'Plasticine' (työnimi/working title)

Käsikirjoitustyökalu/
Screenplay development tool

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Foreign Element

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Sample chapters on website:

Introduction
Aristotle
Syd Field

Collections

Search Results
Beat sheet
Outline
- Binder -
Binder

Cochin Regular 15

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

"The first rule of Plasticine is: don't take anything literally (as with any art theories). You, not a theory, must take responsibility for your story."

Plasticine (working title) is a new, minimalist and irreverent screenplay outlining tool that allows you to create short, thought-out versions of your story and re-use this material in later steps of development. It will eventually come in digital, hyperlinked and notebook origami flavours. Plasticine was born of a need to devise a repeatable, and customisable, way to develop an idea, as well as a frustration while listening to endless debates on the 'universality' of screenwriting theories. It attempts to paraphrase and transparently unite some of the most popular, current major screenplay outlining theory for you to test your work against. If these theories are not for you, I hope you can modify Plasticine to fit your own process.

Plasticine contains no magical, new über-theory. Even if it were true that there was a scientifically proven, eternal structure to storytelling, this would seem to kill any desire to write or create - or, live and discover - in the first place. In this light, the search for a perfect theory to guide us would seem a doomed prospect. This is not to say that organising your thoughts and material in a 'theoretical' manner is useless.

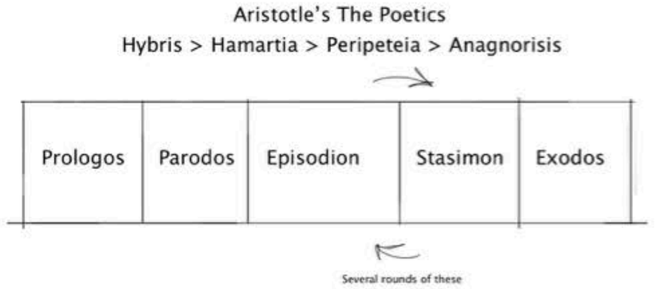
Contrary to a lot of theories, the Plasticine project posits that all these theories are an imposed artifice and that one's inspiration and creative process can arrive in any form. So, if you read or use any of the theoretical materials quoted in Plasticine, you are relieved of the constant demand to 'keep to the script'. Remember Occam's Razor: "among competing hypotheses, the hypothese with the fewest assumptions should be chosen".

Enthusiastic people have thought hard about screenwriting to create these theories (even if it is based on completed work), but if something in a theory is making many assumptions about your work, question the advice and its usefulness to your particular situation. Fear not the delete key, if

110% Pages 1-2 of 5 (Selection - Words: 7 Chars: 48)

Aristotle's The Poetics (335 BC) (Composite) - Aristotle's The Poetic...

Aristotle's The Poetics



A fragmentary introduction to Aristotle and the Poetics

The Poetics is a seminal book in Aesthetics which has strongly influenced subsequent dramaturgy and screenwriting practice. People often ascribe the 'natural, universal' three act screenwriting structure we are familiar with to the Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle [384–322 BC]. Even people who voice their detest of screenplay gurus often single Aristotle out for sage, timeless and unerring advice on the topic of screenwriting. When asked about Aristotle's contributions, however, many of these adherents offer: "you know… a story has a beginning, middle and end and, um…?" Unfortunately, the truth is often less straightforward than we should like and, as neat as it is, 'beginning, middle, end' doesn't really carry us very far.

Most of the commentaries I have availed myself to as source material

110% Pages 1-2 of 39 (Words: 10 573 Chars: 64 721)

Synopsis
Introduction

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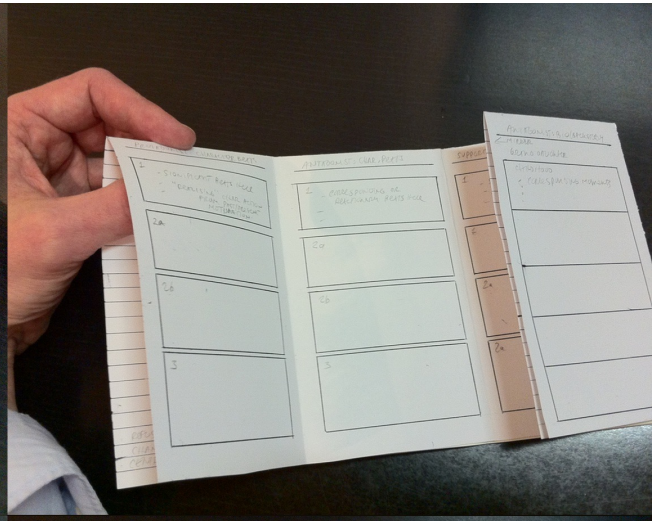
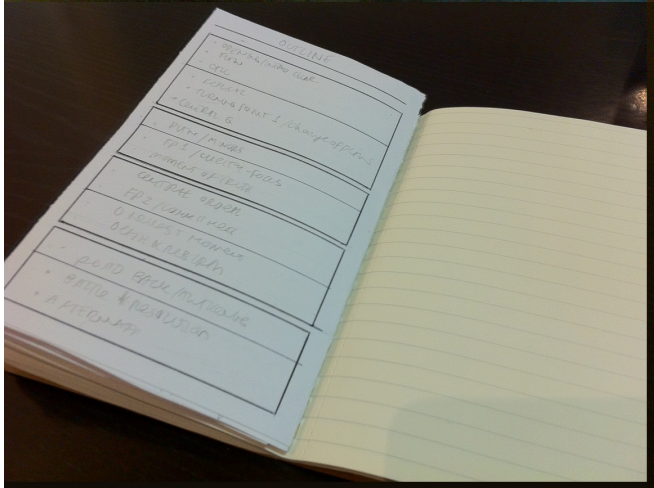
Document Notes

This is the theory sidebar:

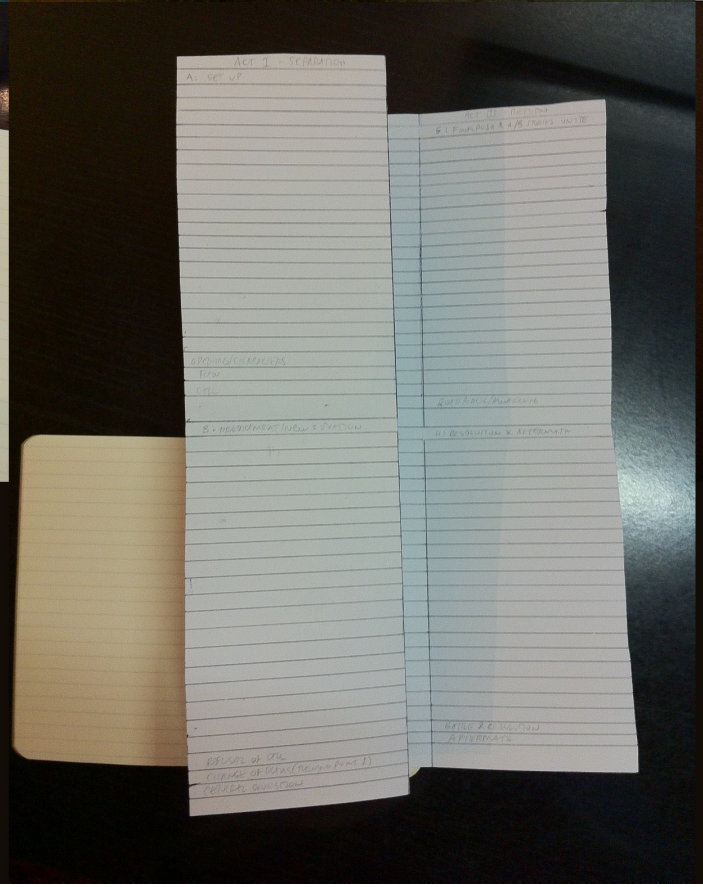
Although not an academic study, and thus lacking in a substantial thesis (e.g. a new 'superior' theory combined from the elements of those studied), one of the interesting points of the Plasticine project has been to read and compare the approaches of various screenwriting theories. The teachers discussed here, of course, promote their own approach to screenwriting and analysis, which is often described as 'universal'.

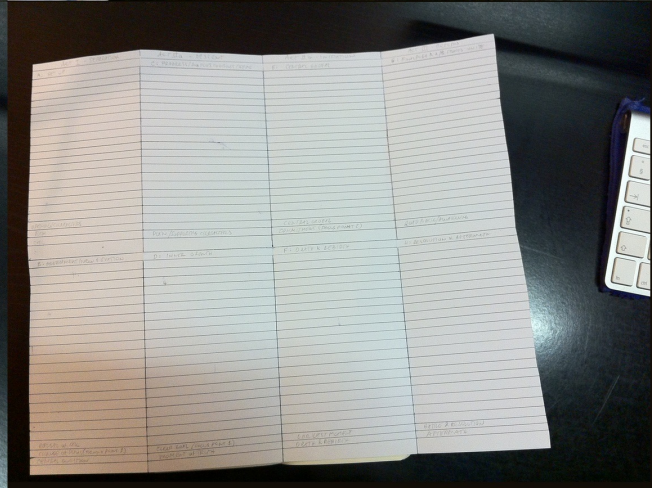
However, it is apparent that the same teachers are often not unaware of the irony of promoting such a universal truth, when there is competition also doing so. Looking at their texts, one finds that these 'gurus' are at often more open in their views than one would believe when listening to some adherents. Building on this opportunity, we will take a brief look at the theories' approach to common stages, such as the premise, before moving on to a fuller treatment of each teacher's system, where each concept will be explained.



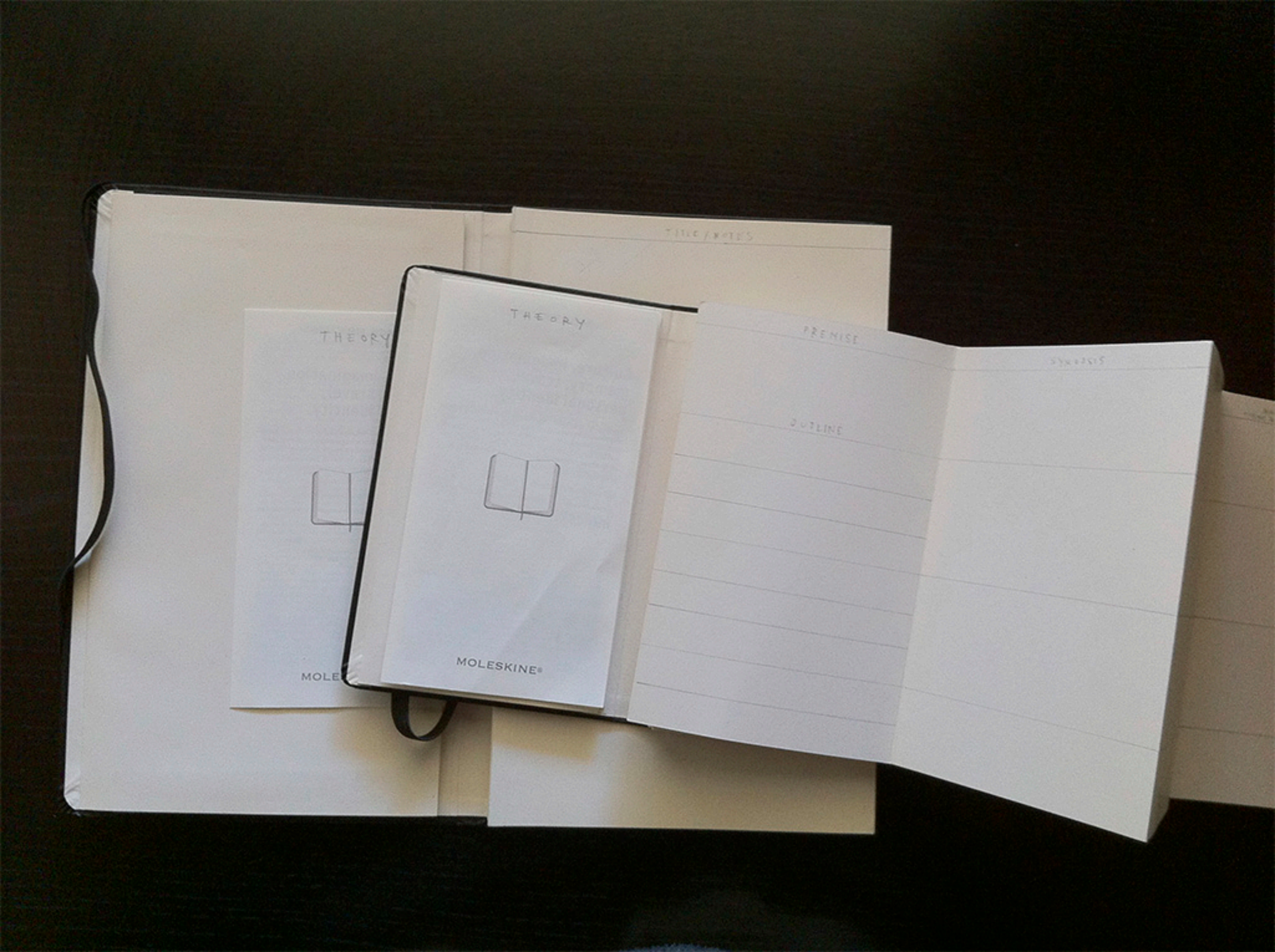


Plasticine





Notebook


THEORY
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PREMISE
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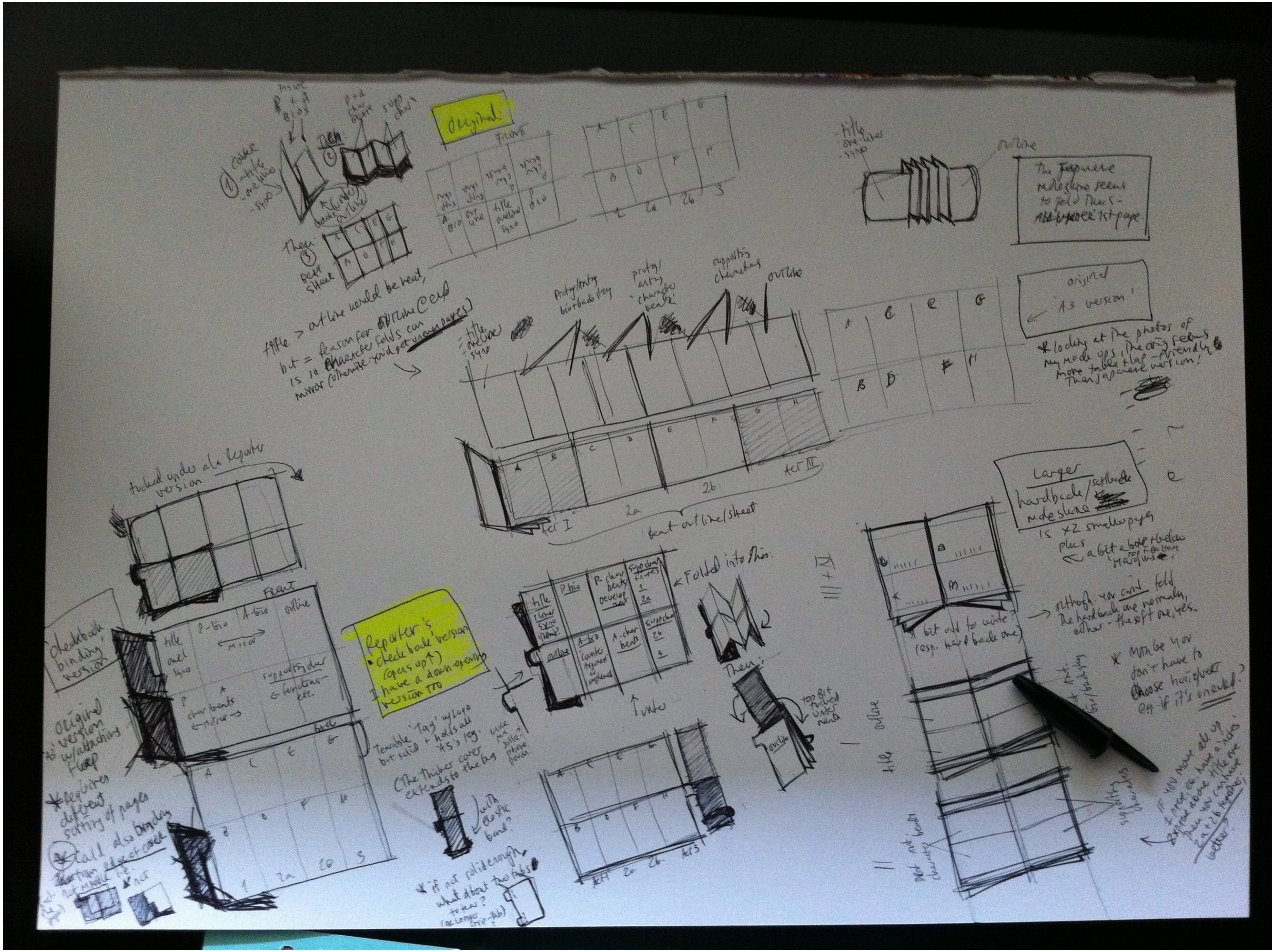
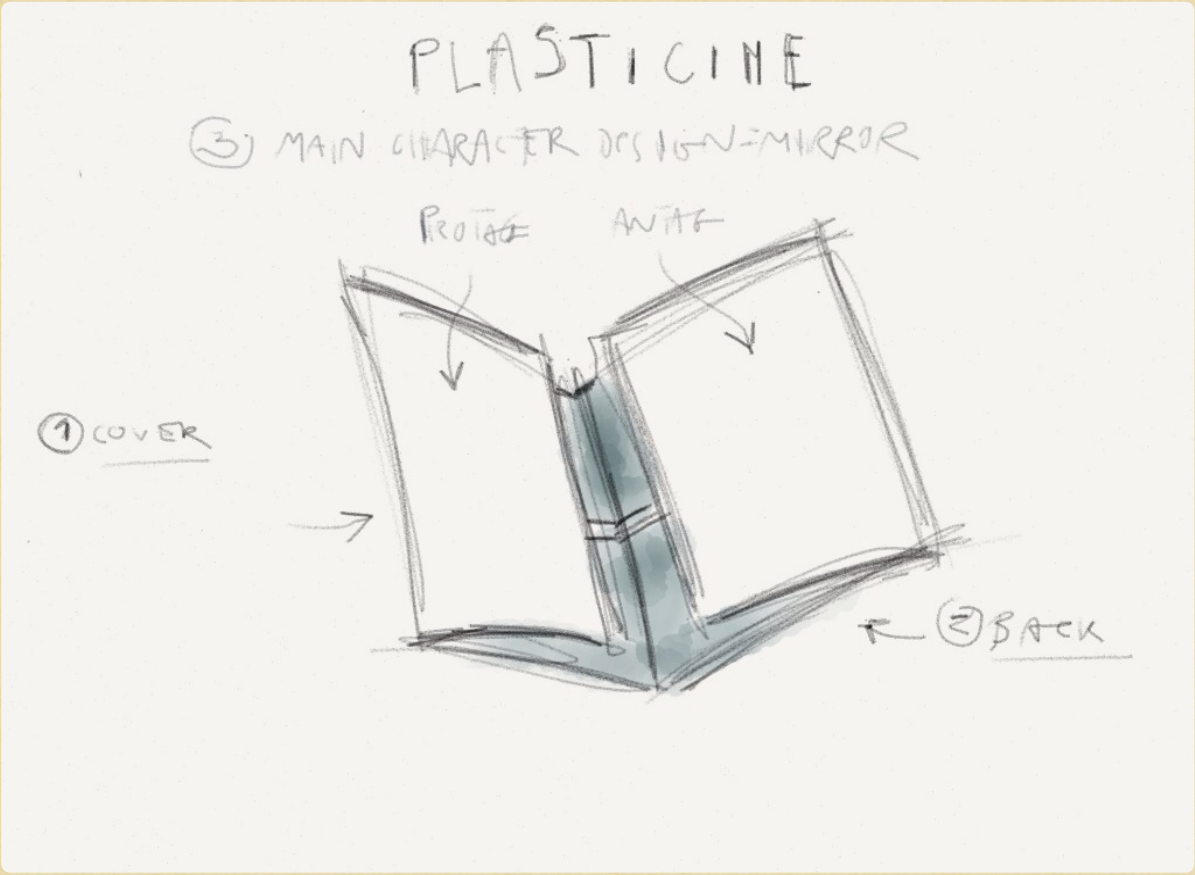

original
Front
Then:
title > outline would be beat,
outline
beat outline/sheet
Act I
2a
2b
Act IV
tucked under a la Reporter version
Front
outline
Reporter's checkbook version (opens up) have a down-opening version too
Folded into this:
Then:
The Japanese moleskine seems to fold this - Also lose 1st page.
original 'A3 version'
* looking at the photos of my mock ups, the orig seems more table + lap - friendly than Japanese version!
Larger hardback/softback moleskine is x2 smaller pages plus a bit about top + bottom margins
although you can't fold the hardback one normally, either - the soft one, yes.
* Maybe you don't have to choose horizontal e.g. if it's unruled?
original A3 version w/attaching flap
* requires different setting of pages
checkbook binding version
Tearable 'tag' w/logo but solid + holds all A5's tog.
(The thicker cover extends to the tag)
with elastic band?
* if not solid enough what about two tabs to tear?

Plasticine

Plasticine (working title) is a screenplay outlining approach and tool that allows you to create short , thought-out versions of your story and re-use this material in later steps of development. It comes in digital, hyperlinked and notebook origami flavours. It also combines and unites the best of the current major screenplay outlining theory for you to test your work against. Shown here is the notebook version. Each notebook contains 20 folded project templates.

A short theory booklet is included to explain how the theories fit into one and other but, naturally, reading all the major works critically is necessary. It isn't an academic exercise in comparative theory, but a practical writing tool. As its name suggests, Plasticine offers a loose structure that you can, and should, re-model.

Cover pages and First fold

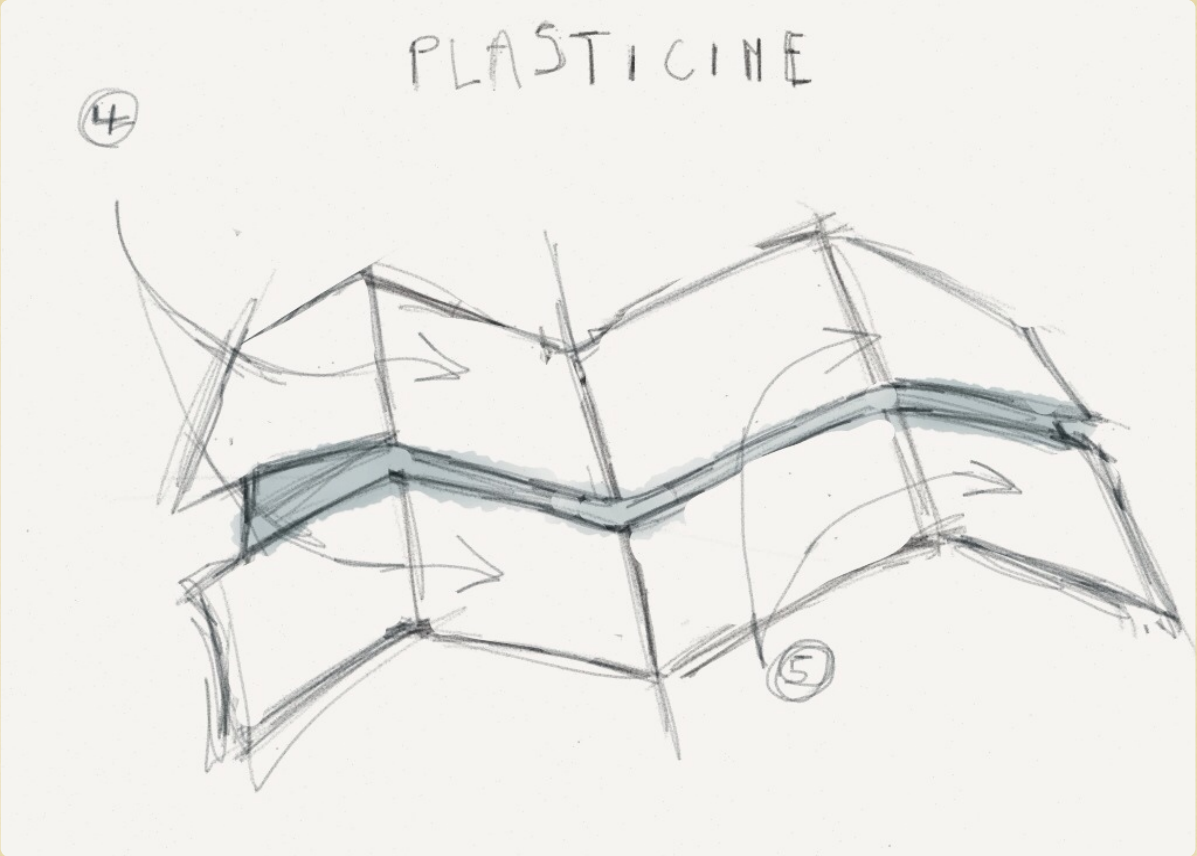


Step 1 (front cover page)
- title
- Temporary one-line 'marketable', idiot-proof pitch
- One paragraph synopsis representing the four parts in a three act structure

Step 2 (back cover)
- (10-15) major beat/point outline broken down into paragraphs representing the four parts in a three act structure

Step 3
- main character design *before story* ('going backwards'): mirrored backstory, biographies and major events for protagonist and antagonist, to motivate story and plot events *during* story. Broken down by age, as appropriate: old age, adulthood, early adulthood, adolescence, childhood.

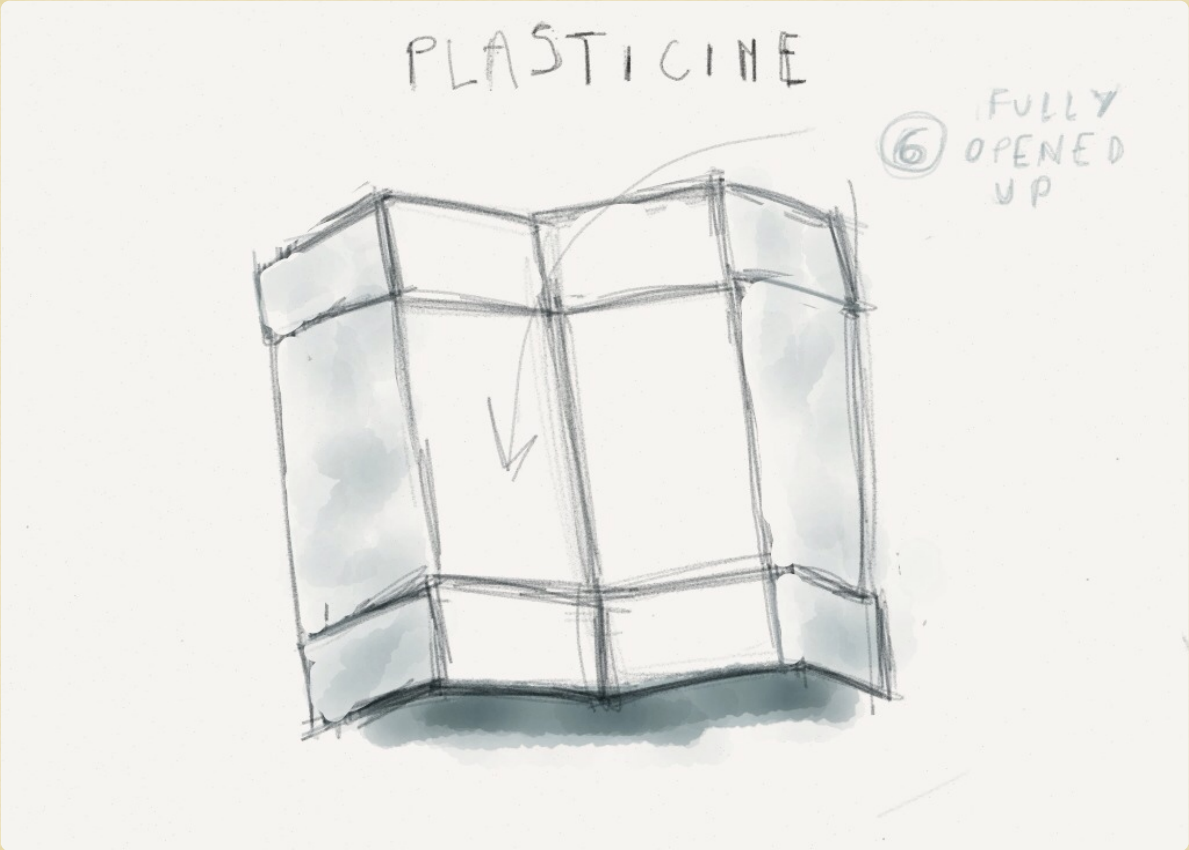
Second fold



Step 4 (two left sections, rotated clockwise)
- main character design *during story* ('going forwards'): mirrored biographies and major events for protagonist and antagonist, to motivate story and plot events *during* story. Broken down into the four parts of a three act structure.

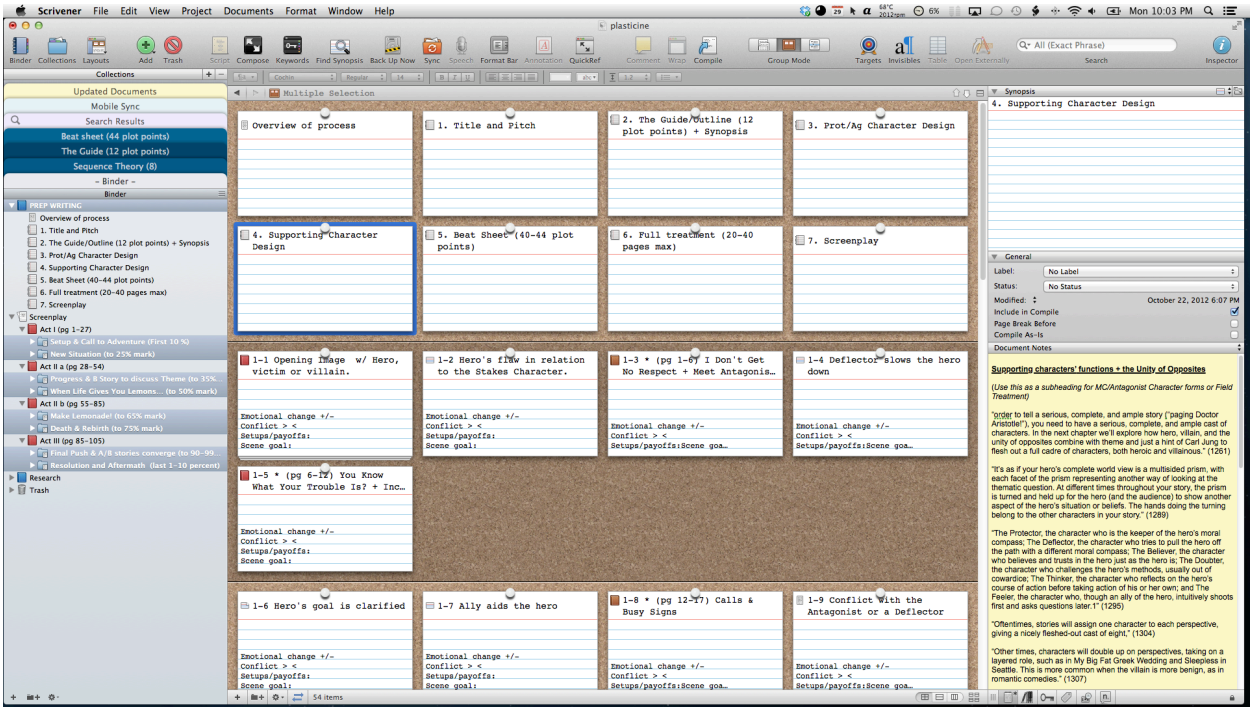
Step 5 (two right sections, rotated clockwise)
- supporting character design *during story* ('going forwards'): mirrored biographies and major events for supporting characters (also: minor notes about backstory, if relevant). Each major supporting character, hopefully, has some kind function which furthers the main characters' debate embodying the film's major theme. Broken down into the four parts of a three act structure

Third fold



Step 6 (with booklet fully opened and spread out, read horisontally)

A (36-60 beat/point) beat sheet, broken down into:
- one vertical 'page' representing each of the four parts in a three act structure
- eight+ scene sequences for documentarists, experimental film makers and writers using the 1920s 'USC' mini-movie method.
- 36-60 beat beat sheet/outline, incorporating the major beat/plot points favoured by teachers like Vogler, Hague, Schechter, Truby and Snyder.



1. Intro

'Plasticine' on käsikirjoitustyökalu ensisijaisesti ideoimiseen sekä treatmentin tai käsikirjoituksen kehittelyyn. Sitä voi käyttää myös varsinaisessa käsikirjoitusvaiheessa ja keskeneräisen käsikirjoituksen analyysissa, jos näin haluaa. Plasticine soveltuu samoin sekä yksin- että ryhmätyöskentelyyn, ja tulevaisuudessa mobiilityöskentelyyn, käyttämällä ilmaista verkkopalvelua kuten Dropboxia.

Plasticinen tärkein ydin on nimensä mukaisesti tarjota 'muovailtava rakenne': "Minulla on idea käsistä varten. Haluan tutkiskella, käsitellä ja kehitellä sitä eri näkökulmista joustavalla tavalla yhden projektin (tiedoston) sisällä." Vasta tämän jälkeen on mielekästä mainita, että Plasticine esittelee myös tunnetuimmat käsikirjoitusteoriat - jos ei näitä tunne - jos tarvitsee esimerkiksi teoreettista tukea, inspiraatiota tai virtuaalisen sparraajan. Näitä teoreettista 'neuvoja' ei siis tarvitse noudattaa - itse asiassa, kannustan kaikkia Plasticinen käyttäjiä, joille osa näistä teorioista on tuttuja, tutustumaan uusiin lähestymistapoihin, jotka tuntuvat vierailta, ja muokkaamaan niistä vapaasti itselleen hyödyllisiä työkaluja. Jos teoriat eivät kiinnosta, nämä saa helposti pois näytöltä.

Suurin osa käsikirjoitussovelluksista, jotka ovat usein kalliita, tarjoaa työkaluja vain varsinaiseen käsikirjoittamiseen ja loput, jotka tarjoavat kehittelytyökaluja, ovat usein sidotut yksittäisen 'käsikirjoitusgurun' oppeihin sekä suljettuihin tiedostomuotoihin. Toisin sanoen: oppi on aika suppeaa ja projektitiedostoja ei voi jakaa muille kuin tietyn, kalliin sovelluksen

omistaville.

Pyrin, aluksi, esittelemään toimivan käsikirjoituksen kehittelytyökalun:

- joka demomuodossaan toimii vielä Scrivener-ympäristön sisällä (mutta: Scrivener-tiedosto on itse asiassa vain kansio, jossa on kokoelma yleisiä RTF, TXT tekstejä)
- joka on edullisempi ja joustavampi kuin markkinoilla olevat sovellukset (parityöskentely, kommentoiminen, verkkotyöskentely, tiedostomuodon avoimuus, tekstin rakenteellinen käsittely).
- jolla voi muokata käsikirjoitusta ideanpoikasesta outlineen, treatmentiin tai jopa ensimmäiseen käsikirjoitusversioon käyttämällä Scrivenerin hyperteksti-linkkejä. Linkit ja outline-vaihe auttavat myös ehkäisemään liiallista kirjoittamista, jos käsikirjoituksen lähtöasetelmat näyttävät olevan laihat - parempi laittaa projekti hetkeksi sivuun ja ajatella uutta käsisideaa, kuin pakottaa sivukaupalla jäykkää tekstiä.
- jonka kirjoitusympäristö vuorottelee vapaan, luovan kirjoitustilan sekä analyyttisen, rakenteellisen kirjoitustilan kanssa.
- joka tarjoaa teoriatukea etenkin uusille käsikirjoittajille tekstin rakenteellisessa, kerronnallisessa ja temaattisessa hahmottelussa.

Mainittakoon vielä, että on tärkeää, ettei näitä tukimateriaaleja seurata orjallisesti ja että näistä oppimalla ja näitä hyödyntämällä sekä taivuttamalla voisi luoda kirjoittajalle itselleen uusia kerronnan muotoja. Plasticine ei myöskään edusta mitään uutta teoriaa. Se tarjoaa kontekstin eri tavalla kirjoittamista oppineille nähdä ja jäsentää kirjoitustyötään eri näkökulmista Teoria-osuuden sisällyttämisen ideana on ollut näyttää kuinka samanlaisia monet valtavirran käsikirjoitusteorioista ovat, ja kuinka niiden yhtymäkohtien ymmärtämisellä voi välttää yksittäisten 'käsikirjoitusgurujen' muodikasta seuraamista tai vastaavasti heidän suureleistä kritisoimista - ja keskittyä kirjoittamiseen ja omaan materiaaliinsa. Teoriat itse eivät tuhoa luovuutta, vaan niiden sokea noudattaminen.

Käsikirjoittamisen rakenneajattelun pääsuuntauksia, hyvin yleistettyinä

- "Käsikirjoittaminen on taidetta, jota ei voi opettaa. Sitä joko on tai ei ole lahjakas. Kaikki teoria ja opetus on turhaa".
- Aristoteelinen traditio, alku, keskikohta ja loppu. Ajan, paikan ja toiminnan yhtenäisyys ja kohtausten välinen looginen yhteys jne.
- Sekvenssi- eli jaksoteoria joka perustuu osittain kolminäytöksiseen malliin ja osittain 1900-luvun alkupuoliskon teknisiin syihin (filmikela piti vaihtaa usein, joten kerronta piti monesti rakentaa tämän ympärille). Moderneista teoreetikoista Michael Haugen 'kuuden vaiheen teoria' on osittain lähellä jaksoteoriaa, vaikkakin kerronnallisesti paremmin perusteltuna (sankarin/päähenkilön 'ulkoinen matka' eli juoni on sidottu tämän 'sisäiseen (psykologiseen ja myyttiseen) matkaan'.
- Syd Fieldin klassinen kolmen näytöksen malli 1970-luvulta, joka perustuu paljolti Aristoteliaaniseen teoriaan.
- Carl Jungin ja Joseph Campbellin kaltaisiin mytologisiin ajatuksiin perustuvat teoriat kuten Christopher Voglerin 'The Writer's Journey'.
- Outline ja Beat Sheet/Step outline-tyyppiset teoriat, kuten Jeffrey Schechterin 'Contour'-teoria sekä Blake Snyderin 'Save the Cat' teoriat.
- Dramatican kaltaiset, todella akateemisen oloiset ja kirjoittajalle vaikeat järjestelmät, joita ei tässä käsitellä.

Jos eri teorioiden vaatimuksia ei oteta liian kirjaimellisesti ("sivulla 27 on pakko tapahtua X…"), niin suurin osa näistä teorioista saadaan Aristoteliaanisen 'alku, keskikohta, loppu' ajattelun, eli kolmen näytöksen mallin, alle (toisin ajateltuna: neljä osaa/näytöstä). Sen alle taas sopii kahdeksan kohdan jaksoajattelu.

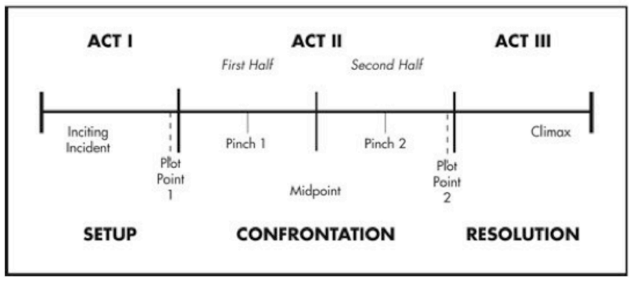
Jaksoajattelun myötä voimme laajentaa kolmesta näytöksestä useampaan, jos näin haluaa. Tästä voi olla hyötyä esimerkiksi dokumenttielokuvan alueella, jossa kerronta voi usein edetä 'vapaammin' kuin fiktiossa.

Jaksoajattelun alle sopii käännekohtiin perustuva outline- ja beat sheet ajattelu, joilla vuorostaan pääsemme suunnittelemaan itsellemme varsinaiset kohtaukset.

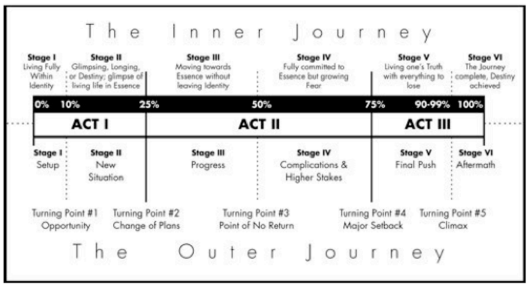
Näillä kilpailevilla, päähenkilö- ja juonikeskeisillä teorioilla on enemmän yhteistä kuin eroja, ja tämän ymmärtäminen auttaa välttämään jumiutumista johonkin yhteen teoriaan, ja etenemään kirjoitusprosessissa - vaikka kirjoittaisi vastoin näitä 'oppeja'. Samalla voidaan välttää useamman tietokone-sovelluksen ostaminen.

Alla näemme esimerkkejä näytöksiin, jaksoihin, käännekohtiin sekä mytologisiin rakenteisiin perustuvia teorioita - ja niiden yhtymäkohtia, joita Plasticine hyödyntää:

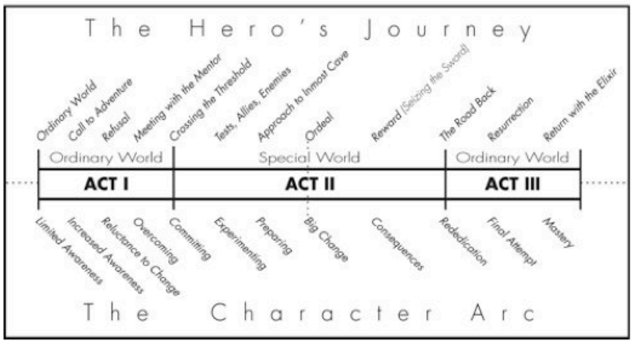
The Syd Field "Paradigm"



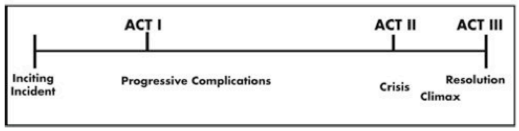
Michael Hauge's "Six Stage Plot Structure"



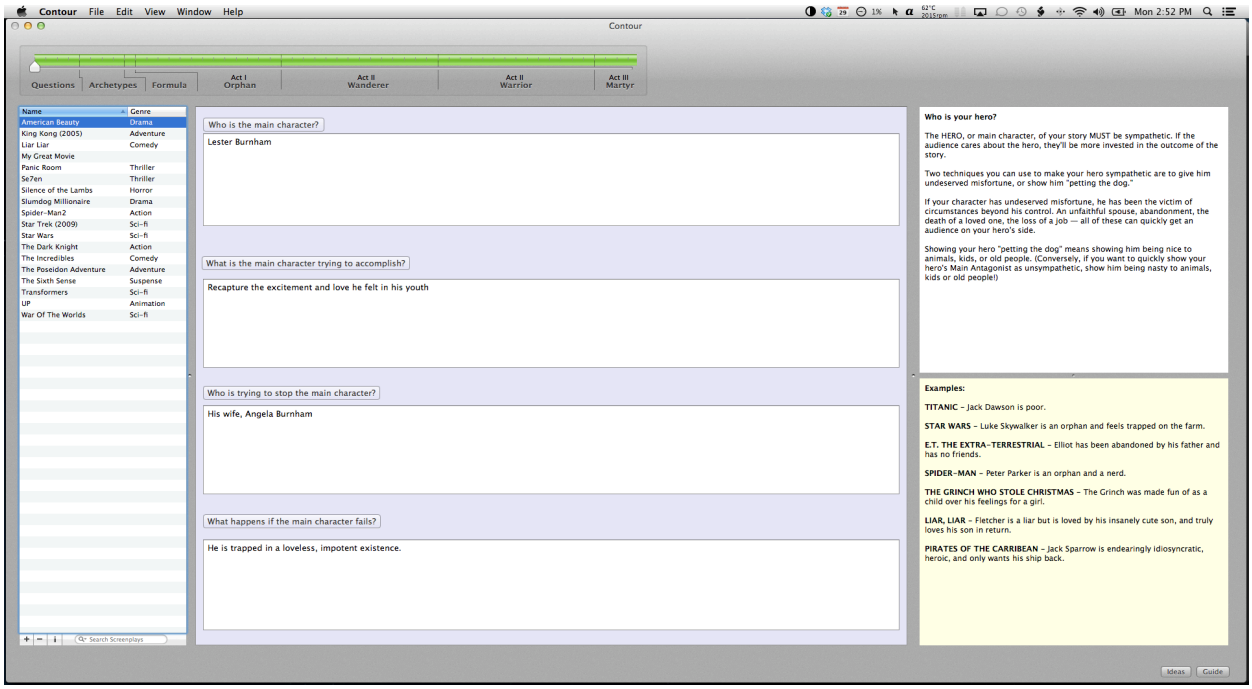
Christopher Vogler "The Hero's Journey"



Robert McKee "Central Plot"



Kuten mainittu, eri teorioihin pohjautuvat sovellukset ovat kalliita (usein satoja Euroja, vrt. Scrivener 30-40 Euroa) ja lukitsee käsikirjoittajan yhteen teoriaan sekä usein tiettyyn tiedostomuotoon (Final Draft, jne.). Jopa ilmainen Celtx-sovellus, joka on käsikirjoitus- ja tuotantotyökalu, käyttää suljettua Celtx-tiedostoa. Joissakin tapauksissa (kuten alla), aivan käytännöllisen kirjan kirjoittaneen henkilön teoriaan perustuva sovellus, kuten Jeffrey Schechterin leikittelevästi nimettyyn 'My story can beat up your story' - kirjaan perustuva Contour-sovellus, tarjoaa käyttäjälleen vähemmän kuin itse kirja. Plasticine pyrkii vähentämään tätä hajanaisuutta:



Plasticinen mahdollisia tulevaisuudennäkymiä

- v1-version eriyttäminen Scrivener-ympäristöstä, ensin eri tiedostomuodoiksi (koko asiakirjan kirjoittaminen sovelluksille kuten MS Word, Apple Pages, Wiki-, HTML-, Fountain- tai Index Card-muotoon (esim. iOS mobiilisovelluksille UX Writer, Writing Kit ja Index card) ja mahdollisesti Mac OSX/iOS mobiilisovellukseksi tai kirja/kurssimuotoon sopivaksi materiaaliksi.

- Uudet Fountain (käsikirjoitus-syntaksi) ja Multimarkdown-tiedostot ovat mielenkiintoisia, etenkin mobiileja, yhteistyötä ja arkistointia varten, sillä ne ovat vain Plain Text-tiedostoja, joihin voi sisältyä muistiinpanoja sekä muotoilua (kursiivit jne.) ja näin ollen muotoilu ei tuhoudu siirryttäessä tietokoneelta mobiiliin jne. Teksti voidaan avata vuosien kuluttua, kun tietyn sovelluksen tuki on saattanut lakata.

- tekstin kääntäminen suomen kielelle (Plasticine-kehittely tapahtuu englanniksi, jotta voitaisiin maksimoida ensisijainen yleisö Scrivener-käyttäjien ja käsikirjoittajien joukosta).

- Plasticinen muokkaaminen dokumenttielokuvalle sekä mediataiteelle/kokeilevalle elokuvalle sopivaksi (ääni- ja kuvasarake, kuvien liittäminen, kuvakäsikirjoituksilla eteneminen jne.) että myös televisiokäyttöön ('series bible' eli koko kauden 'kaari' ja episodien käsikirjoitukset hallittuna yhdessä asiakirjassa).

Plasticine Notebook

Joskus on kiva olla poissa koneen ääreltä. Plasticinesta kehitellään myös fyysinen vihkoversio, joka muistuttaa Moleskine-vihkojen haitarimalleja. Tämä taitettu paperiarkki pitää sisällään prosessin ytimen (ymmärrettävästi rajatummassa tilassa) ja digiversion tavoin pyrkii mahdollistamaan kirjoittajan omaa ajattelua/organisointia esiteltyjen teorioiden ja rakenteiden sijaan. Keskeiset käännekohdat ja muut 'ohjeet' pyritään painamaan vaalean harmaalla, jotta ne olisivat mahdollisimman huomaamattomia ja niiden päälle voisi kirjoittaa omat tekstinsä. Esimerkiksi sekvenssiteorian mukaisten 'Jungilaisten' otsikoiden päälle tulee kirjoittaa oma kyseistä jaksoa kuvaava väliotsikko. Tulevaisuudessa, vihkoversion sijasta voisi halutessaan käyttää mobiiliversiota, jonka voisi synkronoida kotikoneen projektin kanssa. Tästä asiakirjasta löydätte englanninkielisen kuvauksen Plasticinesta sekä kuvia fyysisen vihkoversion luonnoksista.

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

"The first rule of Plasticine is: don't take anything literally (as with any art theories). You, not a theory, must take responsibility for your story."

Plasticine (working title) is a new, minimalist and irreverent screenplay outlining tool that allows you to create short, thought-out versions of your story and re-use this material in later steps of development. It will eventually come in digital, hyperlinked and notebook origami flavours. Plasticine was born of a need to devise a repeatable, and customisable, way to develop an idea, as well as a frustration while listening to endless debates on the 'universality' of screenwriting theories. It attempts to paraphrase and transparently unite some of the most popular, current major screenplay outlining theory for you to test your work against. If these theories are not for you, I hope you can modify Plasticine to fit your own process.

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Contrary to a lot of theories, the Plasticine project posits that all these theories are an imposed artifice and that one's inspiration and creative process can arrive in any form. So, if you read or use any of the theoretical materials quoted in Plasticine, you are relieved of the constant demand to 'keep to the script'. Remember Occam's Razor: "among competing hypotheses, the hypothese with the fewest assumptions should be chosen".

Enthusiastic people have thought hard about screenwriting to create these theories (even if it is based on completed work), but if something in a theory is making many assumptions about your work, question the advice

and its usefulness to your particular situation. Fear not the delete key, if you know what you're deleting.

E.g. you could:
- start entirely with characters; drop them into testing situations, develop a life and an inner world, contradictions, desires causing movement, action and a unique voice - and use this material for an outline. Many films are low on plot; there's no reason you need to start with outlines, although one will help you out later on.
- start with an outline, if you have an overall story in your mind - "don't get it right, get it written".
- follow the thematic sequences, but shuffle them in any order you need, even if it doesn't fit the theory
- question, does your character need to be active (some theories distinguish between a main character and a protagonist) and does the action of the film have to constantly grow?
- think, do you really need all of these plot points or have to follow such a busy opening 10 minutes?
- consider just going completely experimental - e.g. telling a palindromic story - while still resembling the way these theories dramatise a story?

To cobble together a new metaphor, it might be liberating to use the theories/approaches as a scaffolding, not a mold. Not something fixed and final, rather something to be moved, pasted on and sculpted. You'll erect the scaffolding around your new building-in-the-making, and take parts down as your monster grows in unexpected directions. You might have to use some of the same temporary scaffolding on the opposite side of the building, because your new development is about to topple over the entire project.

Write how you want - no theory can guarantee success or that you'll go into production (or even development) - but consider why you are writing your screenplay and what you are contributing to the world and the world of screenwriting. The true structure of your screenplay will emerge from within as you work on it. Writing is messy (and many films should be, too). This is one thing that makes them human. At times, your writing will be blissfully compact and organised. Slip into theory if you feel you need it. Show or hide your structure in the Scrivener Binder and the theory sidebar

in the Inspector: View>Layout>Show Binder or Inspector.

Plasticine is an alternative cook book of possible, though not absolute, screenwriting ingredients. There's no new theory, but that which is contained within, is presented in an 'open' manner; compare and contrast, draw your own practical conclusions.

Included, a folder of condensed theory explains how the theories fit into one and other but, naturally, reading all the major works critically is implied. It isn't an academic exercise in comparative theory, but a practical writing tool. The theory is provided only for reference, and can be hidden to provide a cleaner writing experience.

There are no magic numbers or rules you mustn't break: just think of this as a cell dividing, as your idea expands into the universe.

As its name suggests, Plasticine offers a loose structure that you can, and should, re-model. To write a screenplay that will engage a human audience, you might need to mess with 'perfection' (this goes for most art theories). *Delete or type over text in Plasticine as you see best fit.*

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS - FROM PREMISE TO SCREENPLAY

Step 1 - Premise and short synopsis

- temporary title
- Premise The Premise (sometimes called the Concept) is a simple statement of the main character/s, and their dilemma.
- Short synopsis The synopsis reflects the beginning, middle and end of the story.

Step 2 - Outline

- The Outline does what it says and draws an outline, or major events (beats, plot/turning points of the story) on roughly a page representing the four parts of a three act structure (which you can modify later). Some events may be internal character events, and some external events.

Step 3 - Character design: mirrored Protagonist/Antagonist (alternate starting point)

- main character design before story ('going backwards'): mirrored backstory, biographies and major events for protagonist and antagonist, to motivate story and plot events during story. Broken down by age, as appropriate: old age, adulthood, early adulthood, adolescence, childhood.
- main character design during story ('going forwards'): mirrored biographies and major events for protagonist and antagonist, to motivate story and plot events during story. Broken down into the four parts of a three act structure.

Step 4 - Character design: mirrored minor characters

- supporting character design during story ('going forwards'): mirrored biographies and major events for supporting characters (also: minor notes about backstory, if relevant). Each major supporting character, hopefully, has some kind function which furthers the main characters' debate embodying the film's major theme. Broken down into the four parts of a three act structure

Step 5 - Beat sheet

A (36-60 beat/point) beat sheet, broken down into:

- one vertical 'page' representing each of the four parts in a three act structure
- eight+ scene sequences for documentarists, experimental film makers and writers using the 1920s 'USC' mini-movie method.
- 36-60 beat beat sheet/outline, incorporating the major beat/plot points favoured by teachers like Vogler, hauge, Schechter, Truby and Snyder.

Later stages (in Scrivener or an other application)

Treatment: Twenty to forty pages, a short story virtually, which is simply an expanded version of the Outline and beat sheet, but with more character detail, and various dramatic `moments' and key scenes fleshed out in more detail. Usually each scene is a paragraph. Contains no dialog, and is written in the third-person present tense.

Screenplay: traditionally speaking about 90-120 pages, however shorter is better

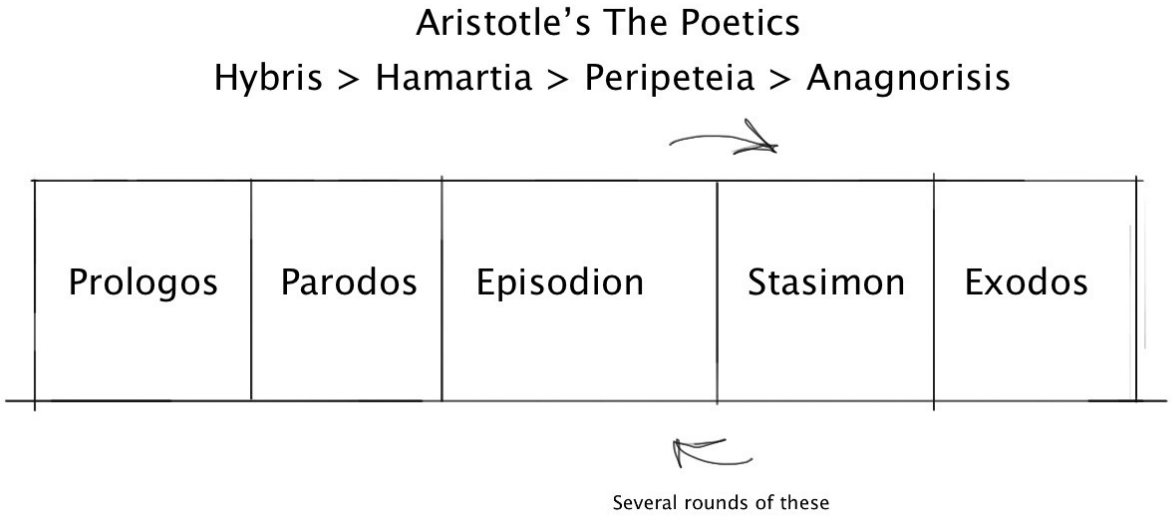
especially for a new writer - look at hitting somewhere in the middle.

I would like to extend my gratitude to AVEK (The Promotion Centre for Audiovisual Culture, Finland) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM) without whose Creademo support the development of this project would not have been possible.

Aristotle's The Poetics (335 BC)

A fragmentary Introduction to Aristotle and the Poetics

Aristotle's The Poetics



A fragmentary introduction to Aristotle and the Poetics

The Poetics is a seminal book in Aesthetics which has strongly influenced subsequent dramaturgy and screenwriting practice. People often ascribe the 'natural, universal' three act screenwriting structure we are familiar with to the Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle [384–322 BC]. Even people who voice their detest of screenplay gurus often single Aristotle out for sage, timeless and unerring advice on the topic of screenwriting. When asked about Aristotle's contributions, however, many of these adherents offer: "you know… a story has a beginning, middle and end and, um…?" Unfortunately, the truth is often less straightforward than we should like and, as neat as it is, 'beginning, middle, end' doesn't really carry us very far.

Most of the commentaries I have availed myself to as source material have focused on particular points in the Poetics, none giving the kind of definitive 'final word' we so often demand of screenwriting theories. I am not convinced that such a exhaustive theory exists (nor am I convinced that we need one). Therefore, you will have to read the Poetics to draw your own conclusions. The Poetics is an ambitious yet ambiguous set of lecture notes from another age, with half of its text missing, and a touch of imagination is necessary in applying its ideas to contemporary work.

Broadly speaking, the Poetics begins by discussing poetry (*poetike*, literally 'making'), an Ancient Greek term for what we'd now call art. Poetry is found to be rooted in imitation (*mimēsis*), an innate ability that enables us to learn. Various art forms imitate differently, e.g. through the use of words, or shapes and colours. From here, Aristotle jumps to tragedy (*tragōidia*, from *tragos* - 'goat' and *ōidē* - 'ode, song', presumably from the ritualistic practice of goat sacrifice for the god Dionysos at religious festivals) as a case study for the majority of the book, first offering his definition of tragedy and continuing to dissect tragedy's elements and construction.

Among others, he redefines the medical term *catharsis* (roughly ' purging' or 'purification', here of specific emotions), which is seen as one of the chief benefits of poetry besides learning and pleasure. Incidentally, there has been some debate about whether Aristotle in the Poetics wants us to create better works of poetry or just learn to appreciate poetry better. Aristotle then comments on epic poetry, which mainly differs from tragedy in its length and use of narrative (*diegesis*), and ultimately deduces that tragedy is superior to epic as an art form.

Aristotle, despite his occasionally prescriptive tone, didn't speak of the topic in exactly the same 'weekend seminar' way that we are used to when studying, discussing and, most importantly, applying screenwriting theory. Aptly for the founder of the peripatetic school of philosophy who, as posthumous legend has it, walked around while teaching (one meaning for *peripatetikos* is 'to walk around or meander'), there is some room for debate and interpretation.

A doctor's son and a philosopher, whose body of work spans from biology to metaphysics, ethics, government and aesthetics, Aristotle seems happy getting his hands dirty with diverse and conflicting empirical evidence. Yes, Aristotle does single out 'better' playwrights and practices of his time and he does, at times, speak in quite an axiomatic manner. He does mention that in Greek dramas you will see action taking place in a single day and single place (another example of tragedy differing from the epic), but he isn't necessarily saying that you *must* write like this. There are no specific act or sequence lengths or plot points set in stone. Where such things are mentioned, in passing, they stand in contrast to Aristotle's recurring analogy between a work of poetry and a living, growing organism with its own purpose and independent form.

One suspects Aristotle was aware of the conflict between tidy, pre-packaged philosophical systems (such as those of the Sophists) and evidence from the field. His thought certainly includes elements more akin to our notion of science and empirical research than theoretical philosophy. Despite its patchy nature, the Poetics exhibits Aristotle's philosophy of redefinition, of constant movement and digging for new knowledge.

One of the philosophical 'tools' Aristotle often employs to make sense of things, is his set of 'four causes' [*aitia*] or kinds of explanation of a phenomenon, the third of which begins the Poetics:

1 the material cause: explanation by reference to the material constitution of something - out of what the thing is made.

2 the formal cause: explanation by reference to the essence of something - the idea based on which the material is arranged.

3 the efficient cause: explanation by reference to the origin of something - the who or what that causes change or rest, representing our current understanding of the word 'cause'.

4 the final cause or *telos*: explanation by reference to the end or purpose of something - why it exists or is done.

As with most things in Aristotle and the Poetics, these causes are subject to academic debate. So, although more conservative readings of *telos* are possible, for example, it might be more rewarding to interpret the final cause liberally along Aristotle's analogy of a living, growing organism, allowing for a degree of freedom for things to be or become themselves. Instead of subjugating all phenomena to an abstract, Platonic one-size-fits-all theory of forms, Aristotle's phenomena has or acquires its own internal logic, based on found evidence, and is an organic 'whole which is the *cause* of its parts'.

Therefore, despite what Aristotle speaks of types and genres, it follows that screenplays could too express - or grow into - their fullest form independently, as there is no pre-existing, abstract idea of what a screenplay should be, other than the one residing within itself. The telos of why something was born (or created) is a part of its beauty, however a screenplay will only reach full bloom once it fulfils its *unique* telos most actually, not just potentially.

Although this remains ambiguous, and contrary to the warnings we see about straying from some ideal (industrial) format, it at least gives a reader and writer of poetry some leeway for creativity amidst the more rigid rules, whilst at the same time guiding them towards their own telos for the piece. To paraphrase the Finnish poet, and translator of Aristotle, Pentti Saarikoski: one of the rewarding facets of the Poetics is that it forces the reader to forge their own interpretations of "what poetry is, how it affects man and what its purpose in society is'.

Aristotle's work in Aesthetics

Aristotle's work in Aesthetics

The Poetics contains references to several ideas in works by Plato and Aristotle that open up Aristotle's thoughts on poetry. The book was also paired with the then more influential Rhetoric when studied in Ancient

Greece. Although both books were classified under the 'productive sciences' in Aristotle's system, it's conceivable that Rhetoric's application in the field of politics might have led to their uneven appreciation.

Although Aristotle wrote polished, 'exoteric' works meant for publication, the Poetics is a an example of a later, fragmentary, 'esoteric' work, very possibly meant only for use as lecture notes, upon which he would expand during lectures. The book is also incomplete: the Poetics likely contained a second book, a commentary on comedy. What remains of the Poetics is far from a finished, unequivocal study and cannot by itself provide a complete representation of Aristotle's thought on the subject.

The Kalon: moving from a theory of beauty to a theory of poetry

When comparing any writing of an other period to ours, it is worthwhile to remember that neither the ideas nor the terminology imbued with a certain meaning in the period being examined will necessarily match ours. This is especially the case with Ancient Greek thought, where philosophical concepts often havw many, composite meanings.

The Ancient Greek term *kalon*, the aesthetically beautiful, is an important case in point and describes something that pleases our senses but can *also* be morally honourable and praiseworthy. This central term is used in works by Plato and Aristotle that discuss topics from ethics to aesthetics but it is at times unclear what is meant by calling something kalon. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to take the evasiveness and richness of this concept into account, as a context, when reading the Poetics.

For example, Aristotle disagrees with Plato on how to represent 'good

people'. In the Poetics, he notes that at times it can be the right thing to show good people making morally bad choices. One can surmise that this would have been counter to Plato's views. But does showing a good person erring - and either growing or being destroyed by those decisions - make them kalon? Does the experience of tragic injustice make us more kalon, does it educate us somehow better than the depiction of infallible cardboard heroes?

Aristotle sets conditions for kalon in various texts, for example the Metaphysics, Poetics and Parts of Animals, but there is again a degree of interpretation afforded to examples found in the field, as seen above with the notion of the living organism.

In the Metaphysics he states that "the chief forms of beauty are order (*taxis*), symmetry (*symmetria*) and definiteness (*horismenon*)". The word for symmetry in Ancient Greek is broader than our understanding and refers to a unified whole, whose parts are in the appropriate relation to each other.

Of order and definiteness, he states in the Poetics that "to be beautiful, a living creature, and every whole made up of parts, must not only present a certain order in its arrangement of parts, but also be of a certain definite magnitude. Beauty is a matter of size and order".

Therefore, to be beautiful, not only must the parts be in order but the size (for screenplays, read: length) must be definite (the word *horismenon* can also be translated as 'limited'). Although Aristotle mentions his preference for length over brevity, "the longer the story, consistently with its being comprehensible as a whole, the finer it is by reason of its magnitude," this is bound by comprehension and the audience's ability to hold the story in memory. The story must seem like it is one entity.

Likewise, to be beautiful (and comprehensible), order is needed. It needs to have unity and be a whole or, in other words, is neither missing anything or include any parts superflous to the whole. However, to know whether something is missing or superflous in a thing, one needs an ideal or perfect representative of a species to measure against. For Aristotle, like Plato, that representative is the form or idea [*eiδos*, also translated as essence]. For Aristotle, the form is something that a particular thing is striving for or growing towards: its goal or final purpose.

Therefore, one needs to know what species (or, genre, from the french for *kind* or *type*) the thing is, what its form or goal is, and what a perfect representative of that species is like. Good poetry imitates actions and produces emotions appropriate for its particular genre, like tragedy or comedy. It is fair to say that, according to Aristotle, a thing is beautiful when it reaches its goal and thus clearly expresses its form or idea.

As prescriptive as the above may sound, it is conceivable to see this leading either way: to the obedience of genres in screenwriting or, contrarily, to breaking out of a mold to create your own.

As Aristotle writes in the Parts of Animals, connecting beauty to the end or telos: "We therefore must not recoil with childish aversion from the examination of the humbler animals … we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful (or, marvellous). Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in Nature's works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful."

The Poetics as a dialogue with Plato

The Poetics as a dialogue with Plato

Although absent in the Poetics, one interpretation of the Poetics is as a dialogue with the thought of Aristotle's teacher and most important influence, Plato.

The theory of forms

First and foremost in any comparison between the two thinkers is Aristotle's response to Plato's theory of forms. According to Plato, the sensory, physical world is not real. The real, universal world is that of ideas, which exists separately from the particular, sensory world and is only accessible and comprehensible to philosophers. Ideas are universal and allow us to understand phenomena on a more general level. It is the universal idea of a table that allows us to recognise various kinds of surfaces with four legs as tables. Thus, what we perceive to be the real world is only a reproduction of the abstract world of ideas, which is truer and universal. It is beyond change. To stare at a table is not to grasp the concept of a table. When we see a table on stage or in a painting, it follows, we are just dealing with yet another level of reproduction.

Starting from the same point but differing, rather practically, by claiming that the above causes unnecessary duplication, Aristotle proposes that a universal idea is something that resides within the particular phenomena or thing itself as a sort of potential or attainable essence of the thing. So, the idea of a flower is already in the constitution of a seed that is planted. The seed's internal constitution thrusts it to grow towards its natural end, or *telos*, which is the *eidos* and full bloom of the flower. Each thing attempts to fulfil its *telos* as perfectly as possible and the more it fulfils its *telos*, the more actual and less potential it is. Of course, what this perfect or natural *telos* is, especially for something like screenwriting, remains open to interpretation

and the responsibility and final decision of the writer.

As seen earlier, Aristotle has an interest in biology and nature, so this 'teleological' approach (explanation of phenomena by its natural purpose rather than theoretical causes) should not be surprising. It's interesting to note a connection between this idea of growth and the current Western storytelling tradition, which so often demands a constant growth and arc from our main characters.

Similarly, one should note that some of Aristotle's argumentation, interest in empirical evidence and inclusion of the term 'natural' within philosophy also includes that which would eventually be considered natural sciences, e.g. chemistry, biology etc. According to the Metaphysics, all science (dianoia, also translated as thought) falls under one of the following headings: practical (ethics, politics), poetical (poetry and art) or theoretical (metaphysics, mathematics and physics).Therefore, the scope of his inquiry is wider than what later be considered pure philosophy.

Mimēsis

On the subject of poetry, both Plato and Aristotle start along the same lines: poetry is imitative. For Aristotle, poetry pleases people because imitation (*mimēsis)*, also translated as representation) itself is pleasurable and as poetry imitates, it pleases. Imitation is an innate ability of man. It is innate because it enables us to learn. The source of this pleasure is derived from learning something new (even if this effect is 'more temporary than for philosophers'), emotions appropriate for each object (or, genre) and the definiteness of the object (that all of its parts are necessary). Thus pleasure, largely dismissed by Plato as worthless, is cognitive and aesthetic and derives from our fundamental desire for knowledge, to recognise and

understand. Historically, this argument was later reduced to the simplistic notion that it is art's explicit and direct purpose to produce pleasure.

Again, stressing the educational or cognitive part of *mimēsis*, it's good to remember that Aristotle seems to be talking about representation as well as plain imitation. He presents three definitions for mimetic art forms in the Poetics and these serve as a starting point for Aristotle's definition of tragedy:

medium what the art form uses to represent what it represents, e.g. words or colours and shapes: in tragedy, this is language, in spoken meter (speeches) and lyric song.

mode how the art form uses the medium to represent what it represents: in tragedy (and comedy), this is dramatic enactment, using direct speech. This is a comment to Book 3 Plato's the Republic, where he speaks of the modes (narrative, direct speech and a mixture of the two). Aristotle's comment is that tragedy is not narrative. Instead, it is dramatic enactment, with actors playing active roles. In epic, this involves the use of a narrator figure to explain things, instead of more compact, dramatised action.

object what kind of thing the art form represents: in tragedy, this is an action, which is (ethically) serious, complete (whose beginning, middle and end are represented and is therefore not just a snapshot of the action) and of a certain magnitude (endures over time, not an instantaneous action)

Plato's objections to poetry

The educational effects of poetry

So, why write a book on art, its creation and appreciation? Poetry was an integral part of Ancient Greek culture, not only for its religious, recreational but also educational - and, beginning with the Poetics, therapeutic - value. The *kalon* is an ideal and a belief that we can attain a moral education by experiencing poetry - and perhaps also by creating it. In fact, Aristotle even speaks of poetry as being more philosophical than history "because literature deals with the universal, whereas history deals with the particular."

Plato did not write a treatise devoted entirely to poetry, so his thoughts on the subject have to be extracted from several books, especially the Republic, which has helped in creating the notion that Plato was entirely antagonistic towards poetry. This is at best only a half-truth, as reference to poetry is abundant in Plato's body of work. Adding to the confusion, he wrote in the form of letters and dialogues.

It has even been alleged that, through fictional characters in his dialogues, Plato himself doubted that most central tenet of his work, the theory of forms. In the Republic, Plato compares his relationship to poetry to that with 'a beautiful woman, whom he used to love and would like to have back, if she wasn't harmful to him'. Plato seems mostly to be talking about whether poetry itself is a good thing, whereas Aristotle is more focused on what makes a good poem. It's a subtle but crucial difference.

Plato asserts that poetry is of little educational value, because imitative poetry is just an imitation of physical things, which in turn imitate the forms or ideas of those objects. It doesn't lead to a higher knowledge of the world of forms; instead, it appeals to our emotions. Poetry also depicts unworthy people or acts. Therefore poetry has no real educational value, quite the opposite. He pleads or challenges poetry to overcome the rift between philosophy and poetry.

Aristotle counters Plato with the notion that imitation is not just the simple act of imitating far-away, abstract ideas but an innate ability of man and an essential way in which human beings learn. Therefore poetry has a definite educational value, although this is not the explicit purpose of poetry. In book 8 of the Politics, Aristotle makes his case for the diverse educational value of poetry and why youth should be taught music:

"But we maintain further that music should be studied, not for the sake of one, but of many benefits, that is to say, with a view to (1) education (*paiðeia*) , (2) purgation (*catharsis* - the word 'purgation' we use at present without explanation, but when hereafter we speak of poetry, we will treat the subject with more precision); music may also serve (3) for intellectual enjoyment (*ðiagoge*), for relaxation and for recreation after exertion (*anapausis*)."

According to Professor Edward A. Lippman, *ðiagoge* stands for *euletherios ðiagoge*, an ethically suitable lifestyle for a free man. Representing an educational and cultural ideal of leisurely time spent studying the sciences, it is the opposite of *anapausis*, recreation intended for relaxation after exertion, so that you are refreshed and can function in society. *Paiðia*, another term, is reserved for play or recreation for its own sake.

The harmful effects of poetry

According to Plato, poetry is misleading and dangerous as it can by-pass rationality in affecting your mind, arousing intense emotions and allowing you to picture a life different to the one you are actually leading. As this creates an illusion, poetry could potentially damage a person's life. It can

upset people and cause them to act unethically or even cause political instability. In Plato's idealised Republic, only educational literature by the ruling philosophical class would be permitted.

Of Plato's allegation regarding the harmful effects of poetry, where people upset by the emotions stirred up by a tragedy would leave the theatre to wreak havoc in the streets, Aristotle again differs from his mentor. Aristotle provides a radical alternative in his definition of tragedy: tragedy produces catharsis, "the proper purgation of these emotions". Unsettling an audience's emotions can therefore be conceived as having a positive, not negative, effect on people, by either ridding, balancing or purifying negative emotions and leading to a healthier individual - and potentially, society.

Both philosophers agree that it is important to be surrounded by the right kind of role models in society. As an example of something that corrupts morals, Plato claims that poetry relates to us immoral acts performed by gods and heroes. Representing them as flawed, or humanly fallible, is seen as harmful. Considering heroes and role models, Aristotle ends up with a more permissive manner of representing such role models: serious or virtuous characters can be depicted in a unflattering or unkind light if this is necessary. A character's growth over time, and either his success or failure in reaching their telos, is seen as yielding a deeper education and understanding of mankind for the audience. Therefore seeing 'undeserved misfortune' fall upon good men can have an ultimately positive educational effect.

It is worth noting that the above objections by Plato can also be seen as challenges or questions posed to poetry: what sort of values does poetry put across and how does it affect us? Also, what kind of credentials do these poets have in telling us about the world - why should we treat them

like gods or kings?

A screenwriter's inheritance

A screenwriter's inheritance

We have inherited Aristotle's work through generations of scholarly interpretations, often with their own cultural biases or scholarly misunderstandings. The reputation of the book, however, has been so strong that some critics such as the Finnish poet and translator Pentti Saarikoski have commented that "not until Brecht, have we begun to speak of non-Aristotelian literature." Ironically, Brecht's theories too contained their own ambiguities, changed over the years and were not entirely correlative with his playwriting practice.

The Poetics seems hardly to have been read or commented upon in Antiquity, when it remained in the shadow of its other half, the politically more applicable Rhetoric. The text was lost to the Latin-speaking West until the High Middle Ages, when demand for Aristotle's texts grew and translations were commissioned from the original Greek and existing Arabic translations, notably Averroes's (Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd) translation which appealed more to the later Renaissance humanist movement, than the earlier translation by Alpharabius (Abu Nasr al-Farabi), which was an attempt to reconcile the Poetics with logic and Islamic cultural norms.

The new Latin translation inspired C16th Italian Renaissance humanist commentators, who used the Poetics as a part of their project to create a new classical literature in the vernacular. The Italian commentator Castelvetro's 'The Poetics of Aristotle in the Vulgar Language' is often credited with the reduction of Aristotle's 'unity of action' into the more limited 'unity of action, place and time', two-thirds of which we find in the

contemporary slugline and are taught to observe in screenwriting today. From there, many later French and English critics fell under the influence of this interpretation, criticising the 'inferior' work of many playwrights including Shakespeare.

An essential part of the contemporary screenwriting-to-scheduling workflow (INT./EXT., DAY/NIGHT etc.), 'the Unities' serve as a good reminder that little changes or misunderstandings like these can create significant artistic and industrial changes for years to come - and that rules and practices seem to be more malleable and subject to change than we admit to in our daily lives. Incidentally, at the time of writing this in 2014, there has been some renewed interest by US screenwriters John August and Craig Mazin in a sequence-based screenplay format (based on their Fountain syntax) to take over from the current location and time based one.

Reading the Poetics

Reading the Poetics

Parts of the book

1. The parts of the book

The twenty-six chapters of Aristotle's Poetics are often divided into five larger parts or sections, each dealing with a set of subtopics. In the following pages, we will walk through a broad outline of the book, touching upon some of its central questions.

A. The origins and main forms of imitative poetry (chapters 1-5)

Aristotle introduces the topic via the concept of imitation. All forms of poetry are imitation. The poetic arts are distinguished by their medium (for tragedy, this is language), object (for tragedy, an action which is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude) and mode (for tragedy, dramatic enactment, not narrative). Comedy portrays people as worse, tragedy as better than we are. Objects can be imitated by narrating (epic) or through action (tragedy).

Poetry has originated for two reasons: imitation is an innate human ability, which is pleasurable. We learn by imitating. Also natural are the sense of harmony and rhythm. Those who originally had the most, developed their innate abilities and poetry was born of improvisation. The more serious of these imitated noble people (tragedy), and more light hearted those beneath us (comedy). Homer was a great poet not because he imitated well, but because he also imitated dramatically. Epic, in contrast to tragedy, narrates events and uses only one metre. In addition, its length is not fixed, whereas tragedy tends to deal with its subject within 'a single circuit of the sun'.

B. The definition of tragedy and the rules for its construction (chapters 6-22)

The definition and qualitative parts of tragedy (6)

To summarise what has been already been discussed, Aristotle proposes a definition of tragedy and proceeds to analyse its qualitative parts, elements and subspecies, as well as its rules of construction.

"A tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of

narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."

Apart from mere ornamental language, 'language embellished' involves the use of rhythm, harmony and music, which is used in some parts of the play, whereas verse is used in other parts. As tragedy's imitation is realised through active people, not narrative as it is in the epic, must spectacle (*opsis*) be an important part of the tragedy, as too must melody (*melos* or music) and diction (*lexis*), the composition of verses.

To carry out the imitation of action, we need people who are of a type of character (*ethos*) and thought (*dianoia*). Presumably, if we see an animal, spectre, god or other such agent in a prominent role within a play, they will exhibit a human-like quality or character in order to be relatable and elicit emotions from us. Like many terms here, the Greek *ethos* is ambiguous (just as the English *character* is) and it is hard to know what Aristotle meant at each instance.

Interestingly, Aristotle doesn't speak of the opposition of protagonist and antagonist in the same way as we do. In chapter 4 he writes: "Aeschylus first introduced a second actor; he diminished the importance of the Chorus, and assigned the leading part to the dialogue. Sophocles raised the number of actors to three, and added scene-painting."

We judge people based on their actions, and those actions based on character and thought, which cause both the actions and either the success or failure in the peoples' lives. The imitation of action happens in a combination of incidents, or plot (*mythos*, although this term has also been used to represent as a single action in addition to a sequence of incidents). Character guides us in assigning moral qualities to people.

Thought, in general, is how people through their speech reveal their

motivation or intent, voice a universal truth or debate, prove or disprove something. According to Aristotle, these six are the only elements that dictate the quality of a tragedy. Two of these relate to the medium, one to the mode and three to the object of imitation.

The most important of these elements is the plot, as a tragedy is not so much the imitation of people as of life and their actions. Life is action: our goal is to do something, not be like something. People don't act to imitate a character; it is character, out of which action is born. This is a principle from Aristotle's Ethics: people are not simply good or bad, it is their action that makes them good or bad. This principle - 'character is action' - is familiar to us from the work of Syd Field and others, and it is why Aristotle considers plot to be superior to character as only actions reveal the character.

Tragedy is impossible without plot, but it is possible without character. Aristotle notes that reversals (*peripeteia*) and recognitions (*anagnorisis*), which make up 'most of the the tragedy's lure', and which are nowadays also thought of in terms of characters, are parts of the plot. Therefore, the plot is the foundation for a tragedy, its soul - character takes second place. Beginners, he says, as well as early dramatists, more easily master diction and character than they do plot.

Third comes thought, in other words the ability express in words that which is possible and what the situation demands. Prior poets allowed characters to speak in the manner of politicians (here, politics means 'speech about practical issues') and current poets make them speak like rhetoricians (here, rhetorics meaning 'speech about general truths'). Such speeches don't express character and thus don't reveal what the speaker is reaching for, or trying to avoid. Thereafter, in order of importance, come diction, music and spectacle, which has the least to do with poetry as 'it's a

display of the stage manager's skills than the poet's.'

The unity of plot (7-9)

"plot must be a whole and plot must be a unity"

Aristotle now turns to plot, "the most important thing in tragedy … which imitates a completed and whole action whose length is limited". Completed and whole are taken to mean having a beginning, middle and end. A beginning, naturally has nothing before it and something after it; an end comes after something, usually as a 'necessity or usual consequent' and has nothing after it.

As simple as this sounds, it's interesting to note that this description demands a causal relationship. A well composed plot must follow the principles set out by Aristotle; it cannot begin or end just anywhere. A scene must cause the next. Therefore, the parts of plot have to be in the right order and not accidental. In addition, a plot's 'beauty depends on order and size'.

Although, as seen above, Aristotle finds beauty in things of all sizes, in the Poetics he again cites an animal's size as a example regarding the judgement of a plot. "A very small animal is not beautiful because an observation made of it in a very short time remains unclear. An animal that is too large, on the other hand, is too much for the eye to take in at once and the 'unity and wholeness' are lost to the audience."

Likewise with tragedy: although Aristotle favours length over brevity, provided that the audience is able to keep the plot in their memory. The length is right, 'when it permits a sequence of events bound by probability

or necessity, during which a change from misfortune to fortune, or the opposite, happens'.

In his book Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters, Michael Tierno expands on Aristotle's use of necessity and probability: “Incidents of necessity always happen after a given cause of action and propel the story forward, whereas probable incidents are only possible. Necessity and probability give unity to a story."

The unity of the plot (or, action) isn't the same as the unity of the hero. Too many events happen, and actions are taken, during a person's life to make it a coherent whole or for the audience to keep it all in memory: "for infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which cannot be reduced to unity".

Aristotle cites the life of Heracles as an example. Only Homer understood that trying to cover everything that ever happened to Heracles in a single story won't work; one will have to limit the action. Therefore the plot must imitate one more limited, but whole action, whose every part is required. Taking something out will destroy the whole, and if this doesn't happen, the part doesn't belong to the whole.

Even though history and poetry are similar in their use of verse, poets mustn't simply describe what has happened, but what could happen; what is probable or necessary. Historians, on the other hand, merely write about what has happened, the particulars. Poetry is more philosophical than history because it expresses the universal. Even though poetry gives characters particular names, it really tells us what a certain kind of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a certain situation, universally.

To make his characters act as they must or are likely to act in a certain

situation, poets need to have general knowledge about people. Going back to our discussion of *kalon*, the poet therefore needs to know what species (or, genre) the thing is, what its form or goal could be, and what a perfect representative of that species is like.

Good poetry imitates actions and produces emotions appropriate to its particular characters and genre, like tragedy or comedy. It follows, then, that poets should make plots rather than just verse, as they are poets 'on the basis of imitation and the object of imitation is action'. The worst kind of plots are episodic ones, with episodes causally unconnected to one another. These are written either by bad poets, or by good ones humouring actors.

Aristotle finishes off this section by noting that tragedy isn't merely an imitation of a complete action, but specifically an action that arouses fear or pity. If these are linked in an unexpected way, the effect is heightened.

Simple/complex plots (10)

Plots can either be simple, without a reversal or recognition, or complex, including one or both, which are caused necessarily or probably by the structure of the plot and what has happened earlier.

The reversal and recognition (11)

The above prerequisites of necessity and probability echo a central element in Aristotle's thought, namely human agency towards specific goals. To paraphrase Professor Angie Hobbs: "reversals are part of a kind of plot that educates us of the limits of human knowledge and agency."

A reversal (*peripeteia*, or sudden change) is a turn to the opposite in the direction of the action, based on probability or necessity. At the same time, it is also an overturning of the audience's expectations. Recognition (*anagnorisis*, or identification) is a movement or change from ignorance to knowledge, 'producing either love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune'.

For Aristotle, the best type of recognition 'is coincident with a reversal of the situation', but there are other forms. Even an inanimate object can be the object of recognition. Similarly, you can recognise someone having done or having neglected to do something. Nevertheless, for Aristotle, the first mentioned is most suitable for a plot as, connected to reversal, it arouses pity or fear as per his definition of tragedy. These situations will eventually determine whether the end will be a fortunate or unfortunate one.

Linked to recognition is a mistake, miscalculation or error in judgement (*hamartia*) which occurs early in the plot. *Harmartia* doesn't necessarily imply moral failing, as in the case of *hubris*, the pride or defiance that leads to speaking or acting against the gods and for which retribution is given by the god Nemesis (from *némein*, to give what's due). This dimension is also of interest when considering the popular modern opposition of protagonist and antagonist as psychological doubles or mirrors to each other, with the antagonist proudly voicing the hidden 'id' of the protagonist.

Hamartia can also be caused by accident, pure mistake or ignorance. In such cases, it is caused by an act that the person commits because he isn't aware of some circumstance, and this constitutes at least part of his recognition of the truth and reversal of forture and fate. *Hamartia* is a key element in creating tension between character, plot and audience, often called dramatic irony, as the audience knows something one of all of the

characters don't.

So, reversal and recognition are two related parts of the plot, which 'turn on surprises'. There is yet a third one, the scene of suffering or *pathos*. This is described as a destructive or painful act, such as violence on the stage, which happens after the reversal of fortune for the character and helps him recognise the cause of his misfortune, hopefully to overcome it. Incidentally, *Pathos* (or 'awakening emotion') is also mentioned in the Rhetoric as one of three modes of persuation used to lead an audience to a particular opinion as if it were their own.

The quantitative parts of tragedy (12)

The quantitative, separate parts into which tragedy is divided are, in order:

the prologue (*prologos*),
episode (*epeisodion*),
exode (*exodos*) and
choric song (*khoros*), which in turn is divided into the parode (*parodos*) and stasimon (*stasimon*).

These parts are found in all plays, however only some plays include songs by actors from the stage and the commos (*kommos*). "Of the choric part the parode is the first undivided utterance of the chorus: the stasimon is a choric ode without anapaests or trochaic tetrameters: the commos is a joint lamentation of chorus and actors."

Although Aristotle criticises some playwrights for being carefree about the location and utility of their choric songs, e.g. if their place or content is

irrelevant to the plot, and derides the use of a deus ex machina device to tie up loose ends, it is clear to see that the above structure is still a far cry from the rigid, page or plot point specific story structure we are used to and more 'elemental'.

As always, these parts are subject to debate as to what they are referring to. We are used to conceiving things in three act structures, which would then make the prologue, episode and exode the three acts, respectively. This would be neat, particularly considering Aristotle's appeal to only retain parts that work dramatically towards the whole, but the actual infomation given on the subject is slight.

"*The Prologue is that entire part of a tragedy which precedes the Parode of the Chorus.*"

Traditional prologues (for *pro*, before, and *logos*, word or speech) from Antiquity to Elizabethan drama formed a narrative part, which was in part to provide exposition and introduction to the audience and in part to prepare the audience mentally for the experience of a story. So, at times, this part could feel like an entirely separate part and not a part of the story; almost like a preface to a book or an introduction to a speaker or musician, prior to stepping on stage.

In the Rhetoric, Aristotle discusses speeches in a way interesting to us:

"Introduction. The introduction corresponds to the prologue in poetry and the prelude in flute-music. The most essential function and distinctive property of the introduction is to indicate the aim of the speech. An introduction may (1) excite or allay prejudice; (2) exalt or depreciate. In a political speech an introduction is seldom found, for the subject is usually

familiar to the audience."

Although films do include prologues, epilogues and even individual scenes that seem intentionally separate from the film's world, we are often taught to weave expository material directly into the telling, action and world of the film itself, instead of someone narrating it to us. Most crucially, we learn to pack the opening part - whether we call it Act 1, sequence A or 'the setup' - with the most urgent information we need in order to understand the film. The collective assumption must be that this is the only, or the most efficient, way to tell or understand a film.

The latter part, preparing the audience mentally, in interesting in terms of the study of reception and criticism of the media's effect on us. As with Plato's criticism of poetry, we at times hear claims of the dangerous effect of violence, sex and bad role models in films and television. We're told that audiences don't realise that films are fiction. 'Normal' people will get upset and unstable members of the audience go out and commit immoral acts.

In the prologue, although one could see this as patronising, we see a type of introduction that, in part, coaches the audience in how to experience and receive poetry or to paraphrase Jean-Luc Godard: 'it's not blood, it's red'. This opens up a mental space, where the audience is still partly in the real world, conscious of being sent into a realm which will affect them mentally or emotionally.

"*The Episode is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete choric songs.*"

With the episode (*epeisodion*) being the middle part, surely it should essentially equate to what we now call the second act, or in lieu of that, roughly represent the main body of the story? Yet we get very little

description in the Poetics of the constitution of an episode.

Episodes (*epeiɯoδion,* from *epi* - 'upon, in addition' + *eiɯoδoɯ* - 'coming in, entrance' itself from *eiɯ* - into + *hoδoɯ* 'way, to go') which we generally depict as scences, have variously been translated as commentaries, portions of dialogue or 'underplots or parenthetic narratives between two choric songs, which might themselves form distinct wholes'.

Is the episode a scene or a unit like a plot point, a sequence of scenes or an act? 'Episodes' is mentioned in plural form throughout the Poetics, so it is reasonable to assume there are multiple episodes in a tragedy - effectively, to Aristotle, this is a space reserved for episodes.

So, how many episodes? How long are they? What should they include? Well, it's disappointing, yes, but we aren't sure. What we can do, however, is extract information from other sources in Aristotle's work to gain a better understanding of this issue.

In addition to points in the Poetics, mentioned earlier in this text, such as complication and unravelling; beginning, middle and end (on every level of argument in a tragedy); the unities; length of tragedy based on ability to hold plot in memory etc. we can consider the topic of argumentation in book 3 of the Rhetoric, in the same section where the epilogue is discussed:

"Arguments. The duty of the Arguments is to attempt conclusive proofs." For Aristotle, tragedy personifies a different dimension of the same kind of reasoning found in his other work. It presents human agents working towards specific goals, yet educates us on the limits of this agency. The question may therefore be rephrased thus: what (kind, number etc. of episodes) do you need, in order to make your argument (for the tragedy)?

The current state of mainstream screenwriting theory, to generalise, focuses heavily on precise structures e.g. specific numbers of plot points and beats to hit. Many of these theories are taught as 'universal' - true in the past and true in the future - and thus a natural inprovement over past writing processes. This is an understandable refining and filtration of an industry, which has seen a kind of Taylorist development in all of its other sectors as well.

However, screenwriting formats and preferences in structure have varied widely over the history of filmmaking, making it hard to invest fully in any prescriptive theory in the knowledge that these will likely be disproven or discarded in the future. One could argue that good ideas and writing have persevered over time, in all their forms, *despite* industrial or theoretical demands.

Traditional television must currently be written with commercial act breaks and series continuity in mind. Feature writing can largely avoid this, but must still exist within the industrial framework of feature length and generally understood narrative development. Happily - not to knock any of the current screenwriting theorists - there are many writers breaking or bending 'the rules' and focusing on the development of an idea, to return to our discussion of Aristotle.

So, keeping in mind the industry, medium and audience you are writing for: how many episodes? Well, how many do you need to present, develop and conclude your argument, on all the levels you need?

Regarding the length of a tragedy, Aristotle leaves some room for interpretation. In chapter 5, he states: “tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit.”

And, in chapter 7: “so in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory…within such limits, 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.”

"*The Exode is that entire part of a tragedy which has no choric song after it.*"

"It's a complete part - and don't put a song after it"? We often think of a prologue and epilogue as at least potential bookends to a story. As we've seen with the prologue, this part can be seen as either an intrinsic part of the story's early development or a sort of expository add-on that eases the audience into the story and the dramatic experience. With the exode, although we're clearly discussing an ending and conclusion of sorts, we bump into some distinctions between the notions of exode and epilogue, most likely due to different translators.

Exode (*exodos*, from *ex* - ‘out, out of’ + *hodos* ‘way, to go’) is a word used by Aristotle discussing topics as removed from each other as: military excursions and/or withdrawals, several kinds of bodily excretions and death or the departing of the soul. At its simplest, *exodos* can be translated as 'the exit, way out, going out', which in the context of the end of a tragedy would naturally take the meaning of 'the conclusion of the play with all the actors leaving the stage'.

Were it not for Aristotle's desire for a tragedy's parts to contribute towards the whole, this would be clear cut. Describing the exode merely as 'the exit' without this being a conclusion or solution of some sort would seem a little out of character, to pun. Although Exode is used in

translations of the Poetics, it might be of use additionally to consider what Aristotle says of the epilogue.

Epilogue (*epi* - 'upon, in addition' + *logos* - 'word, speech' also translated as 'conclusion of speech') is described in considerable detail in the Rhetoric. An interesting passage in W. Rhys Robert's Modern Library translation of the Rhetoric elaborates on the epilogue's constitution and effect:

"A speech has two essential parts: statement and proof. To these may be added introduction and epilogue."

…

"Epilogue (Peroration, Conclusion). This has four parts. You must (1) make the audience well disposed towards yourself and ill disposed towards your opponent, (2) magnify or minimize the leading facts, (3) excite the required kind of emotion in your hearers, and (4) refresh their memories by means of a recapitulation.—In your closing words you may dispense with conjunctions, and thereby mark the difference between the oration and the peroration: 'I have done. You have heard me. The facts are before you. I ask for your judgement.'"

Tragic action and character: 'how the plot can best produce the emotional effect of tragedy' (13-15)

Aristotle now turns to what a poet should "aim at, and what he should avoid, in composing his plots". Secondly, what are the conditions the effect of tragedy depend on? A good tragic plot must be complex, not simple, and it should imitate actions that arouse pity and fear, not mere shock or disgust, as this is the function of tragic *imitation*.

To simply cast a worthy man into misfortune, or raise a worthless man to fortune is not tragic. Similarly, casting 'an utterly worthless man into unhappiness', whilst pleading to our emotions, does not arouse fear and pity. Left is the man who exists between these two extremes; not particularly virtuous, and whose misfortune is caused not by 'vice of depravity' but some kind of error in judgement caused by ignorance.

"A well constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain" and the hero's change should be from fortune to misfortune, not the other way around. A plot with a double threaded plot, which ends "with different catastrophes" for the good and bad, comes second. Although the latter kind of plot has been considered better traditionally, it is only due to the weakness of audiences, whom poets aim to please. This kind of plot is more suitable for comedy, where "enemies walk off as friends at the close".

Not all kinds of pleasure should be required of tragedy, only those which are proper to it. Fear and pity through imitation cause a pleasure proper to tragedy. These can be aroused by spectacle (*ὄψις*), but it is the mark of a superior poet to arouse these by the structure of the plot (action) itself. The plot should be composed so well, that merely hearing it ("without the aid of the eye") can arouse fear and pity. Therefore, the incidents themselves should cause these emotions, not spectacle, which is the less artistic way.

What kind of incidents do we regard as terrible or pitiful? Such incidents happen between people who are either friendly, hostile or indifferent towards each other. Of the latter two, we do share the pain of the sufferer, but we only feel pity when such an act happens among friends and family. These are the kind of incident the poet should aim for.

In commenting on how to correctly treat such acts in traditional legends, Aristotle also brings up a second point. A terrible act may be committed either aware or unaware of the act's horror. Also, the perpetrator can aim to do something, but restrain from acting. Finally, he may be about to commit an irreparable deed out of ignorance, but realise the truth before the act is carried out. According to Aristotle, these are the only options, 'because the act can either be carried out or not, knowingly or unknowingly'.

One should aim at four points regarding character. Most importantly, charcter must be good (or, noble, *kalon*?). Speech and action 'that manifests moral purpose' expresses character: if the intention is noble, so is the character. Aristotle states that it is possible even for a woman or a slave to be good (NB Aristotle himself was not a 'worthy citizen of Athens').

Secondly, character must be appropriate. For example, a character in a play may be manly, 'but it isn't appropriate in a female character to be manly, or clever.' Notice, also, the character's appropriateness for the genre. Thirdly, character must be true to life. Fourth, is consistency: even if the person imitated is inconsistent and displays such character, must the inconsistency be consistent.

The composition of the plot must always seek what is probable or necessary, so that the person's diction and action are either probable or necessary effects of his character, as must an incident follow another probably or necessarily. Likewise, the final unravelling of the plot (also known as *dénoument*, from the French to unknot) as well as its complication must arise out of the plot and not a sudden *deus ex machina* ('gods from the machinery').

A *deus ex machina* should only be used for incidents or information outside

human knowledge and outside the realm of the play, e.g. events in the past or future that the audience can't see. Only the gods would be omniscient in such matters. Therefore, the action must include nothing that is improbable; if this is unavoidable, it must be left outside the tragedy proper. Tragedy is the imitation of people just above the ordinary man and thus the poet should follow what portrait artists do: imitate their likeness, yet ennoble them to a higher level of beauty.

Appendix to discussion of plot

Types of recognition (16)

Having earlier defined what recognitions are, Aristotle returns to the topic by listing their various types in order of importance:

the best type of recognition relates to the incidents themselves;
next are recognitions that occur by the process of reasoning;
then, those using memory, where a person reveals his emotions as they see something;
after this come 'inartistic recognitions invented by the poet' (e.g. talking with the voice of the poet instead of the plot);
and, finally, recognition by exterior features (which are the least artistic).

Rules for the tragic poet; types of poet, outlining, development (17-18)

In composing the plot, the poet must, as far as possible, place the events in front of his eyes, as if he were present or living them, 'noticing best what is suitable'. Aristotle divides poets into two groups: some are malleable (euplastoi), who write rationally, weighing each word. They correspond,

roughly, to someone born with a favourable nature (eufuous).

The other group of poets are ecstatic (ekstatikoi), who write spontaneously under the influence of inspiration (from the latin inspirare, to breathe or blow into) from some outer force like a god, which causes the birth of the poem. These, in turn, roughly correspond to a manic nature (manikou).

Although poetry is created by people of these two dispositions and ecstatic poets have a strong ability to embody their characters, Aristotle is more in favour of the former type, who are more versatile and can therefore more easily cope with the different emotions that arise throughout a story. Whether the story is traditional or invented by the poet, he should first 'sketch an outline' of the plot. Then, once the poet has given names to the characters, he fills the outline of the plot with episodes that are relevant to the action and 'amplifies in detail'.

Every tragedy 'falls into two parts': the complication (or, problem) and the unravelling (or, solution). The complication, often created by events outside the tragedy, is everything from the beginning of the play to the point that marks the turn to good or bad fortune for the character. Everything from this point forward, to the end of the play, is the solution.

There are four types of tragedies:

complex, based entirely on reversal and recognition,
pathetic (or, tragedy of suffering, *pathos*) based on passion and 'the awakening of emotion',
ethical (or, tragedy of character) based on ethical motives and

simple (or, tragedy of spectacle).

Poets should endeavour to master and combine all, or as many as possible, of these poetic elements as audiences expect more of them, especially in surpassing the work of earlier poets. "Many poets tie the knot well, but unravel it ill."

However, the poet should remember not to make an epic structure (one with a 'multiplicity of plots') into a tragedy. In larger stories, like the Iliad, portions should be selected rather than trying to fit everything into the structure of a tragedy. In addition, the chorus should be regarded as one of the actors and an integral part of the whole, instead of their application as mere interludes, unconnected to the plot.

Thought (19)

Aristotle is left with the subjects of thought and diction in tragedy. Thought (*∂ianoia*) proper falls under the subject of Rhetoric. At times linked with what we now call 'theme' in screenwriting, thought is a broader topic relating to the many levels of what can be expressed through the medium of language. *Dianoia*, general knowledge, is further divided in Aristotle's system into the domains of theoretical and practical knowledge.

As thought is something that Aristotle generally links with rhetorical argumentation and expression, we can see that this concept is equally applicable on the scene level, e.g. in the 'motivation' of dialogue and action, as on the level of a theme for a whole tragedy. "Under thought is included every effect which has to be produced by speech, the subdivisions being,--proof and refutation; the excitation of the feelings, such as pity, fear, anger, and the like; the suggestion of importance or its opposite."

Dramatic incidents (or action) also must compliment the point of view of the dramatic speech and aid in the revelation of its thought, however action must do this 'without the aid of verbal exposition'. The speaker could be rendered unnecessary, if the thought was easy to reveal by mere action alone.

Diction (20-22)

"The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean."

Next, Aristotle speaks of diction (*lexis*), mainly focusing on grammar: what a letter, syllable, noun is etc. To paraphrase a footnote from Pentti Saarikoski's 1967 Finnish translation: 'I've included what Aristotle says about grammar, but the reader may as well take a break and watch some television for a few chapters'. This amusing commentary aside, the topic of diction is nevertheless of some importance, whether seen in terms of elocution or a poet's choice of words.

Although we have already seen Aristotle stress plot over diction and character ("beginners more easily master diction and character than they do plot"), it is important to note that the unique selection of words can in some cases radically change a tragedy (or screenplay). The choice of words appropriate to a world, character or plot - or, indeed, the particular nuances of an actor - can often be the thing that makes an otherwise familiar plot seem particular and memorable.

Aristotle does pay some attention to the selection of words, particularly on the balance of 'current or proper words' and 'unusual, strange or rare

words'. The former kind of words are clear but also very ordinary. The latter, which include usage that is metaphorical or differs from the normal idiom, is raised beyond the commonplace but may turn into jargon or a riddle. "A metaphor is born, when a name is given to something which actually belongs to something else; the transfer of meaning can happen from the general to the particular, or the opposite."

Aristotle stresses the importance of using these modes of expression *appropriately*. Most important of all, is to have a command of metaphor: this is the only thing that cannot be learnt from others and in expressing a poet's capacity to 'perceive the similar in dissimilars' is a sign of the poet's genius.

C. The epic: rules for its construction (chapters 23-24)

Having thoroughly analysed tragedy, Aristotle now makes some comments on epic poetry ('the poetry which merely narrates') and its relation to tragedy. Its construction should follow the same principles as a tragedy, being "a whole and complete action with a beginning, middle and end so that it, like a living organism, produces the right kind of pleasure". Epic, however, deals with a complete period and several people, "however disconnected the several actions may have been".

Epic poetry also has several subspecies: it must be either simple or complex, a 'story of character or suffering' (pathetic) and, apart from song and spectacle, it holds the same parts as tragedy: the reversal (*peripeteia*), recognition (*anagnorisis*) etc. Thought and diction need to follow the aforementioned rules. The epic differs from tragedy in its use of only the 'heroic verse' and its length. Nevertheless, one should be able to watch an epic in one sitting.

The epic has one advantage over the tragedy: due to its breadth, it can imitate several simultaneous actions, furnishing the epic with a grandeur and allowing the poet to utilise a variety of episodes. Like the tragedy, the epic requires 'use of the marvellous'. Improbability is part of the marvellous, and well suited to the epic, as it doesn't present us active heroes. Further, a 'plausible impossibility' is preferable to an 'implausible possibility'. However, improbable events in a story should be left outside the plot whenever possible.

D. Criticisms and counterarguments (chapter 25)

Perhaps anticipating contemporary critique, Aristotle now addresses some critique concerning tragedy. What is permissible in political rhetoric, is different to what is permissible in poetry. A poet must imitate in one of three ways: the way things are or were, how they are said or appear to be, or how they should be.

We should consider what is said, the nature of the person who is saying it (or acting it, e.g. a character) and why they are saying it (e.g. a contradictorily talking poet might be approaching the utterance as part of a dialectic argument). Therefore, we shouldn't criticise a poet for imitating something that appears impossible or hasn't occurred yet; in poetry, a 'plausible impossibility' is preferable to an 'implausible possibility'.

Going back to Plato and Aristotle's debate on the merits of poetry, we can also recall that to Plato, good poetry should imitate things correctly and should not imitate immoral persons or actions. For Aristotle, in contrast, a poem must imitate or represent plausibly what the poet intended to represent and to 'serve the end of poetry itself'.

Aristotle submits that criticism always stems from five starting points, which the above discussion can resolve: things in poetry are either impossible, irrational, morally hurtful, contradictory or contrary to technical and artistic correctness.

E. Tragedy as artistically superior to epic (chapter 26)

Finally, based on this extensive analysis, Aristotle comes to the conclusion that tragedy is superior to epic as a form of poetry. Tragedy has everything epic has, is enjoyable both when read as well as performed, is more compact and unified and therefore has a stronger impact and is therefore more pleasurable for its audience.

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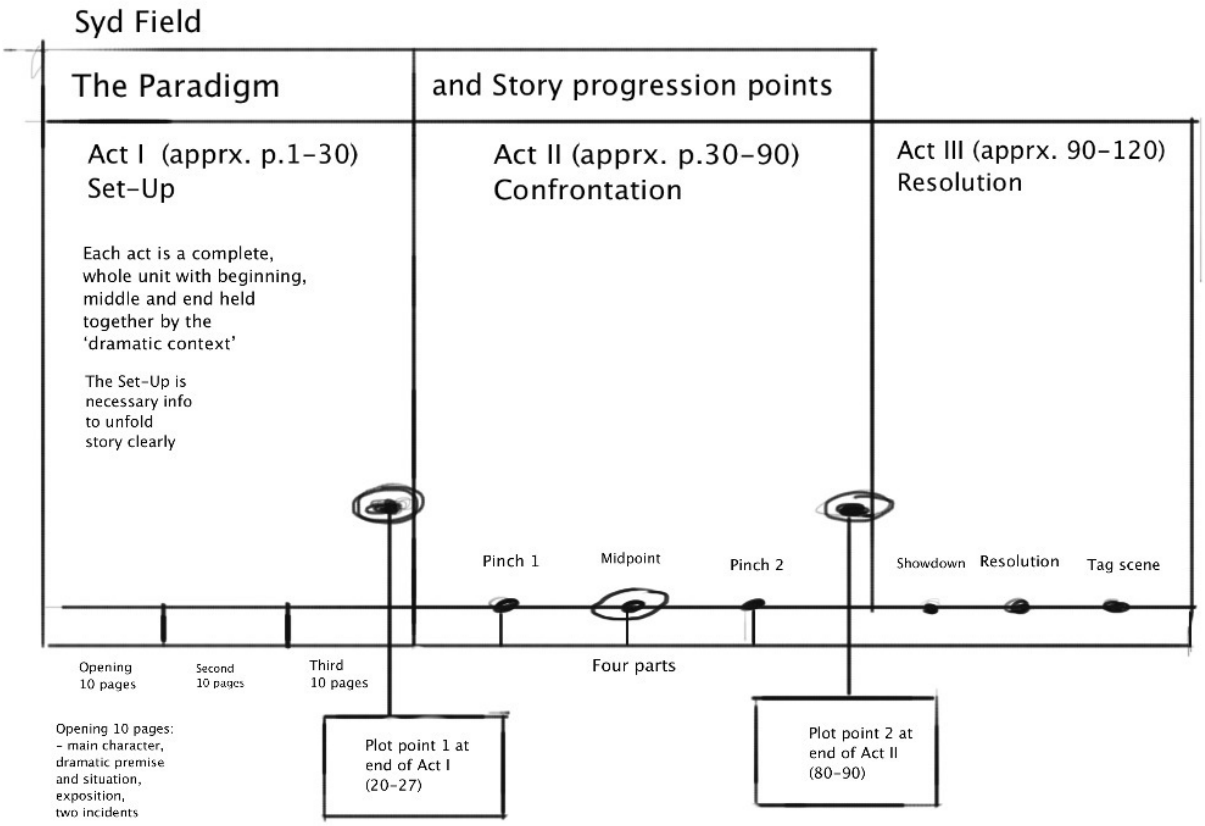
Michael Tierno: Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters

Syd Field's Screenplay (1979)

Field's Paradigm

Syd Field's Screenplay paradigm



Love him or hate him, Syd Field is often the name that first comes up when people speak of screenwriting theory or gurus. There are seemingly two Syd Fields: one who relishes the art and craft of film and what it can do to elevate the human race; who emphasises depth and the avoidance of cliché; who quotes his mentor Jean Renoir: "perfection is only ana idea"; who states that you either have talent or not and that this is beyond his humble capacity as a teacher - and the one who re-iterates nuances in a

constantly perfected screenwriting paradigm with very few mechanical parts to learn.

He is also the king of reduction: Field polishes and reduces his core tenets over the course of books, videos and workshops and computer applications to the point of zen-like minimalism. Although he speaks very passionately and in detail about the more subtle levels of writing (NB his favourite stage: redoing dialogue) and avoiding cliché, the core elements of his work and process remain, as he too would say, simple and simple to master.

Although many items on his list of [screenwriting elements] are essentially not new - as he himself states -, Field's legacy is that of a passionate teacher as well as a clever marketer of a systemic, product-like screenwriting approach that has affected us all, future screenwriting gurus and practitioners, lovers and haters alike.

Preparation - subject, storyline and paradigm

Preparation - subject, storyline and paradigm

Idea > subject (line)

Syd Field's screenwriting system begins quite naturally with a seedling idea. For Field, however, an idea is only a passive, 'vague notion', which needs to be made active and structured. The essence of this idea must be extracted into what he calls the subject or subject line. This subject line is not your whole story, but what the story is about: it consists of two elements: action and character.

Subject (line) > storyline and onto paradigm

The storyline leads Field to define a couple of central terms in his thought: structure, dramatic context, plot points, all of which add up to what he calls the paradigm.

Structure, summarised by Field, means 'to build or put something together…the relationship between the parts and the whole'. In a story such as a screenplay, such essential building parts would include scenes, sequences, acts, characters and so on. These are fixed together in a whole Field calls The Storyline. Structure, he claims, is like gravity and what holds everything together.

The natural fact that most things, like stories, have a beginning, middle and end, is used by Field in following the common convention of breaking a screenplay up into Acts I-III. These three acts themselves express 'contexts', which like a space hold the content of the act together, like a strand of pearls on a necklace. The contexts of the acts are, in order:

Set-up (Act I) - setting up your characters, dramatic premise and situation (a conceptual description of what the story is about) and relationships between the characters

Confrontation/conflict (Act II) - rooted in your character's essential dramatic need ("what they want to win, gain, get or achieve"), the majority of the screenplay revolves 'contextually' around the ability of the character to overcome the obstacles in the way of this need - or fail in doing so.

Resolution (Act III) - "Resolution means solution. What is the solution to your story?" This concerns how the story unravels and is solved, and is separate from the literal end scene or sequence.

The moment that the acts turn into another he calls plot points. His definition for these points, the purpose of which are to move the story forward, is "any incident, episode or event that hooks into the action and spins it around into another direction". Although a story will have many plot points, at this stage of developing a story, Field focuses on two main plot points: numbers I and II.

A paradigm, to Field, is "a model, example or conceptual scheme." He cites an example recognisable from Plato's theory of ideas, whereby the paradigm of a table is 'a top with four legs'. He continues to describe various kinds of tables that fit under that description. Screenplays are no different, although their details and fine details change. "The paradigm itself doesn't change; it's still a top with four legs."

Laid out on a simple version of Field's paradigm, they would look like the above illustration.

In developing the subject line into the storyline, Field suggests starting by determining the ending: how does the story end? How does it resolve? If you don't know, how would you wish it to end?

After this, do the same for the opening, then plot points I and II. Remember the contexts of each part as well as the function of the plot points in furthering and spinning the story in a new direction.

The tools of creating character

All drama is conflict/Character is action

At this point, Field (in different incarnations of his thought, books, workshops and computer applications) either moves on to developing the storyline further via a 'narrative treatment' or index cards, or as we'll do here, character development. In this area, Field uses a lot of exercises, including free association and character biographies, to generate material.

In his books, Field draws inspiration from many diverse writers such as Hegel (whose dialectic logic can be seen inspiring conflict in scenes) and Joseph Campbell's The Power of Myth to Henry James's The Art of Fiction and The Art of Illumination and Aristotle's The Poetics, and the latter two have especially influenced Field's understanding of character and the notion that 'all drama is conflict' and 'character is action'.

As Field puts it:

"All drama is conflict," Field states, "Without conflict you have no character. Without character you have no action. Without action you have no story. Without story you have no screenplay… Action is character. Film is behaviour."

To paraphrase James: ""What is character but the determination of incident…what is incident but the illumination of character?" and "the incidents you create for your characters are the best ways to illuminate who they are."

Henry James also wrote, in The Theory of Illumination, of the character occupying a centre of a circle shared with all the other characters he interacts with. Upon each interaction, the other characters can "reveal, or illuminate, different aspects of the main character."

Dramatic need, four essential qualities of a character and the midpoint
Waldo Salt's technique of first creating a simple dramatic need for a character, one that is clear enough to strike a universal chord 'in the Everyman' and expresses the essence of the character, but upon which one could add layers of detail and colour, resonated in Field.

Similarly, working with Sam Peckinpah, Field discovered how useful structure could be in the development of character. Field had already learnt the importance of a strong, eye catching opening while working on documentaries at David Wolper Productions. However, in the middle of writing the Wild Bunch, Peckinpah told Field how he likes to hang his stories around a centrepiece - he'd build the action up to a specific event in the midpoint of the screenplay and let everything subsequent be 'a result of that event'.

Further working with Peckinpah and reading his Major Dundee screenplay, Field came to a conclusion about the essential qualities of good characters, of which there are four:

- the characters must have a strong and defined need

- and a (strong) individual point of view
- they should personify an attitude
- and go through some kind of change or transformation

As an exercise, you might write short texts on each of the above points. This starting point, and basing characters on action, will give you a good head start in creating strong characters.

Creating a character at Sherwood Oaks
One of Field's favourite exercises at Sherwood Oaks Experimental College was creating a character together with the class. Everyone collaborated over a couple of hours in creating the character, with a need and an action, out of which the story idea would emerge. Field would ask the students questions and the material would be formed into an idea, although he notes that this technique would sometimes produce interesting material, sometimes not.

Character biography
- Field uses writing exercises a lot: combining flow of consciousness and free association with broad directions to generate material that you can edit later. He recommends starting with 5 or so pages on the character in general: their name, where they were born, the character's parents and their vocation, siblings. Then, he suggests further texts to develop the character's first 10 years, second ten years and third ten years, focusing on what we generally take as the interests, thoughts and conflicts - both external and internal - during those ages. You might even try writing in first person, but only if it works for you, but most of all - "have fun."

Definition: backstory versus biography

Field makes a distinction between biography and backstory. The latter is what happens "your main character a day, week or an hour before the story begins". It deals with specific events that "charges the beginning of your screenplay with energy and emotional tension… it should influence the opening scene of your screenplay."

The two kinds of research: live and text

- Live research, e.g. interviewing people
- Text research e.g. using libraries, newspapers or archives - material that sheds more light on your subject.

Short essays on the three Ps or areas of character's life during the screenplay

1. The character's professional life
- what do they do for a living, what are their professional relationships like?

2. The character's personal life
- are they in a relationship?

3. The character's private life
- what do they do privately or when they're alone?

Similarly, think about two other aspects of the character's life:
The internal aspect (from birth to present): this emotional life forms character

and

the exterior aspect (film's beginning to end): this physical life reveals character, through defining the character's need and revealing character through action ("action is character").

Short essay on the circle of being

- define a life-shaping incident that happened to the character around the age of 12-18, which can pop up externally (as an action) or internally (e.g. as a motivation) during the screenplay, causing change. Cf. with the 'Key Incident', which can also happen before the story.

Treatment aka narrative synopsis/Index cards

General
- as you have gathered a good deal of material, through plot, premise and character, you are ready to write, as Field calls it, a four terrible page treatment, a kick in the ass exercise'. "Dare to be terrible." "The idea is to start the process, not complete it." This text is for you only, not for a pitch or presentation.

- Although this can be seen as an alternative to an outline or 3 x 5 index cards, which Field prefers you to end up with (even if writing a treatment), as the later writing process uses them.
- Field's different books, DVD workshops and computer applications place the narrative treatment before character development, some after. We will choose to write it after character development, as you now have a richer variety of material to draw from, but you can also finish this section directly after completing your storyline.

The two distinctions
- At this stage, Field notes two distinctions necessary in writing the narrative treatment: 'dramatising and summarising'. Dramatising is creating "a dramatic recreation of a particular scene or sequence, like the opening scene or plot point I & II. [It] dramatizes a specific incident, episode or event, with some dialogue, if needed." To contrast, "the narrative synopsis refers to summarizing the action."

These two approaches provide a dynamic way to dramatise short, vibrant parts of your screenplay and summarise other, longer parts, so that you present your story as a coherent, brief and entertaining whole.

The four page treatment
Starting with what you have already written in your bare bones storyline: the ending, beginning and plot points I and II, we will now write a four page treatment of a little more detail. Remember, again, to follow the character's need and action and that obstacles in the story can either be

internal or external.

Page 1
- In half a page, write the opening scene or sequence in a dramatic narrative
- In half a page, summarise the action that occurs in Act 1

Page 2
- In half a page, write the plot point at the end of Act 1 in a dramatic narrative

On a separate sheet of paper:
- In one page, list four obstacles that your character(s) confront during the action of Act 2. They can be internal, external, mental, physical - most will be a combination of these.

Page 2
- In one paragraph, summarise each of the obstacles your character encounters and deals with during Act 2

Page 3
- In half a page, write the plot point at the end of Act 2 in a dramatic narrative

Page 4
- In half a page, summarise the action of Act 3, the resolution
- Finally, in half a page, write the end scene or sequence in a dramatic narrative

As you can clearly see, the dramatise and summarise approach is quite useful in organising large areas of story, leaving further detailed work for a later stage. You have now ended up with a four page, fairly detailed map of your story's progression, which is rooted in the character's inner need.

Writing - writing the screenplay

Having completed your subject line, storyline, character development and four page treatment (outline or index cards), we have finally departed Field's preparatory stage and entered the writing stage proper. During this stage, Field starts with 3 x 5 index cards. Strictly speaking, some might consider this a bit of an overlap stage, but we will follow suit and presume that you will be condensing your treatment onto 3 x 5 cards for the following steps.

Writing the screenplay

At this point it is necessary to unveil Field's full paradigm and its 'plot points/story progression points' as well as provide his description of scene and sequence (of scenes). As with all screenwriting theories, laundry lists of requirements are to be taken with a pinch of salt, but here are Field's descriptions.

Although Field says that:
"The scene is the single most important element of a screenplay." (chapter 10) and
"…the sequence is perhaps the most important element of the screenplay." (chapter 11)

he also says, quoting his mentor Jean Renoir:
"Do I contradict myself? Then I contradict myself." (chapter 12)

A scene is:
- one element of necessary information
- moves story forward or reveals information about character
- if neither, delete

- something specific happens towards the above
- context > content
- must know what happens within and between the scenes
- TO READ: 'elements' of scene
- don't need to show the entire scene: enter late, leave early

A sequence is:

- a series of scenes connected by one single idea with a definite beginning, middle and end: it's the backbone or skeleton of your script.
- usually expressed with a word or two ('the context')
- once the context has been established, you can build it with content
- sometimes, your four elements (end, beginning, plot points I and II) are the sequence.
- can be written any way you wish
- sequences can have sub-dramatic contexts, like the dramatic contexts of Acts I - III
- no specific number of sequences in a screenplay - the idea behind them is what matters.

The screenwriting workshop process

From Preparation (as already covered) to Writing

- look to your prep work and start with the cards that you have already in your storyline, and those which you can comfortably fill in first. Remember that you are always heading for the plot point of each Act.
- Although we have written out a four page treatment, Field suggests the use of 3 x 5 cards: you use 14 cards per 30 pages, working on one act at a time

- You will start with too many index cards, that's ok - pair them down: how few can you tell your story with?
- Use only 1 card per scene, later on you can fold scenes into sequences on a single card.
- on each card, write only the basic idea of the scene of sequence: five words or so of description to aid in your writing.
- Field stresses that building your screenplay is a different process to actually writing your screenplay: be loose and have fun at this stage, don't cut off your options at this stage, stay flexible.

Act I - opening ten pages

- Act I is apprx. pages 1-30. It's broken into 14 index cards. Its dramatic context is: Set Up - information necessary to unfold the story clearly.
- In his description of the writing process, Field places very heavy emphasis on Act I versus the other acts and stresses consideration of the script reader and 'keep turning pages'
- once you have fixed down your plot points on 14 cards, write out the act.

The first ten pages contain the following plot points:

Opening Image

- an image or action with which you visually grab the attention of the audience. Preferably, it can encapsulate or summarise the entire film.

Exposition

- the provision of background on the characters, their lives, the world of the film, plot and theme.

Inciting Incident / Key Incident (Field's Two Incidents)

- the two incidents, or at least the inciting incident, occur during the first ten minutes
- The two incidents provide the foundation of the story line.The inciting incident sets the story in motion and the key incident establishes the story; it is the dramatic premise executed.

Inciting incident:

- Field quotes the New World Dictionary: "Incident: A specific occurrence or event that occurs in connection to something else."
- a life-changing event or point in the story, where the main character or protagonist is confronted with the central problem that they must overcome.
- may be spread over several events; character or action driven
- grabs your attention and is the visual representation of the key incident ('what the story is about')
- is a (Hegelian) dialectic conflict between two points of view, two truths/ rights, to a logical conclusion.
- sets the story in motion: once we've established the inciting incident, the story begins.
- may reveal the protagonist's dramatic need.

Key Incident:

- "the inciting incident always leads us to the key incident, the hub of the storyline and engine that powers the story ahead - it reveals visually what the story is about and initiates the emotional journey."
- Many times, the key incident and plot point I are the same
- key incident may have occurred in the past, before the screenplay
- 'key incident' is described and mentioned several times in Screenplay, but really not in Field's workshop DVD, Problem Solver etc.
- Premise vs. Key Incident: both concern 'what it's about', but the

Premise is a conceptual description whereas the key incident is a specific scene or sequence and dramatic visualisation of what the story is about.

- the inciting incident and key incident are related, but not always in the same way - it depends on the story you're telling.

Act I - second ten pages

- at this point, Field has not much more to suggest, but "follow the focus of your main character"

Act I - setting up plot point I

Plot Point I

- the 'hook and spin' at the end of Act I, an unexpected event that occurs and finally projects the protagonist out of their 'normal world' (to use Campbell's terminology). Similarly, in line with Campbell, Field calls plot point I "the true beginning of your story".
- Note Field's definition of plot point: "an incident, episode or event that hooks into the action and spins it around in another direction; moves the story forward; holds the paradigm in place.
- There are many plot points but you only need to know the basic four to structure your early storyline (ending, beginning, plot points I and II).

Act I - third ten pages

- Field doesn't elaborate on this space much, however we're dealing with the build up and culmination to the plot point I spin into Act II.

Act II

- Act II is apprx. pages 30-90. It's broken into 14 + 14 index cards. Its dramatic context is: Confrontation/Conflict
- always enter by defining the character's need
- then, define the midpoint
- define the two pinch scenes or sequences
- use free association with the index cards, remembering the context or conflict and confrontation; do the first half, then the second half
- now write out Act II, one part at a time

Pinch I

- the first pinch scene or sequence occurs about halfway through the first part of Act II, and acts as a thematic reminder of the central issues and conflict in the screenplay.

Midpoint

- calling to mind the Peckinpah idea of 'hanging your stories around a centrepiece', building the action up to that midpoint and letting everything that follows be a consequence of that event.

Pinch II

- the second pinch scene or sequence occurs around halfway through the second part of Act II, again as a continued reminder (from the first pinch) of the central thematic issue in the screenplay.

Plot Point II

- the 'hook and spin' at the end of Act II, an unexpected reversal that occurs and finally hurls the protagonist towards his antagonist in a serious confrontation that can only be resolved in one of two ways: clear success or

failure (and return to the normal world, again using Campbell's terminology).

Act III

- Act III is apprx. pages 90-120. It's broken into 14 index cards. Its dramatic context is: Resolution
- Field suggests writing down one or two unresolved items from Act II, then defining and articulating them on 14 cards
- Then, articulate the ending visually: does it still work?
- start writing out the act.

Showdown

- well into Act III, the decision and/or events in plot point II culminate in the confrontation of the protagonist and antagonist (whoever represents the main thematic issue or problem for the protagonist).

Resolution

- the resolution of the main conflict and issues, for better or worse.

Tag

- the tag scene, as Field calls it, is a short break at the end of Act III, which ties up any loose ends for the audience. The term dénouement, which is often used here, comes from the French to unknot/untie/unravel and refers to the knotted strands of plot and character issues being unravelled at the end.

Writing - rewriting

Writing - rewriting

"Writing is re-writing." or to paraphrase Field's mentor Jean Renoir "true art is in the doing of it." The final part of Field's writing process, here, concerns developing, editing and polishing your freshly written but overly long first draft. He reminds us that screenwriting is a process which shapes itself as you proceed.

Stage 1 is re-reading

Going back to your finished first draft and reading it as a dramatic work, as objectively as you can, without taking notes and tearing the work apart.

Stage 2 consists of writing three essays

Again, Field believes in generating a lot of pages of text relying on intuition, free association and intrinsic talent.

essay no. 1

- two pages or so on the question: what originally attracted you to this idea? Writing loosely, bad grammar and all, try to locate your original impulse for the work.

essay no. 2

- now that you have re-connected to your original impulse, write honestly about what kind of screenplay you have created or ended up writing. Compare the original intention and the resultant work.

essay no. 3

- going by the notion that "the intention must equal the result," Field now asks you to write on the following question: "What do you have to do, to change what you did do, into what you originally wanted to do?" He also reminds us that what you have ended up with might actually be better than what you set out to do: in this case, you might have to go back in the story to change or re-order elements, especially in Act I, so that they "have one fluid line of action."

Stage 3 is breaking down your screenplay into acts and re-writing as individual units of dramatic action no longer than 30 pages long. In this stage, Field suggests working on your screenplay as follows:

- Rewrite Act 1 as a unit of dramatic action, making notes in the page margins as you read. If you feel that you need to re-write large parts of Act I, you can use your 14 cards to restructure the action and plot points: "re-lay out the story line if you have to - that is the purpose of the rewrite."

- Rewrite the first half of Act 2 as above. Field notes that "most of the necessary changes may be from Plot point 1 to Pinch 1, as that is often where the story goes off-track."

- Rewrite the second half of Act 2. Here, Field makes few comments, noting that "you've probably found your creative rhythm about this time."

- Rewrite Act 3. As a separate note, Field stresses that you "smooth the rough edges and keep the storyline moving forward."

This stage, which Field calls the second, or mechanical, draft, should take from three to six weeks, writing one unit at a time. It's just about trying to fine tune and even out the rough edges of your story and to solidify it into "a single line of dramatic or comedic action."

Stage 4 is the polishing draft, working on the scene level

Your screenplay is probably a bit long, despite the work you've put into it. The next stage is called the polish draft (third draft). His favourite draft, this is where Field suggests we invest in detail work: characterisation, dialogue, visuals, concision.

This final assignment is concerned with the reading experience:
- look at your scenes: what can be tightened and strenghtened?
- are there any missing scenes?
- how do your transitions work?
- does the storyline flow smoothly from the beginning of the screenplay to its end?

Once you have gone to the extra effort at this final level, you should expect your screenplay to look its best. As a final pep talk, Field reminds us of the task we have mastered. We have taken a sapling idea, developed it into a strong storyline, and further into a full blown screenplay. The experience of writing and the fulfilment of achieving what we set out to do is reward enough. He reminds us, the readers, that "god's gift, either you've got it or you don't, but that shouldn't interfere with the experience of writing. Writing brings its own rewards."