship with him. The first chapter of *Washington Square* focuses on the heiress's father, Doctor Austin Sloper. We learn "that fortune had favored him," and that his only setback was the death of his wife during the birth of a little girl Catherine, "who was a disappointment," who grew to be a girl so timid and so easily cowed by her father that "such as she was, he at least had no fear of losing her."[22]

The first turning point in the novel occurs when the now adult Catherine has what must be her first date when she agrees to meet with a young man Morris Townsend the following day in the Square. The mid-point occurs when Doctor Sloper tells his daughter Catherine that, "If you marry without my consent, I don't leave you a farthing of money," to which Catherine replies, "I ought not in that case to have a farthing of your money."[23] The second turning point extends from one chapter into another. Morris Townsend decides he "must give her up" because her father has disinherited her.[24] Morris then takes almost ten pages to tell Catherine to her face. Her reaction: "It was almost the last outbreak of passion in her life; at least she never indulged in another that the world would know anything about."[25]

The first movie version of *Washington Square* was the 1949 *The Heiress* directed and co-produced by Wyler, which was based on a 1947 stage play version of the novel. (Martin Scorcese saw this film as a child and was horrified that a parent could treat a child so horribly.) The movie starred Olivia De Havilland (she won her second Oscar for her performance), Montgomery Clift as Morris Townsend, and Ralph Richardson as Doctor Austin Sloper. (The original music by Aaron Copland also won an Academy Award for Best Score.)

The first turning point in the 115 minute movie comes after twenty-one minutes, when Morris Townsend says, "I wish to call on you," and in the very next scene he does so. The mid-point comes when Catherine tells her father, "I think we should marry without your approval," while the second turning point comes while Catherine awaits her lover and her father tells her, "You're disinheriting yourself." Five minutes later Catherine realises Morris is not coming for her.

Readers may be astonished to know that thirty-nine film adaptations have been made of James's short stories and novels. There have been five versions alone of *Washington Square*. In 1997 the Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland wrote and directed her vision of *Washington Square*. Using the paradigm, the analyst can now examine how closely her story follows the structures of James's novel *Washington Square* and Wyler's *The Heiress*, and perhaps that examination can prove instructive, too.

The paradigm can be useful for another approach to the works. As many readers know, Henry James revelled in narration and had a distinctive voice. However, when a novel is translated to film, narration must be spoken as a voice-over (VO), or written in subtitles, or expressed indirectly by dialogue. Knowing that the structure of the screenplay is nearly identical to the structure of the novel, the analyst can devote more time in noticing hand gestures and body language in the film. (Ralph Richardson, who was nominated for a Best Supporting Actor Oscar, stands out in the Wyler version; some critics think he chewed the scenery and tried demeaning the others in the cast.) These are an actor's tools to make these characters more human. Focusing intently on those turning points can bring wonderful performances into high relief.

In another approach, novelist David Guterson freely admitted to Poco Iver in *Time* magazine that his 1994 novel *Snow Falling On Cedars* came about after his dozen-year analysis of Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, that he followed very much the same structure and addressed the same concerns as she did in her novel.[26] Without going into more specific details, perhaps the paradigm can be used to see how closely Guterson followed Lee's work. By the same token, the 1999 film version of *Snow Falling On Cedars* (Scott Hicks) can be compared

using the paradigm with the 1962 film version of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Richard Mulligan.) The movie version of the best-selling *Snow* was much anticipated, received rave critical reviews, yet it failed to connect with the audience. (The script for *Snow* was co-authored by Guterson and Ronald Bass, while the screenplay for Mockingbird was written by Horton Foote, who went on to receive both a WGA Screen Award and the Academy Award for best adapted material.) Perhaps the paradigm can be useful in suggesting reasons for box office failure or box office success.

We might use this tool to peer at the intricate workings of Academy Award nominated original scripts like M. Night Shyamalan's 1999 *The Sixth Sense*. We can marvel at the careful calculations that writer-director created that energise the clockwork precision of this story. And yet this same tool can help us see—by isolating plot points and thus make them stand in relief—that *The Sixth Sense*, as in most stories designed to lead inexorably to a trick ending, has built its foundation on a shaky ground. After all, what wife would stay in that apartment, that bedroom, that bathroom, after the events of the first ten minutes?

Under the studio system in the 1930s and 1940s, many films (such as Warner Brothers 1942 *Casablanca*) went into production with unfinished scripts. The paradigm can be a tool to dissect the machinations of studio moguls. By the same token, contemporary studio films are ruled by marketing experts and test audiences; the paradigm may be useful to chart those machinations. The paradigm might explain box-office disasters such as *Howard the Duck* (William Huyck, 1986), *Ishtar* (Elaine May, 1987), *Hudson Hawk* (Michael Lehmann, 1991), *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980), or *The Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, 1993).

Also, by examining the strength of the storyline, we might be able to note areas where coherence problems affects the film's credibility. We may more easily spot the dramatic power within the story and thus how it touches the human heart. By examining the early drafts with the shooting script—or the shooting script with the final cut—we can thus see what strategies and tactics were used in order for the film to hit those marks. Not surprisingly at all, the film editor becomes as important to a film's aesthetic success as the director, and who gets "final cut" becomes a most critical issue.

The paradigm may help us answer other difficult questions: Does a plot twist enhance or merely enrich a storyline? Is this a soft spot in the storyline or is it a more serious structural weakness? Does a film slavishly follow the paradigm and thus inadvertently reveal psychological weaknesses in characterisation? Does the paradigm force characters to act "out-of-character"? Has the story's pace been speeded up or slowed in order to mesh with the turning points? Were serious deficiencies plastered over?

The paradigm can reveal what is more aesthetically pleasing about a specific story. Compare your memories of Robinson Crusoe, for instance, with the paradigm's turning points mentioned above. Notice that those turning points afford a clean and precise summary line. But your memories may differ. They may represent more visceral visual images within that story which more strongly affected you.

What if the three turning points do not provide a coherent three-step summary? This may be the first tangible evidence that the storyline itself is off-kilter. (We should remember that Hamlet says, "I am but mad north-north-west.")

The paradigm may be a useful appliance comparing and contrasting a theatrical release with a later "director's cut" of that same film. Did the studio take the final cut away from the director because his passionate vision overwhelmed his cold-blooded eye? Was the director's vanity an obstacle in the filming? Does the paradigm help explain "creative differences"? Where does a personal vision clash with a collaborative effort? Was the director's ego detrimental to the power of the story? Was the marketing department an abattoir of creativity? Was the theatrical version a dumbed-down travesty or a sincere attempt to make a mass-produced product more accessible to the average audience? Was the final cut a hatchet job by studio hacks?

Movies are at core about bringing an audience to a story. Like the popular novel, movies are a mass-produced story for a mass audience. Audiences and readers of popular fiction connect with stories on a visceral emotional level. Escape is desired. We beg to be mesmerised. The novelist John Gardner spoke about "the fictive dream" to pinpoint that moment:

> Whatever the genre may be, fiction does its work by creating a
> dream in the reader's mind. We may observe, first, that if the effect
> of the dream is to be powerful, the dream must be vivid and
> continuous—vivid because if we are not quite clear about what it is
> that we're dreaming, who and where the characters are, what it is
> that they're doing or trying to do and why, our emotions and
> judgements must be confused, dissipated, or blocked; and
> continuous because a repeatedly interrupted flow of action must
> necessarily have less force that an action directly carried through its
> beginning to its conclusion.[27]

Gardner cannot help himself but recognise and repeat that special relationship between the novel and the film:

> Though characters and locale change, the dream is still running like a movie in the reader's mind. The writer distracts the reader--breaks the film, if you will—when by some slip of technique or egoistic intrusion he allows or forces the reader to stop thinking about the story (stop 'seeing' the story) and think about something else.[28]

Consider the audience's outrage when the film breaks or the projector fails. When a reader is distracted, does the reader pick up the book again? Wannabe best-selling novels are said to "page-turners" or "unputdownable." A storyteller will use any and every trick available to get and keep a reader's attention. To mesmerise. Storytellers who disregard the implied contract between them and their audiences operate at their own peril and may find they not only work alone, but their work may vanish without a trace.

Was the author of the novel artistically out on a limb alone in his zealotry, with no audience willing to follow his flawed vision? Is the absence of the paradigm suggestive of why a story failed to connect with its expected audience?

With the paradigm, perhaps we can more easily recognise what choices were made during the creation of a work, what Procrustean decisions were made, some of which may have been artistic while other choices may have been strictly pragmatic. The paradigm is a good tool to keep in our toolbox.

Notes

[1] Raymond Chandler, "Writers in Hollywood," *Raymond Chandler Speaking* ed. Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962) 117.

[2] See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar: An Oration Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 13, 1837" in *American Public Address: 1740-1952*, ed. A. Craig Baird (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), 136.

[3] Aristotle, *Poetics* trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 63.

[4] William Goldman*, Adventures in the Screentrade: a Personal View of Hollywood and Screenwriting* (New York: Warner Books, 1983), 195.

[5] Aristotle, 62.

[6] Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982) and *The Screenwriter's Workbook* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1984).

[7] Todd McCarthy, rev. of *Hook Variety* 9 December 1991, 72.

[8] Aristotle, 66.

[9] I am grateful to my editor, Michele Aaron, for helping me clarify this point, and the distinctions between structure and performance.

[10] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 90.

[11] Ibid., 91.

[12] Aristotle, 89.

[13] Ibid., 67.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 105.

[16] Ibid., 56.

[17] Ibid., 69.

[18] Robert James Waller, *The Bridges of Madison County* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 15.

[19] Ibid., 84.

[20] Aristotle., 67.

[21] Ibid., 78.

[22] Henry James, *Washington Square* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 28, 29, 30.

[23] Ibid., 125.

[24] Ibid., 174.

[25] Ibid., 185.

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[26] See Pico Iver, "A Different Journey," *Time* 15.16, 26 April 1999.

[27] John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 31.

[28] Ibid., 32.