

Robert McKee Story Seminar Notes (Part II)

DAY II: THE PRINCIPLES OF STORY DESIGN

Story Design: Aids to Telling Story

Note: For a full outline of the daily agenda of McKee's three-day seminar see:
<http://mckeestory.com/outline.html>

Setting and character

- 1) Work: what does the character do? How to show? Most work dull to watch
- 2) Politics: what are the politics of the story
- 3) Rituals: What are they ie family—dinner, driving
 - Morals/ethics/laws
 - Genre conventions
 - Back story: previous significant events in character history

Design of the cast

polarize the cast

- network of contradictory characteristics
- different reactions to singular events essential
- maximizes opportunities for conflict

Object of desire

restores balance in protagonist's life and creates a conscious desire which in turn creates an active pursuit; generally creates a contradictory unconscious desire too
—this is the spine of the story

- stories take the essential form of quest
- understanding what the character wants is key: must be one thing
 - What, if you gave it to the character would stop the story?

this is the object of desire

Inciting incident

- hooks the audience
- births the obligatory scene (the crisis)
- sparks the central plot
- also present in subplots
- radically upsets the balance of powers in the central character's life

Timeline for inciting incident

- Inciting incident usually occurs within the first 30 minutes to get a reaction of the kind you want
- a delayed inciting incident requires an early subplot
- hard to write: consider what is the worst thing that could happen to the protag?
- How could it be the best? Another approach would be vice versa
 - inciting incident is relative to genre

Progressive complication

- conflict propels story
- writing is a temporal act akin to music
- poses question of how to move audience through time without making audience aware of time passing
- conflict is key; constantly passing points of no return

Law of Conflict

- gives interest to the audience
- when conflict dissipates, the eye leaves the screen
- we are universally in a state of perpetual conflict at some level
- start with a minimal, conservative action to gain object of desire
- if obstacle encountered, more energetic, riskier actions required to achieve goals
- to avoid repetition attack from as many angles as possible

Levels of conflict

- 1) Inner-novelistic:
- 2) Personal: ie soap opera
- 3) External: physical, social

The best approach for an emerging writer:

- relatively simple
- small cast; conflict on all three levels
- can be very complicated even if deceptively simple

Act structure

- an act ends with a major reversal
- three act design
- basically 120 minutes

Act I: ends at 30 min

Act II: ends at 95 min

Act III: 115 min followed by short denouement

- note the long second act, roughly an hour
- sub plots can carry the audience through Act II
- or add another major reversal in Act II, basically making a four act play

-Kramer Vs Kramer an excellent example of a three-act movie

Sub-Plots

Types (missed some notes here, so it's best to refer to McKee's book)

- contradictory
- parallel/mirror
- complication

-McKee recommends The Verdict as good example of sub-plotting

Turning points

- both major or minor obstacles
- character's choices under pressure

Effect on audience

- surprise
- curiosity
- insight
- new direction

-30-40 turning points in typical film

-turning points define writer's vision

Set-ups/Pay-offs

- answer to question why
- after pay-off met, it becomes the next set-up and so on

Principle of Choice

- a binary opposite such as good/evil or right/wrong is no choice at all. The character will always make the right choice according to his POV
- **true choice is a dilemma**

Story

- cycle of rising tension
- rising action broken by scenes, subplots, etc.
- act structure lends itself to this technique
- after reversal, drop tension then build: pacing is key
- should be a sense of inevitability between inciting incident and climax, connected by spine

- within this unity must be as much variety as possible, else the law of diminishing returns kicks in

- **key to variety is research**

- rhythm and tempo adds to variety as well
- if your scenes are running an average of 5 mins, you have a glacial pace
- Entering and exiting of major characters , however, can create something analogous to new scene ie “French Scene”
- act climax is generally long and tense: major reversal

Principle of Antagonism

- your character is only as compelling as the forces of antagonism make them
- compels your character to become fully realized
- protagonist *should only have a chance* of succeeding

How do you know if your antagonist is up to par?

Schema for creating effective antagonism : **Negation of the negation**

- Negation of the negation is the strongest point of antagonism
- Follows this generally schema:

Positive---contrary---contradictory---negation of the negation

- Examples:
- Love-----indifference---hate-----self-hate
- Justice---unfairness-----injustice-----tyranny

How to reach the negation of the negation?

- take the contradiction and add a lie ie hate to self-hate

Crisis

The obligatory scene that reveals the protagonist’s true character

- choices — will power tested
- at climax you can pry open that “gap “ one more time, but very difficult
 - can be very satisfying for both the audience and the writer’s pocketbook

Climax

- A scene that is saturated with meaning, hence emotion
- most powerful transition of values; enormous pivot in values
- subplots can climax simultaneously, but if not possible end in order of importance
- give the audience what it wants, but not in the way they expect

So what does it want?

-emotional satisfaction

- surprise ending is not the same ie Sixth Sense; cheap surprise=the mind fuck ending
 - cheap surprise relies on withholding a fact
- great climax—Fight Club
- ending a combination of image and truth: controlling idea
- final image that sums up all meaning and emotion

Resolution

- perhaps end a sub-plot
- a social event which brings all the characters back
- create a slow curtain

Telling the Story

Exposition

- way it's handled separates pros from amateurs
- should be invisible
- show don't tell
- let characters use what they know as ammunition in your story
- characters know their world and act accordingly
- parse out exposition
- only give it to audience when they need it. Not before
- get ahead of audience
- keep them in the dark

- too much exposition tips your hand too early
- secrets come out when people are facing the lesser of two evils dilemma
- if starting in media res, inciting incident should be close to the point in time at which the story starts
 - avoid “table-dusting”; having characters tell each other what they both already or should already know