Introduction to Screenwriting

Screenwriting Workshop

'Structure'

Ben Slythe

The Lacuna Works

What is Screenwriting?

- Fiction
- Film
- Television
- Web
- Closely allied to playwriting and radio writing

How are movies made? - Theory

- Pre-production
  - Write, plan, cast
- Production
  - Shoot, re-shoot
- Post-production
  - Edit, sell

How are movies made? - Practice

- Sell, cast, re-sell, budget, plan, write, shoot, edit, re-write, re-shoot, re-edit, ADR voiceovers, shoot extra second-unit footage, force the editor to stop re-editing under threat of violence, meet lawyers, shoot lawyers, break leading actor out of rehab in time to deliver in screaming panic fifteen minutes before world premiere is held in a shed behind a Halfords in Milton Keynes

Screenwriting is different

- Structured
- Visual
- Collaborative
- Menu

Beginning screenwriting

- The hard way
- The easy way
- Homebrew
  - The bits you can still do well...

The Basics – What goes in

- Action
- Dialogue
- Parentheticals
- Descriptions
- Tone and texture notes

The Basics – What doesn't go in

- Scene numbers
- Camera and direction notes
- Performance notes
- Timings
- Most of the parentheticals you've just added...

The Basics – Standard format

- Single sided
- Courier font
- Agreed layout for different textual elements
- Agreed arrangements to make reading the script easier

The Basics – Standard format

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INT. WORKSHOP - DAY

People attending a screenwriting
  workshop stare at Ben, enraptured.

                    BEN
          There's a reason for

          the standard format.
                  (beat)
          Timing.
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The Basics – Standard format

- A feature film is:
  - 100 pages
  - 100 minutes
  - 100 sleepless nights
- The standard format allows for estimates of shooting times

The Basics - Standard format

- 100 pages
- 1 minute per page
- Act 1 – 15 pages
- Act 2 – 70 pages
- Act 3 – 15 pages

The Basics – Short films

- A short film is, er, shorter
- One act in length
- Act 2, usually
- 3 Minutes of Torture
- Tonal

The Basics – Television

- Parallel structure

- Storylines

- The weird inflexibility of the internet web-series and what it says about the broader human condition and the end of civilisation

The Basics - Writing action

Henry sitting in his room. Opposite
  him sits Jimmy.

                    JIMMY
        Me family name, you

        said it stood for

        something.

The Basics - Writing action

HENRY

Not convinced you <u>stand</u>

for anything.

JIMMY

No, but me name, Fitzroy,

it means sommat?

The Basics - Writing action

                    HENRY

          Son of the King.

          Fitzroy means son of the

          King.

                    JIMMY

          Me? Don't sound much

          like me.

The Basics – Writing action

                    HENRY

              (silently agreeing)

        Just a name.

                    JIMMY

        How about me given name?

The Basics – Writing action

HENRY

(smirking)

Yeah, that one fits you.

JIMMY

What's it mean?

The Basics – Writing action

HENRY

A jimmy is a blunt tool used for breaking things.

The Basics – Writing action

- What parts of that scene are the 'action'?

- The words?

- The bit where it said 'smirking'?

- The bit where it said they were sitting opposite each other?

The Basics – Writing action

- No
- Action is what the characters do and have done to them directly
- Description
- Parenthetical
- Dialogue

The Basics – Writing action

- Action is the part of the screenplay that involved the entire production team, the cast and crew

- It is the most important part of the script

The Basics – Dialogue

- The most important way for the <u>writer</u> to reach the audience

- Only the actor stands between you and the person in seat K23

The Basics – Dialogue

- Three roles in the script
  - Explanation
  - Character
  - Context

The Basics – Annotation

- Descriptions
  - Instructions to the entire crew
- Parentheticals
  - Instructions to the actors
  - The beat

The Basics – Annotation

GENERAL SMITH

Mr. President. The terrorists
have told us what they want.
A live broadcast.

PRESIDENT

Ah, no.

The Basics – Annotation

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                GENERAL SMITH

Mr. President.  The terrorists

have told us what they want.

A live broadcast.

                PRESIDENT

Ah,

          (beat)

No.
```

Storytelling

- The corny voiceover
  - In a world where love was a crime, one woman stood up!
    Now... Hunted by the authorities she must find a way...

Storytelling

- The corny voiceover (cont.)
  - To rescue her man and save her city.

  - Structured story, if a terrible one

Storytelling

Exercise 1:

Write a Trailer Voiceover.

"In a world where..."

"Now..."

"To..."

Corny and derivative voiceovers for well known movies.

Structure

- Poetics
- Campbell
    - The monomyth
    - The hero's journey
- Field
- The 3-act structure

The 3-Act Structure

1. The setup – at home doing my work then the call

2. The complexities – working out how to overcome the problems

3. The denouement – having a good evening

The 3-Act Structure

- Three elements
  - Something kicks off the narrative
  - A point where the story hinges
  - How the tale ends

The 3-Act Structure

1. Tree the characters
2. Throw rocks at them
3. They get themselves down

The 3-Act Structure

1. [Person] wants [thing]
2. but [obstacles] make him [evolve]
3. finally [denouement]

The 3-Act Structure

- Two moments
    - Instigating event
    - Denouement

Hélène Back Again

Exercise 2:

Find the instigating event and denouement

Try not to force the story to fit.

Need a reminder of the plot?

Hélène Back Again

Plot:
- Childhood in England
- Move to Cannes
- War
- Invasion
- Vichy France
- Recruited by Allies
- Training

- Resistance work
- German annexation
- D-Day
- Betrayed
- Arrested
- Tortured
- Executed
- Honoured

The First Act - Description

- Establish the <u>mundane</u>
- Establish the <u>rules</u>
- <u>Explain</u> why the instigating event matters
- Show the <u>goals</u>
- <u>Instigate</u>

The Second Act - Description

- <u>Complexities</u>
- Get us to the denouement
- The hero's journey
- <u>Axis</u>

The Third Act - Description

- <u>Denouement</u>
- Aftermath
- Entirely interchangeable

Pivoting the Acts

Exercise 3:

Pick a film and retell the third act to a different end.

- Must leave the second act unchanged.

- Must plausibly fit the existing acts.

Scenes

- <u>Container for script elements</u>
  - Single unbroken <u>timeline</u> *or*
  - Single unbroken <u>location</u> *or*
  - <u>Both</u>

Scenes

- Split the story with gaps of arbitrary time
- Split the location with gaps of arbitrary distance
- Split the tone
- Shoot in controlled settings

Montage

- Sergei Eisenstein
- A narrative sequence of shots
- Controlled by the director

And back to Scenes

- Scenes are the writer's montage and serve the same purpose

- The most heavily edited part of the screenplay

Thank you

bythelens.org

Tracks – Screenwriting 101

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