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28 Tricks from Film School

Because you can learn a lot from movies

You can learn a lot about writing from watching films, and learning from the creative process used to make movies. With both film and print, an author is trying to tell a story and get an audience to keep watching/reading. Some of the tircks for writing of course come to us from long before there were movies. However, many of these tricks are easier to see now that we have movies we can use as examples.The following tricks are taken from a book called: *101 Things I Learned in Film School.* I can also guarrantee the tricks in this book are good and useful, since I am a writer and my daughter graduated from a nationally recognized Film School (UNC School of the Arts – Go Fightiong Pickles!). So Enjoy …

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Show, don't tell.

Film is primarily a visual medium; almost everything that needs to be communicated about a story and its characters is better shown than explained. Visual cues, when well conceived, will demonstrate the unseen—inner psychology, hidden histories, and emotional conflicts—far better than direct explication will. And if you show it rather than tell it, you will leave more screen time for more important things.

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Start late.

A movie story should start as late as possible and occur over the shortest reasonable span of time. A film that uses too much time setting up the ordinary world of the characters or that spreads over three weeks a story that can be told in three days will feel slack.

In individual scenes, don't waste valuable time on unnecessary entrances and hellos. See if a scene can be started in the middle. A screenwriter or director who is willing to self-edit will often find that a scene is strengthened by cutting the first two, and often last two, lines of dialogue.

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Make psychology visual.

Change of focus: A character in sharp focus walking into a blurry crowd might be suggestive of an uncertain future. A character walking from a blurred background into a sharp foreground might be getting his values or priorities "in focus."

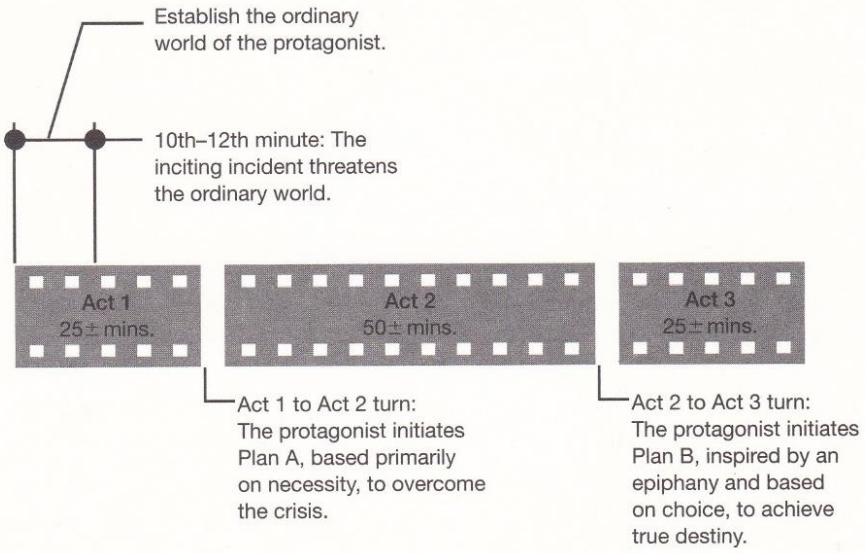
Low angle camera: A view looking up at a character will make him or her appear powerful. Also known as a "hero shot."

High angle camera: looks down on a character to convey his or her powerlessness or insignificance.

Tilted (Dutch) angle: The horizon is skewed or tilted from horizontal, suggesting that something is amiss or off-balance—physically or psychologically.

Over-the-shoulder: may suggest a character in a vulnerable, ripe-for-attack position.

Jitter/hand-held shot: can project a sense of being overwhelmed while at the center of turmoil, such as a busy emergency room or crime scene.



Common three-act structure for feature-length American films

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Beginning, middle, end.

Whether working out the broad concept of a new story, figuring out the particulars of a film during production, or editing a story in post-production, efforts should almost always be directed toward establishing and reinforcing a three-act structure.

Act 1: Establish the problem. Show the *ordinary world* of the protagonist, introduce the inciting incident that disrupts it, and make the stakes clear and compelling should the protagonist fail.

Act 2: Complicate the problem. The conflict grows deeper and broader, and the initial response by the protagonist proves inadequate.

Act 3: Resolve the problem. Events reach their inevitable climax and resolution.

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The antagonist subverts the truth.

A true "hero" has truth on his or her side. Knowing this, the antagonist usually seeks to subvert the truth. Often, the protagonist and antagonist fear the same truth. In a romantic comedy, where the antagonist—the protagonist's romantic interest—is typically friendly, the truth being subverted is a realization or admission of love.

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A high concept movie can be explained in one sentence.

Selling a movie or TV idea is difficult, but it's far easier when you can articulate its premise in a one sentence logline, for example:

- A billionaire weapons inventor dons an indestructible, high-tech suit of armor to fight terrorists. (*Ironman*)
- A woman has twenty minutes to gather 100,000 Deutschmarks or her boyfriend will be killed. (*Run Lola Run*)
- A man ages backward while his beloved ages forward. (*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*)
- A curmudgeonly weatherman keeps waking up on the same day. (*Groundhog Day*).

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Have a strong *but*.

A clear *but* in a movie's premise is essential to a successful Act 2. For example, "Mamie promises the mob she will deliver a drug shipment from Colombia to Italy, but she's afraid of flying." A premise without a strong *but* will lack sufficient tension, conflict, irony, or humor to carry the middle of the film, while a strong *but* will lead to an Act 2 in which the essential conflict of the film plays out naturally.

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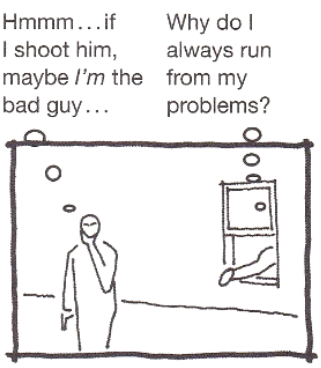
Story concerns the specific characters in a film; *theme* concerns the universal human condition.

A theme is a truth about life that is embedded in and emerges from the experience of a film. Themes always relate to the struggles and power of the human spirit: honesty is the best policy; love conquers all; one voice makes a difference; be true to who you are; be careful what you wish for.

A film may have more than one theme; in fact, a film's maker and its viewers may differ on which is the essential one.

Plot



Story

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Plot is physical events; *story* is emotional events.

Plot is what happens in a movie; story is how the characters feel about what happens. In *The Dark Knight*, the plot sets good guy against bad guy, as Batman seeks to protect Gotham City from the deranged Joker. But the story of *The Dark Knight* is the moral crisis Batman faces in risking his reputation for a greater good.

Tell a story at different scales.

A full range of shots (called "coverage") conveys a variety of information and emotions, provides visual interest, lends rhythm and pacing, and gives a director more choices during editing.

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Wide Shot (WS; also called Master Shot or Establishing Shot): a broad view that places the action in a physical context the viewer can fully grasp.

Full Shot (FS; also called Long Shot): frames a person from head to toe; frequently used for an entrance, exit, or "walk and talk" (following a character).

Medium Shot (MS): shows a character from the waist up; primarily used for two or three characters in conversation.

Medium Close-up (MCU): shows a character from the shoulders or chest up; used for more intimate conversations.

Close-up (CU): shows a character from the neck up; commonly used to capture one side of an intimate conversation or reveal facial detail.

Extreme Close-up (ECU): shows a character (or object) in great detail, usually the eyes and nose; can show subtext, irony, dishonesty, or detailed activity such as putting on makeup.

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Props reveal character.

A prop is any object physically handled by an actor, including elements of wardrobe. Props not only make a set more lifelike and believable, but inform on character and back-story.

In *Seven*, Morgan Freeman's character has a metronome beside his bed. Its ticking rhythm comforted him and helped him drift off to sleep. But more significantly, the prop conveyed his desire, as an overworked city police detective, to control one noise in a cacophonous city.

Make setting a *character*.

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Characters might seem the essential objects of a film, portrayed against a neutral backdrop of setting. But setting can have as strong a presence as character. Every setting has unique attributes—climate, topography, lighting, and so on—that influence or are influenced by its inhabitants. Dialect, clothing, notions of personal space, aesthetic sensibilities, and much more can be part of setting.

Because setting is large, one might be inclined to portray it through broad vistas, such as a savannah, beachfront, cityscape, or desert. But details—a rusty fishing vessel, a wizened fisherman, a loon taking flight, a weather-beaten street sign—are crucial, too.

Give your characters the anonymity test.

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Each character's voice should be distinctive and idiosyncratic. When writing or reviewing a script, cover up the characters' names to see if you can tell who is speaking. If the lines are interchangeable, the characters are too similar.

Mise-en-scène

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French for "what's put into the scene," *mise-en-scène* is the sum of factors affecting the visual aesthetic or feel of a shot, scene, or movie, including the interplay of objects, characters, color, depth, shadow, light, shot selection, composition, production design, set decoration, and even the type of film used.

Signs of a novice filmmaker

1. On-the-nose dialogue in which characters say exactly what they're thinking or feeling in lieu of subtle exposition
2. Excessive use of coincidence
3. Flashbacks that disrupt forward momentum and take the audience out of the moment
4. Voiceovers explaining exactly what can be seen on screen
5. A perfectly good protagonist or perfectly evil antagonist
6. A passive protagonist who does not choose a course of action
7. Flat frames lacking foreground and background enrichment
8. Too many scenes filmed from the same distance
9. Underactive actors who recite lines without seeming to inhabit the scene
10. Uneven lighting
11. Poor sound quality
12. Inattention to continuity, resulting in simple transition errors
13. An ending that doesn't grow naturally or inevitably out of previous events

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Have some showstoppers.

Successful mainstream movies always include several memorable high points, or *set pieces*. These are heightened visual scenes, snippets of which are typically shown in promotional trailers. In a comedy, the set pieces are usually the funniest jokes or squirmiest gags. In action-adventure films, they might show the boldest special effects, chase scenes, or fight sequences. In a horror movie, the set pieces are those that force viewers to cover their eyes.

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Every movie is a suspense movie.

Regardless of genre, a film should continually fuel the viewer's desire to "get to the next page" to see how things turn out. As new information and developments are revealed, the protagonist's dilemma should also deepen. Suspense is the product of the interplay between revelation and deepening dilemma: Will the accumulating discoveries and successes be sufficient for the protagonist to overcome her accumulating difficulties? Will the protagonist ever fully grasp the nature of her struggle? Will she resolve it before it destroys her? Will the next scene be the one in which we find out?

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Random hypothesis

Suspense doesn't come from speeding things up; it comes from slowing things down.

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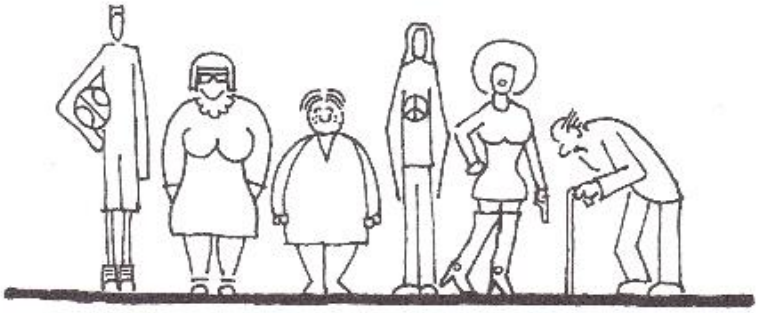

Help the audience keep track of your characters.

Use distinct names. Avoid having an Irma and an Alma, or an Elaine and Eileen, unless confusion is intended. Try names with different numbers of syllables, associating adjectives (e.g., "Silent Bob" in Kevin Smith's films), or using a full name for one character (e.g., "Keyser Söze" in *The Usual Suspects*).

Give characters names that fit perfectly or very imperfectly. One might expect a "Dirk" to be square jawed or a "Mabel" to be old, but you can play with expectations if it strengthens character and story.

Give your characters identifying habits. Pet phrases, verbal tics, unusual clothing, and similar distinctions are helpful, as long as they are not distracting.

Assume the audience forgets details. In a script, restate who a character is if not mentioned in a while. If "CRAIG, 28, the office hunk" is introduced on page 3 but not seen again until page 23, remind the reader with "CRAIG, the office hunk, saunters into the bar." Onscreen, have characters reference other characters by name rather than pronoun when it sounds natural to do so.

Dig deeper.

Good movies are often—or even usually—about simple things explored with depth, nuance, and attention to detail and meaning. Resist the urge to needlessly clutter a film with more and more plot events, hidden agendas, shoot-em-ups, illicit acts, and quirky characters that don't contribute to a central narrative. Instead, dig deeper into the murky gray areas of the events, themes, and emotions already present in the story. Do fewer things, but do them better.

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Who is the intersection?

A protagonist typically needs to choose between or reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable situations. A *pivotal character* often provides the crucial connection between the two. It can be a mentor, lover, stranger, marginal relation, or other character who straddles the worlds in conflict. When the protagonist's path intersects with that of the pivotal character, usually in Act 2, the pivotal character provides advice that causes the protagonist to reevaluate his or her understanding of the central dilemma, catalyzing the protagonist's eventual catharsis.

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Different lenses tell different stories.

Telephoto and wide angle lenses produce obviously different effects: telephotos (typically 70–1200 mm) narrow the field of view and bring distant things closer, while wide angles (typically 9–28 mm) incorporate a very broad field.

These lenses also have specific effects on movement along the camera's axis of vision. Wide angle lenses tend to exaggerate or accelerate movement to and away from the camera, while a telephoto retards it. For example, an actor moving from the far side of a room toward the camera will appear to move very quickly or abruptly when filmed through a wide angle lens, while an actor moving toward or away from a telephoto lens will appear to be moving more slowly.

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Augment action scenes with clean cutaways.

A cutaway is a momentary view away from the main action that provides enriching context or detail. A scene showing a young couple walking on the beach might be complemented with a cutaway of a seagull digging in the sand or an older couple strolling nearby. A scene of a woman engaged in a tense phone conversation might include a cutaway of the sweat on her brow or her chewed fingernails.

A cutaway is "clean" when isolated enough from the general action that it can be inserted during editing without creating continuity problems. For example, an exterior wide shot of two cars careening around a corner can be followed by a clean cutaway of the driver's hand frantically shifting gears, and a return to an exterior view of the vehicles.

Always shoot extra cutaways during filming, particularly for action scenes, to provide more opportunities for improving pacing and dramatic tension during editing.

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Burn your characters' bridges.

It's almost always stronger dramatically to prevent your characters from returning comfortably to their ordinary worlds. Limit their options so they remain trapped in the central dilemma, and their only real course is to keep forging into the unknown.

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"Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

—ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY

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Hang a lantern.

Resolving a complex story in two hours is difficult; the introduction of plot contrivances may at times seem unavoidable. A way out of this problem is to "hang a lantern"—to have an on-screen character question the same logic an audience is likely to question. When a character is willing to acknowledge the improbable, the audience may be more willing to go along with it.

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The climax is the *truth*.

A climax is more than the point of highest action or plot revelation; it is the moment at which the protagonist recognizes his or her existential core. The protagonist's false self, previously supported by secrets, lies, shame, or fear, may be stripped away so that a truer, more fulfilled self may emerge.

A hero accepts and evolves in the face of the truth, except in a tragedy, where the protagonist's inability to evolve leads to a tragic outcome.

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After the climax, get out fast.

After the plot reaches its climax, there are few places for a film to go that won't feel superfluous. Resolve the plot and primary subplots satisfyingly, but don't feel obligated to tie up every loose end. Leave the audience wanting more. Often, a *suggestion* of how the characters end up is more powerful than showing exactly how they *do* end up. Nonetheless, when creating an ambiguous ending, have a clear point-of-view with which the viewer may agree or disagree.

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