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Screenplay

The seven moments that will captivate your audience

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Preface

People go to the movies to experience seven universal moments that are within every film. These same seven moments compel viewers to watch television every night. The more often these moments occur, typically the more successful the film or television program. Genre doesn't matter (there's an audience for every type of film). Storyline is irrelevant (every story has been told). What makes one story different from another is the *manner* in which it is told by using the seven moments.

It took me nearly eighteen months to discover the seven moments that matter. It took several more years before I decided to write this handbook. What you now hold in your hands can be read in less than an hour, but don't take the information too lightly. Indeed, with this guidebook, this roadmap to the human experience, movies can be made far more rich in content than they have ever been.

How This Book Came to Be

In 1999, I submitted my first screenplay for coverage. The reader promptly tore it apart and sent it back to me with a scathing review. I was actually ok with that. Since I hadn't attended film school or spent years developing my screenwriting ability, I expected a negative review. I undoubtedly had a lot to learn.

The next logical step was to figure out just what needed to be in a screenplay. I spent a small fortune on screenwriting books authored by self-proclaimed gurus of screenwriting. But after studying these books, I still had not learned much about writing a screenplay. Everyone screamed, "Act 1! Act2! Act3!" and "Plot points!" Outside of that, these books did nothing more than ramble in ambiguity, lacking any concrete explanation as to specifically why an audience will sit for ninety minutes and watch a film. That's what this book is about. I have found seven moments that will captivate any audience. This book explains each moment in detail.

This handbook fulfills that part of screenplay and film analysis that is currently missing on the subject. It is the result of an eighteen-month objective analysis on some of the highest grossing movies released during the 90's and early 2000's. This book is for the hard-core students of film who insist on understanding why one movie outperformed another at the box office. It's for those who want a definitive answer, not explanations that result in circular ambiguity. This booklet talks about what makes our eyeballs lock into position and become fixated on the big screen.

I believe movies are made to make money. The only way for them to turn a profit is to captivate an audience from beginning to end. From that perspective, I'll warn you now. This handbook does not focus on story, structure, or artistic expression. This book is about captivating your audience with seven different moments, with the ultimate goal of making a profit.

I am fascinated by the concept of spending a million dollars (or five or fifty) on a project and getting back ten to twenty times your investment. That's an amazing potential ROI. But what fascinates me even more is the apparent ignorance of what compels an audience to watch a movie, enjoy it, and then recommend it to others. Despite the difficulty of getting approval to take a script into production, Hollywood still churns out absolutely horrible movies that have no hope for captivating an audience and no hope for returning a healthy profit for the investors. How can this be? It's as if nobody really *knows* what makes a great movie great. They just try to cram sex, violence, and pretty faces into whatever storyline blows up the biggest building.

I am not a successful screenwriter, nor am I a successful filmmaker. I'm a short-fiction writer turned movie enthusiast, with an analytical and critical eye. I'm your audience. I've studied over a thousand movies. Dissected them. Dictated every word of dialogue, every moment of action. I've burned out DVD players in my resolve to understand why one movie appealed to me more than another. This booklet is a summary of what I found to be the primary moments within a movie that make an audience take notice.

No matter how far fetched your story, these seven moments are what your audience relates to when they watch any film. In fact, everything we experience in real life can be categorized into one of these moments. This explanation actually makes perfect sense. No wonder people flock to the movie theatre every weekend. Where else are they going to get that much humanity in such a short period of time?

I have searched high and low for a book that provides definite answers to what separates great movies from mediocre ones. Unless I have missed something, such a book does not exist.

This handbook is the result of eighteen months of my life. It's direct, concise, and altogether avoids ambiguity. Enjoy.

How to Use This Book

The purpose of this book is twofold: To help screenwriters build a stronger screenplay, and to provide an objective method in which to analyze the strength of any screenplay.

You should start by reading through the first seven chapters that will explain and give examples for each of the moments. Once you have a basic understanding of the moments, I suggest you watch a few movies and acquire a feel for recognizing them when they occur on screen.

The Blake Rating System is explained in detail at the end of the book. This system of analysis can be used in a variety of ways: finding a strong screenplay, strengthening individual scenes, or assisting in the writing/editing process to help eliminate unnecessary scenes.

The proper application of the seven moments will result in a tighter, more captivating storyline that will hold your audiences attention from beginning to end. The more you can keep your audience's attention, the higher the potential return on investment for your film.

Introduction

Introduction occurs when the audience meets a new character or when two characters meet for the first time, regardless if the audience has already met either one. Character-to-character introductions must be acknowledged either by the characters or through camera work for the audience to recognize them.

Introduction examples:

Dracula (1992) – Dracula gets introduced (20 seconds into the film) before he says goodbye to his bride and leaves to fight a war.

The Sting (1973) – Two characters meet for the first time when Hooker wakes up a drunk Gondorff (26 minutes into the film).

Payback (1999) – Porter is introduced while a doctor performs backroom surgery on him for gunshot wounds (1.5 minutes into the film).

As Good As It Gets (1997) – Melvin gets introduced when he drops his neighbor's dog into the trash chute (1 minute into the film).

An introduction is a powerful moment for the audience. You should capitalize on it by delivering additional information about your plot while the character is being introduced. The above examples are strong introductions because they also convey plot information at the same time the character is being introduced.

Because your audience can only meet a new character once, you should spread out the introductions. When a new character enters a scene, the audience is going to perk up and start asking questions: *Who is this? What are they doing? Where are they going? Is this a good guy or a bad guy? What's his part in this story?* When you introduce two characters at once, you are essentially diffusing these questions and weakening the introduction for both characters. Don't do it. Instead, play upon your audience's thoughts. Let them learn about the most recent character before you bring someone new into the story.

Discovery

Discovery is when your audience learns something that pertains to the story. There are three types of discoveries: **Explaining**, **Pushing**, and **Plotting**.

You can express discovery through dialogue (the hero says he is afraid of snakes) or you can visually express discovery (the heroine searches under her bed, and the camera shows a close-up of a bomb wired to her bed frame).

The more discoveries you cram into a scene, the more you will captivate your audience. The more relevant the discoveries are to the plot, the more attentive your audience will be to that particular scene.

Discovery examples:

The Sixth Sense (1999) – The strongest discovery in this story happens to be an explaining discovery, and it occurs when Dr. Malcolm Crowe learns the truth about himself near the end of the movie.

L.A. Confidential (1997) – Ed Exley discovers Capt. Dudley Smith isn't completely legit when Smith asks him about Rollo Tomasi (100 minutes into the film).

Ghost (1990) – Sam Wheat follows his friend Carl to a thug's house and discovers Carl and Willy are in league together (57 minutes into the film).

The Usual Suspects (1995) – At the end of the film, the audience discovers who Keyser Soze really was.

Discoveries that **explain**: An event occurs or information is revealed that explains previous events within the story or supports the current direction of the story. An example from *Get Shorty* (1995): Chili describes his movie idea to Harry and Karen. This is an explanation of the story thus far (18 minutes into the film). The information does not alter the direction of the story, nor does it offer a choice for Chili, Harry, or Karen to alter the current path of the story. This type of discovery simply explains or justifies. Nothing more.

Discoveries that **push**: An event occurs or information is revealed that pushes the story in a direction. The characters are not given a choice. They are forced. Another example from *Get Shorty*: when Bones tells Chili to visit the dry cleaner's wife (9 minutes into the film). Chili is forced to visit her because Momo is dead, and Chili now belongs to Jimmy Cap. That piece of information is a push. In the next scene, we see Chili meeting with Faye, the dry cleaner's wife. Chili did not visit her because he wanted to do so. He went because he was forced.

Discoveries that **plot**: An event occurs or information is revealed that allows the character to make a choice to take the story in a new direction. Yet another example from *Get Shorty*: A casino manager asks Chili if he will talk with a movie producer who is in debt to the casino (12 minutes into the film). Chili

makes a decision to visit the movie producer. He has made a choice that will take the story in another direction. He has just “plotted” an event based on a discovery.

Although you need to keep discoveries flowing to keep the audience interested, you don’t necessarily have to reveal consecutive discoveries about the same plot. Give the audience discoveries, but have them pertain to multiple plot lines. In short, string the audience along.

Character details help shape and define your characters: she sleeps with married men; he has a drug problem; she likes to dance in the rain; she eats two pints of vanilla ice cream whenever she breaks up with a boyfriend, etc. Character details are not discoveries. Unless your character details pertain directly to the plot, they are superfluous and unnecessary.

Two simple character details:

- 1) *The private detective hates every type of gun except .38 revolvers.*
- 2) *He carries a snub-nosed .38 in a shoulder holster under his jacket.*

Those two details would be pointless and a waste of precious screen time unless they become pertinent details later in the film, at which time they would be considered discoveries. Example: The Police arrest the private detective for murder, question him, and throw him in jail; however, forensics determines the murder weapon was a 9mm. At that point, the audience understands why you showed the .38, and they will anticipate the release of the detective.

Discoveries are essential to telling the story; otherwise, there would be no story progression and subsequently no end to the film. They are necessary.

An enjoyable movie that can successfully hold an audiences’ attention is thick with discoveries that directly relate to each other and to the storyline.

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