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## **“Strong Curtains” and “Dramatic Punches:” The Legacy of Playwriting in the Screenwriting Manuals of the Studio Era**

**Abstract**

The Hollywood Golden Age was a revolutionary moment in the history of cinema and is pivotal to understanding the historical passage of a peculiar new art form –screenwriting. This early film period, from the Tens to the Sixties, was determined by key interactions between the respective forms of cinema and stage. Together, these interactions form a wider screenwriting “discourse.” There are reoccurring disputes in film scholarship over the paternity of the conventions and techniques of screenwriting. One solution is that techniques of theatre playwriting persisted extensively in the production practices of classical Hollywood cinema. Whether or not its professionals were aware of this is at the heart of this dispute. It is possible to identify the contribution of screenwriting manuals from Hollywood’s Golden Age toward the standardization of screenwriting techniques. The article aims to examine in the screenwriting manuals of this period some statements by practitioners who document the normalization and codification of the narrative structures used in screenwriting over time –in particular, the three-act structure. The validity and origin of the three-act structure are constantly debated among screenwriters. While this formula was known to the early writers of the Silent Era due to its legacy throughout centuries of playwriting and literature, it reappeared in the Seventies in the guise of a new theory. This article attempts to fill in certain gaps in the history of the theorization of screenwriting practices by juxtaposing statements found in screenwriting manuals and the statements of scholars and educators of this field. Ultimately, narrative conventions belonging to the tradition of theatre, as well as technological exigencies were integral in shaping the cinema techniques in use today.

**Keywords**

**Hollywood Golden Age, screenwriting manuals, playwriting, three-act model, discourse frame, theatre.**

### **1. Creative Process, Creative Discourse**

Screenwriting Studies may be a relatively novel academic discipline, but the discussion on the screenplay and its relationship to the completed movie began early on in its development<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> This article is mainly based on the paper “Strong Curtains and Dramatic Punches. The Legacy of Playwriting and the Debate on Three-act Model in the Screenwriting Manuals of the Thirties” (presented

The discussion emerged in the U.S. at the beginning of the twentieth century with the birth of commercial films, and it has continued throughout the history of American cinema. (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985; Price, 2013). Another important conversation regarding the relationship between cinema and other art forms such as theater, has also persisted in academic and production contexts. The dialogue between cinema and the other arts contains both clashes and reconciliations and it has been shaped a need to categorize forms of artistic experiences, such as reading, theatre and photography. Being more easily distinguishable, these art forms could be better appreciated by audiences (Norman, 2007, pp. 5-15). Much scholarship is still needed to develop a historical understanding of twentieth century show business which would be able to analyse theatre and cinema not on the basis of the antagonistic forces which set them apart, but as the two main fields in one single area of artistic creation. Charles Musser has suggested an integrated history of the stage and screen: “From a more contemporary perspective we might say that stage and screen are two different practices, but practices with many points of intersection. Indeed, at certain periods in their history, these intersections were profound” (Musser, 2004, p. 3).

The era which saw the birth of commercial films also saw the rise of a new language, the language of cinema. In this new age, a mechanism that sets in motion a “discourse”<sup>2</sup> on screenwriting began to take a visible form. This discourse paints a sweeping picture of screenwriting theories and techniques and the history of their development and dissemination. Ever-evolving, this discourse also came to encapsulate the tensions between different theoretical approaches. In *Screenwriting. History, Theory and Practice*, Steven Maras proposes to widen the research field from the theory of screenwriting to the “discourse on screenwriting” (Maras, 2009). The wisdom of this approach is that it takes into account the organic nature of screenwriting practices, including the changing status of both a film and script at every stage of the process of production. This Foucauldian approach, dubbed “discourse frame” by Maras, is one that takes into account the key moments when screenwriting standards were debated, refined and normalized, and it analyses screenwriting on many fronts –such as history, practice, and theory– which it considers to be tightly bound (see also Maras, 2011; Chiarulli, 2014). Thus, the history of screenwriting is closely bound to the techniques applied by cinema practitioners (Fumagalli, 2020). Screenwriting manuals are often packed with the opinions of “practitioners” that offer us a technical pattern by which to trace the development of screenwriting in time (Price, 2017).

The screenplay is the core element which allows the intersection between two traditionally distinct –at least until the Seventies– sectors: the means of production (how movies are made) and the means of representation (how a story is told). The dynamic, integrated approach to screenwriting proposed by Maras helps us to look at the film world as a self-aware industry that cultivates its own “behind-the-scenes” identity. This is evident in its use of a particular jargon and in the interaction and mutual influence between creative, theoretical, and practical departments. Critics, directors, and producers together furnish a rich professional milieu. This way of approaching the movie industry, allows us to form a picture of the screenwriting field as it is imagined, sustained, or debated by its own members.

In the same terms, screenwriting manuals do not just expose the creative process at the heart of the production machine, but they provide insight into the economic and industrial functioning of the machine itself. As Terry Bailey notes, manuals published during the Silent

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at the 7<sup>th</sup> Screenwriting Research Network Conference in 2014 in Potsdam). I would like to thank Avigayil Kelman for helpful comments and the revision of the English text.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of “discourse” is used by Michel Foucault to name a kind of sequence of signs, or more precisely, of enunciations –woven within writing, reading or communicative activities– referring to one or more kinds of speech and –in case, they reach a certain degree of regularity (of object, phrasing, concept or theme)– composing a discourse construction (Foucault, 1969).

Era served two key functions: "First, they legitimized film as a new medium at a time when it was struggling to forge an identity. Second, they codified and 'normalized' screenwriting practices that were already in use in silent cinema, which offers us valuable insights into several aspects of photoplay writing. This contribution has proved especially significant to film historians" (Bailey, 2014, p. 213). When cinema arrived on the entertainment scene, it needed to be legitimized a new medium, thus, it was necessary to show that it belonged to the same dynasty as its noble ancestor, the theatre, and that it learned from it the rules of show business.

## 2. A Single Area of Artistic Creation

The kinship between cinema and theatre has been investigated assiduously since the birth of cinema, featured in scholarly debates on film's "specific" and the "differentiating" factors and in investigations of the semiotic and structural affinity between the two arts (Bettetini, 1975). A few years before cinema's 100th birthday, Patrick G. Loughney complained that few significant efforts had been made to examine the phenomenon of motion pictures within the sphere of turn-of-the-century American popular entertainment, and that no extensive writings had yet appeared which traced the relationship of popular early narrative films to their direct antecedents. According to Loughney (1990, pp. 211-212),

One of the best ways to understand the development of the American narrative film prior to 1915 is to study the history of the American stage during the same period. To be more precise, it lies in knowing the "theatrical writing" forms of the *playscript* and *scenario* that evolved as *the* organizational elements essential to the production of all performance media decades before the advent of motion pictures. Their importance cannot be overestimated, for it is to these already-established written forms that early filmmakers turned as they developed production methods for narrative films longer than one or two minutes. It is also important to realize that they also provided, by their ubiquitous existence, the main source for the "content" of narrative motion pictures [...]. More than 60,000 of these "non-film" scripts and scenarios were copyrighted in the United States between the years 1870 and 1916, and many, legally or otherwise, found their way onto the screen in the years after 1900.

The documents in film historians' possession show that scripts of this period were dual mediums: "In the rampant opportunism and fly-by-night business practices of entrepreneurial turn-of-the-century American film-making, writers and companies were generating stories that could be mounted for theatre, film or both; if the work was successful in one medium, it could readily be adapted to the other" (Price, 2011, p. 210). The common custom of creating such versatile stories continued through the whole history of cinema. Practices such as this reveal how much the two forms of art, film and theatre, can and should be studied side by side within the "discourse frame." These script adaptation practices are a clue that further illumination may be found in script manuals.

Script manuals were highly influential texts in the entertainment industry. Analysing scripts from the Fifties, David Bordwell wondered why writers so loved flawed characters. In *The Way Hollywood Tells it*, Bordwell speculates that the Hungarian drama theorist Lajos Egri played a crucial role in influencing this trend. Egri worked as a dramatist and theatre director, first in Hungary and, from the Thirties on, in New York. In the mid-Forties, he founded the Egri School of Writing, which he also directed, and published his writer's manual, *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (an earlier edition, entitled *How to Write a Play*, dates back to 1942). In the Sixties, he moved to California, where he worked in cinema and television (Bordwell, 2006, pp. 32-33):

Lajos Egri's *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (1946) became a bible for many screenwriters during the 1950s and is still praised as indispensable. Egri demands that characters grow in the course of a play, and he shows how to build a plot around the process. How, he asks,

may a devoted, conventional wife like Nora in *A Doll's House* become an independent woman ready to abandon her husband and children? The change is plausible only in gradual stages, so Ibsen takes Nora through phases of irresponsibility, anxiety, fear, and desperation, before she recognizes that her marriage is based on deceit. Egri's recipe of modulated psychological growth helps the writer plan conflicts that will challenge the character to develop step by step.”

Bordwell's reference to playwright Henrik Ibsen (*A Doll's House*) calls to mind a key “supporting actor” who shaped screenwriting trends: William Archer. Ibsen's plays were already popular in English-speaking countries at the end of the nineteenth century –as was George Bernard Shaw's essay *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891)– thanks to translations by William Archer. Archer authored the manual *Playmaking* (1912) that was included in the bibliography of certain film handbooks used in Hollywood in the early Twenties, i.e., *Cinema Craftsmanship* by F. T. Patterson (1920) and *Modern Photoplay Writing* by H. T. Dimick (1922). *Playmaking* “seems to be the direct source of many modern screenwriting manuals” (Velikovsky, 2012).

William Archer's *Playmaking* is noteworthy as a link between the practices of play writing and the practices of film writing, but also as a portal through which Aristotle's theories have penetrated the Hollywood dramaturgical consciousness (Nardis, 2015, pp. 19–20). In an article on the history of the three-act structure, Jennine Lanouette reveals that Archer's manual provoked a conscious recovery of Aristotle's famous division of plot into beginning, middle and end. *Playmaking* offers one of the earliest suggestions that the three-act division was a more viable structure than the classical five-act form (Lanouette, 2012). “It was doubtless,” wrote Archer, “the necessity for marking this rhythm that Aristotle had in mind when he said that a dramatic action must have a beginning, a middle and an end. Taken in its simplicity, this principle would indicate the three-act division as the ideal scheme for a play” (Archer, 1912, p. 137).

The association between Aristotle, Ibsen and Egri, highlights the powerful link between playwriting and screenwriting. For a long time, many scholars have tried to dissolve the invisible ties that bind playwriting to cinematic practices. However, with their theories, the authors of the manuals were attempting to create applicable solutions to practical problems. In the scholarly and professional communities, there are advocates for separating theater and cinema studies and advocates for uniting them under one discipline.

Like *Playmaking* was for the Silent Era, Egri's *Art of Dramatic Writing* was a critical point of connection between dramaturgy and screenwriting for the Golden Age. In fact, Egri can still be found alongside contemporary manuals on LA bookshelves, available to hundreds of freelance writers. His manual, a fascinating example of editorial longevity, confirms how practices and methodologies that originated in theatre have easily spanned all eras of cinematic storytelling history, even surviving the revolutions on “form” that quashed other aspects of American cinema. The successful implementation of such dramatic practices can determine the force of the story at a movie's core.

Bordwell refers to *The Technique of Screenplay Writing* (1944) by Eugene Vale and *A Practical Manual of Screenplay Writing for Theater and Television Film* (1952) by Lewis Herman, as the only two manuals that endured on the scriptwriting market from the date of their issue until the end of the Seventies, when a new wave of manuals invaded the market (Bordwell, 2006, p. 247). Two other noteworthy screenwriting books, *Film: The Creative Process* by John Howard Lawson and *The Art of Creative Writing* by Lajos Egri –though they are not manuals in the strict sense –were published respectively in 1964 and 1965.

John Howard Lawson, like Lajos Egri, is a leading figure in the conversation on playwriting and screenwriting and on the history of screenwriting theory. His first-produced play, *Servant-Master-Lover*, was staged in 1916; in 1927, he became one of the founder-directors of New Playwrights in New York; from 1928 to 1947, he wrote for films without

entirely giving up theater. In 1936, he wrote *Theory and Technique of Playwriting*, which he republished in 1949 under a conspicuous new title, *Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting*. His plays as well as his films embody the core dramatic theory illustrated in his book: that dramatic conflict is social conflict predicated on the exercise of the conscious will, whereby the protagonist must strive to understand the world in order to consciously choose a course of action. More than one generation of screenwriters trained on Lawson's book, which was highly rated by Allardyce Nicoll (professor at Yale and chair of its School of Drama) as well as Sergej Ėjzenštejn (see Horne, 2006, pp. xvii-xviii; p. 104). Jennine Lanouette stresses that this book is "the first manual to take screenwriting seriously as a dramatic form, because previous screenwriting manuals, with titles like *How to Write a Photoplay*, focused more on film technique than dramatic technique" (Lanouette, 2012). Lawson's is a manual oriented toward elevating screenwriting as a literary product rather than a commercial one, something previously only done with theater scripts (Koivumäki, 2010; Sternberg, 2014).

From the broad range of practitioners cited by Maras and other scholars, a vested interest in viewing screenwriting through various lenses, under the umbrella of discourse, is apparent. This allows us to theoretically and practically address the relationship between theater and cinema, a relationship that points to the centrality of the screenwriting manual. It is in the pages of the manuals that one can notice the rise of a popular movie technique, the three-act structure.

### 3. From the Single-Reel Film to the Full-Length Feature Film

A structural discontinuity exists between movies that were made from 1917 and 1960 movies made prior to that era. This is essentially due to the length of the first silent movies, which were limited to one reel. Plays are a long narrative medium, thus, with the invention of the full-length feature film, the continuity between playwriting and screenwriting structure eventually increased (Staiger, 1985, pp. 173-192; Thompson, 1998, pp. 225-237). Standard rules for narrative film were only established in the mid-1910s. Prior to this, however, building a good story still demanded some narrative conventions that were set down before the birth of cinema by the theatre. Action continuity and a clear and realistic plot were required even in single-reel films (Price, 2013; Bailey, 2014), as indicated in a 1904 film magazine article "About Moving Picture Films" (discovered by Janet Staiger). As the anonymous author of the article states, "There should be no lagging in the story which [a movie] tells. Every foot [of the movie] must be an essential part, whose loss would deprive the story of some merit; there should be sequence, each part leading to the next with increasing interest, reaching its most interesting point at the climax, which should end the film" (Staiger, 1985, p. 175). Historians J. C. Tibbets and J. M. Welsh found in that statement, and in other quotations from early twentieth century film magazines, traces of a specific storytelling model inherited from theatre (Tibbets & Welsh, 2001, p. XIII). This model, which was theorized in the middle of the nineteenth century (Cardwell, 1983), was defined in a complete and effective way during the passage from single-reel to multiple-reel films.

The first cinema storytelling manuals often refer to a sort of "wave" motion of the action which should rise and fall and space out the different segments of the narrative. Kristin Thompson cites William Lord Wright, the editor of a screenwriting guideline column in *The New Moving Picture* magazine, who wrote in 1922: "There must be the opening of the story, the building and the plot development, the big situations and the climax; comedy relief and a happy ending. For a five-reeler [...] there must be minor climaxes in the action as well as one great major climax" (Lord Wright, 1922, p. 60; p. 82; see Thompson, 1999, p. 21). The minor climaxes are those which must end each sequence, whereas the major climax obviously belongs at the end of the movie.

That every scene should be built, from a dramatic point of view, as a "miniature film" or a "story within the story," with a beginning, middle, and end, is a basic notion of which there

was much awareness in the Studio Era, even though film industry professionals at that time were not interested in making theoretical reflections on it. The exceptions, albeit rare, exist (Chiarulli, 2013). Tamar Lane's 1936 writings help to underline the connections that existed between cinema, theatre, and the other narrative arts in her day (Lane, 1936, pp. 13-14):

Of late there can be detected in the writing of film sequences, whether long or short, a new form of technique borrowed from the stage, which in many respects lends itself admirably to the cinema. It entails the building of each sequence with a gradual rise in dramatic interest, followed by a quick twist and fade-out at the end, as though it were an act in a stage play.

Formerly, photoplay sequences were handled in much the same manner that the novelist writes his chapters. As the novelist ended his chapter wherever he considered there was a break of action, regardless of the drama entailed, so the scenarist ended his sequence merely on the same basis. It mattered not whether the sequence ended in a "punch," or otherwise. Some faded out on a dramatic highlight, others simply ended on a piece of unimportant business.

Today many of the better scenarists are "ringing down," so to speak, each episode with a strong "curtain" or dramatic punch. Every sequence is treated with the theory that it is a new "act" or phase of the story. It is built on a slowly rising interest in tempo and drama, then brought to a climax of some kind, and a quick fade-out or "curtain," to be followed by other sequences in the same fashion. The attempt is made, of course, to have each photoplay curtain more dramatic and suspenseful until the final grand climax is reached at the end of the film.

Despite the fact that this technique is following closely along the lines of one phase of the footlight drama, it cannot be claimed as inherently the property of the stage. Some novelists have used it with good effect. Regardless of its source, however, it is a form that can be utilized to good advantage by scenarists in the preparation of many photoplays. Some writers assert that, as in the case of the legitimate drama, this act-and-curtain system is superior for all types of cinemas and will eventually be as universally used in film as in stage dramas.

That same year, Robert Riskin –one of the greatest screenwriters in history, who trained as playwright– confirmed this narrative technique that was "borrowed from the stage": "every scene must have a beginning, middle and end, no matter how small. Each little scene has a climax of its own, to build up to the important climax, which may be at the end of the first act. This, in turn, builds up to the end of the film in cumulative fashion. In all, a picture should have about ten small climaxes, each one completed by a laugh, a tear or any other emotional period" (Riskin, 1936, p. 9). Riskin uses the word "scene" but it is safe to assume that when he uses the word "climaxes" he is referring to the "sequences" mentioned by Lane.

The use of the "three-act structure" since the silent era and throughout the Golden Age is confirmed by other screenwriters of the time through statements like Riskin's. Some are gleaned from oral sources like story conferences, some from the unpublished memos and manuals circulating within studios. These manuals are a testament to the theatre practices used in the making of films of the day. This gives them an incredible historical value and marks their relevance within the "discourse frame" of screenwriting theory.

During the same years, Lawson uses the metaphor of "cycle of action" to show the patterns and functions within dramatic structure. He identifies a three-cycle pattern in the narrative structure of the play *Yellow Jack* (1934) by Sidney Howard –adapted for the screen with the same title in 1938– in which the first cycle comprises the "decision to follow a certain course of action," the second one represents the "tension developed in fulfilling the decision" and the "unexpected triumph," and the third one takes on the "new complication which requires another decision on a higher plane" (Lawson, 1949, p. 225). Commenting on these passages of the book, Lanouette suggests that Lawson, like William Archer, resists identifying this "three-cycle" pattern as a fundamental dramatic structure and "is trying to get away from

the limitations of the word ‘act’ as a mere segment of action, and instead is struggling to find a more structurally based model. But, for whatever reason, he is more comfortable with words like ‘cycles’ and ‘divisions’ than he is with trying to redefine an act in structural terms” (Lanouette, 2012). In the same article, Lanouette reveals that a commitment to the three-act structure can be found in Kenneth Rowe’s *Write That Play*, published in 1939 (Rowe, 1939, pp. 163-164.):

In recent years, by no rule, but in general practice, three [acts] has come more and more to be the standard [...]. Three movements are clearly more basic to the fundamental structure of a dramatic action than Horace’s five. There is an attack, a crisis, and a resolution... There is a natural symmetry and balance with adequate flexibility inherent in the three-act form, with the first act introducing and springing the attack, the second act developing the action to the crisis, and the third act for the resolution.

As historians have noted, theatre techniques were at the foundation of cinematic storytelling since the dawn of Silent Era, but with the advent of sound, cinema became more open to them (see Nannicelli, 2013, pp. 79-107). Ultimately, what may shed light onto the history of screenwriting is the practice of dividing the film into segments which seems related to theatrical practices. Beyond theatrical devices, a key shaper of screenwriting practices seems to be the film technology itself.

#### **4. The Act-and-Curtain System. Reels or Pages?**

Consulting manuals from the first half of the century, it is less clear how conscious screenwriters were of the “curtains” technique (the length of each narrative portion culminating in a climax). As many scholars note, Hollywood professionals during the Silent Era promptly began dividing –consciously or unconsciously– their stories into segments. The lengths of these segments were balanced in relation to the bigger, coherent structure containing them (Price, 2013, pp. 204-209; Brüttsch, 2015). Thompson suggests an insightful theory to as to why the structural divisions were seen as necessary: “Breaking a narrative into parts gives the spectator a sense of direction in which the action will proceed and thus aids comprehension. Structure can be learned instinctively by watching a great many movies. It also helps prevent any one portion of the story from becoming too long and boring the audience” (Thompson, 1999, p. 22).

By the Thirties, this “act-and-curtain” system was somewhat theorized and commonly used, especially to mark the transition between scenes. Only in the Seventies, however, did the term “act” begin to recur in manuals as the name for a unit of the large sections into which the film narrative is divided. David Bordwell notes that some veteran screenwriters from the Forties acknowledged using a three-act model in plotting, but their testimony came long after their retirement from cinema (Bordwell, 2014):

[...] Philip Dunne says he used a three-act organization for his 1940s screenplays, but he makes the claim in an interview published in 1986. Billy Wilder says he “wrote [Charles Boyer] out of the third act” of *Hold Back the Dawn* (1941), but the remark comes in an interview given decades later. There is always the possibility that older writers [...] were projecting it backward onto their work – assuring us that they conform to contemporary standards, or even asserting precedence [...]. It may be, of course, that three-act structure of some sort was so ingrained in studio writers’ habits that they did not have to discuss it explicitly. [Manuals from the Seventies] were addressing aspiring screenwriters who wanted inside knowledge, but as intuitive craft workers, the old contract writers would not be likely to spell out rigid rules about length and dramatic patterning.

Bordwell reports a single script of the period, the screenplay *Infidelity*, dating back to 1938, (begun but not completed by F. Scott Fitzgerald) in which the division into three acts is explicit. According the Bordwell’s analysis, Fitzgerald grouped his scenes into clusters and alongside each cluster he marked the date by which he expected to complete it. Since each

scene usually runs only a couple of pages, the groupings present a feasible day-by-day timetable. These clusters of scenes total eight "sequences" in all, labeled with Roman numerals (Bordwell, 2014):

Each of *Infidelity's* sequences presents a unified phase of the action and is more or less continuous in time, although there are some ellipses as well. [...] Fitzgerald's timetable assembles the sequences into acts. Sequences I through IV are labeled "FIRST ACT 45 pages." Sequences V through VIII are labeled "SECOND ACT 50 pages." Sequence VIII is continued to form "THIRD ACT 25 pages."

Regarding the considerable number of pages, Bordwell notes that "Fitzgerald's layout is perhaps more characteristic of a stage play, which can afford a longish exposition and equivalent second act," and that, "we could easily imagine the script as a stage play, with a curtain ringing down on each of these teasing situations" (Bordwell, 2014). Scholars like Bordwell or Steven Price wonder whether the three-act structure was promoted by the Studios as a standard procedure to facilitate filmmaking or whether it was a convention introduced by writers who started out in theatre.

Certain theatrical influences within the film industry were more overarching than specific, with practitioners frequently citing Aristotle as a muse. The very first instructive handbooks for writing silent films contained references to Aristotle's statement that tragedy, being an "imitation of an action that is serious and complete," should be split into three parts, beginning, middle, and conclusion. This concept, applied to film as "narrative acts," stresses the obvious affinity between cinema and the dramatic arts. Nevertheless, a debate was born among film scholars regarding the implications of the occurrence of this and other Aristotelian concepts in American handbooks (see Macdonald, 2013, pp. 48-51; Brüttsch, 2015).

The relationship between Aristotle and Hollywood screenwriting was sometimes misconstrued by authors of screenwriting manuals and some academics (Thompson, 1999, p. 49; Vanoye, 1991, p. 29; Alonge, 2012, p. 154; Brenes, 2014). The notion that Aristotle invented the three-act structure is probably a misinterpretation of his famous statement in *Poetics* regarding the need for a harmonious relationship between the different parts of a tragedy: "Well-constructed plots should neither begin nor end at an arbitrary point, but should make use of the patterns stated [beginning, middle, and conclusion]. Besides, a beautiful object, whether an animal or anything else with a structure of parts, should have not only its parts ordered but also an appropriate magnitude: beauty consists in magnitude and order" (Aristotle [4<sup>th</sup> Cent. BC], 1995, p. 55). There is no evidence to suggest that Aristotle's literary parameters of a beginning, middle, and end necessarily prescribe a three-part structure or indicate literal divisions. They simply impart an aesthetic trajectory. Greek tragedy was built around this trajectory. But some scholars read Aristotle through a contemporary lens, perhaps imposing modern cinematic notions on antiquity (Fumagalli & Chiarulli, 2018, pp. 41-72).

One of the most popular formulations of the three-act model –with precise indications concerning the length of each act– emerged in the Seventies. The most rigid screenwriting theory destined to stifle Hollywood writing practices in the following decades is undoubtedly Syd Field's. The suggestion that the three-act proportion corresponds to a quarter, a half, and a quarter, which film experts ascribe to his manual published in 1979, can actually be found in a previous manual (as demonstrated by Kristin Thompson), a little-known text that had been published a year earlier: *The Screenwriter's Handbook* by Constance Nash and Virginia Oakey (Nash & Oakey, 1978; Thompson, 1999, p. 22; see also Brüttsch, 2015, pp. 303-304). Field, Nash and Oakey all prescribe an equivalency between the duration of the scenes and the pages of the script, assuming that a page of script corresponds on average to a minute of film.

During the 7<sup>th</sup> Screenwriting Research Network Conference in Potsdam (17-19 October 2014) Jennine Lanouette discussed the topic with me and made further helpful observations



by e-mail on 30 October 2014: she objects to the notion that Syd Field institutionalized the three-act structure in the film industry. In fact, she studied the three-act structure in her graduate film school at Columbia University, under the Czech screenwriter Frank Daniel, before Syd Field gained a following. Daniel, a refugee from communism who had studied with Pudovkin and Ějzenštejn in Moscow, taught widely on this topic in the US from 1969, first at American Film Institute and at Columbia University, then at the University of Southern California (Lanouette, 2012; Koivumäki, 2016, pp. 85-86). Similarly, Robert McKee studied under Kenneth Rowe (see above) at the University of Michigan in the Fifties, though he does not say so expressly in *Story*. He merely mentions Rowe as the author of an “excellent book on dramaturgy” (McKee, 1999, p. 16). Such cases support the thesis that there are legacies within schools of dramatic theory with far-reaching influence that have little to do with the manual written by Syd Field. If we give credence to the hypothesis, proposed by Bailey, that “the difference between a ‘school’ and a ‘manual’ was often slight [because] some ‘schools’ existed simply to sell a single book” (Bailey, 2014, p. 212), there is no doubt that any study of the evolution of the three-act structure must consider influential teachers, not just published books (Nardis, 2015, pp. 26-33; Curran, 2019).

Linking Frank Daniel’s teachings to the rise of the three-act structure in the script manuals, uncovers yet another lead: that of cinema technology. While Daniel was the head of the Graduate Screenwriting Program at the University of Southern California, he developed the “Eight-Sequence Structure,” a system based on the fact that in the early days of cinema, technical considerations forced screenwriters to split their stories into sequences, each the length of a reel (more or less ten to fifteen minutes of story) (Price, 2013, p. 152; Bailey, 2014, p. 220). Significantly, in 2004, Joseph Gulino in *Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach* argues that a smart way to structure the three acts is to divide the action into eight segments of approximately fifteen minutes each, with a minor plot point at the end of each, and a climax in the final one. The first act consists of two sequences, the second of four, and the third of two (Gulino, 2004). This information seems to echo the aforementioned words of Robert Riskin, according to which “a picture should have about ten small climaxes” (Riskin, 1936, p. 9), and confirms the pertinence of the technique used in 1938 by F. Scott Fitzgerald to regulate the three acts of a script precisely by splitting them into eight sequences (Bordwell, 2014). Regardless of who applied the formula first, a striking precedent can be found in a 1937 British manual with the suggestive title, *Money for Film Stories*. The manual is owned by the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles (cited in Velikovskiy, 2012 and in Chiarulli, 2013). The author, Norman Lee, after acknowledging the great debt of cinema to literature (as far as structure is concerned), recommends dividing the story into parts not based on the number of pages, as Field would later suggest, but rather on the number of reels comprising the entire film (Lee, 1937, pp. 30-31):

An average “programme” picture is between 6000 and 7000 feet in length. The entire film would be divided into seven or eight reels. The first reel we will call the beginning, in it the main characters should be established and introduced, the story commenced, and some indication given of what to expect in the first situation. The second reel should develop the first situation; introduce more characters; build up the leads and point a finger to a coming crisis.

Into reel three, drop your first smash crisis, which will form the middle. Now develop from this crisis into reels four and five, introducing a developing situation. Into reels six and seven create your paramount climax and your denouement.

Norman Lee –who wrote and directed around thirty films and some documentaries in the UK– might have been among the firsts to propose the three-part division with the proportions of a quarter, a half, and a quarter. Matthias Brüttsch notes that, even before Norman Lee, in 1920, F. Taylor Patterson suggested a similar 1/3/1 segmentation for five-reels (Patterson, 1920, p. 11, cf. Brüttsch, 2015, p. 303). Francis Taylor Patterson, the first woman to teach a film course

at Columbia University (where she studied under Brander Matthews)<sup>3</sup>, wrote compelling reflections about the influence of theatrical forms on film writing (Patterson, 1920, p. 6):

For the first time in the history of the narrative arts, a story may be revealed wholly and completely through pictures. Concomitant with the youth of the photoplay is the lack of analysis of cinematic plot. But there can be no greater aid to the student of the new photodramatic art than the vast mass of critical material upon the practice and theory of the theatre. The student of plot analysis should submerge himself in dramatic literature from Sophocles and Euripides to Granville Barker and Eugene O’ Neil [...]. He should consort with the master minds of dramatic criticism. From the Stagirite to Sarcey, from Brunetiere to Brander Matthews.

Patterson’s words “are indicative of a tendency in the manuals of the Tens and Twenties to outline a continuity in the analysis and structure of the film plot with the theatrical dramaturgical heritage” (Nardis, 2015, pp. 30–31). The link between the length of the acts, the proportions between them and their origins in the theatrical dramaturgy, thus, seems highly apparent – far more so, than is apparent in the manuals of the Seventies. Apparently, the manuals by Lee and Patterson are the only ones to allot specific proportions of the plot segments before the issue was taken up again in the manuals of the Seventies. If the references from the Twenties (Patterson) and Thirties (Lee) are not the predecessors of the same three-part formulation of forty years later –there is no historical evidence to suggest they are linked, only hypothesis– and if the authors of the Seventies had come to the same conclusion by other means, this precedent wouldn’t be as interesting from a historical point of view. However, the precedent may still rouse the curiosity of other scholars, particularly cognitive psychologists, for what it has to say about the mechanisms by which stories, and the human condition via these stories, become intelligible to us. The formulation of this same idea in two different moments in film history may show how intrinsic it is. That fact that, time and again, the moviemaking industry revisits its dramatic heritage may imply just how fundamental, rather than arbitrary, those storytelling structures are. Tracing these storytelling practices also adds a valuable tile to the “discourse frame” within which the history of the relationships between different media is highly instructive.

Kristin Thompson’s work, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, accurately calculates the length of each act in a series of movies produced by Hollywood from the Tens to the Nineties. It is not surprising that, in these films, the proportions of the different parts of the film remain more or less unaltered from the Tens to the Nineties (Thompson, 1999, pp. 355–363). Confident in her synoptic analysis of Hollywood films of different periods, Thompson calls into question the rigidity of Syd Field’s proposed structure. In particular, she raises objections to the length of the second act, which according to the majority of screenwriters is the hardest to write. According to Field and his fans, the second act should be sixty pages long and last one hour – that is, half the film. The difficulty in dealing with the second act appears to be a result of the weakness of the model itself. Entirely focused on timing and on the number of pages, the model doesn’t seem to take dramatic logic into account: “This paradigm does not sufficiently analyze the ways in which characters formulate and change their goals; it does not recognize that Hollywood films incorporate a lot of sheer delay; and it does not take into account that the demand for a beginning, middle and end need not –indeed, usually does not– result in a three-part structure” (Thompson, 1999, p. 27; see also Brüttsch, 2015, p. 318).

David Howard and Edward Mabley specify that the division into three parts is not a fill-in-the-blank chart, but “a set of landmarks an explorer/guide tries to keep sight of when traveling through new and dangerous territories.” The explorer “must keep track of those

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<sup>3</sup> Brander Matthews (1852–1929) was the first American professor in dramatic literature. On the influence of his theories in classical American cinema, see chapter 14 of Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1985 and Nardis, 2015, pp. 26–33.

landmarks, occasionally losing sight of them, but then spotting one again and becoming oriented” (Howard & Mabley, 1993, pp. 25-26).

Thus, we must keep in mind that the number of acts into which a theatrical or cinematographic work is split (i.e., the number of narrative segments identifiable from a structural point of view) do not necessarily correspond to the so-called beginning, middle, and end in *Poetics*. These Aristotelian parameters are helpful to screenwriters mainly in that they lend the story a dramatic harmony (Fumagalli & Chiarulli, 2018, pp. 10-11). *Poetics* is the first “manual” we know of that prescribes a narrative trajectory for the theatre. The question alone of how theatrical act divisions evolved is hotly debated and could furnish its own article. Scholars and authors of script manuals have explored possible answers. Some have found compelling historical leads: the division of Shakespeare’s works into five acts may hypothetically be attributed to editors of his plays after his death. Or else, acts could be based on the time of consummation of wax candles in Victorian theater (Yorke, 2013, pp. 41-42).

The terrain between playwriting and screenwriting has thus far only lightly been explored. What this essay is interested in establishing are the formidable bonds between playwriting and screenwriting. Comparing the two different arts, there is something far deeper to learn than the formal and stylistic similarities which permit the comparison. Above all, these similarities may point to fundamental values that matter more than mere aesthetic and economic considerations. We would be hard put to find a screenwriter or playwright today who would encourage the use of writing manuals. Most of them –and the best of them would be sincere– would say that they applied certain dramaturgical rules in an entirely unconscious way. As Umberto Eco reveals in his Postscript to *The Name of the Rose* (Eco, 1983, p. 19),

When the writer (or artist in general) says that he worked without thinking about the rules of the process, it only means that he worked without knowing he knew the rule. A child speaks his mother tongue very well, but he would not know how to write down its grammar. But the grammarian is not only one who knows the rules of the language, because even the child knows them very well without knowing it: the grammarian is the one who knows why and how the child knows the language.

The same “intuitive” process may apply to writers for the screen and stage alike, who are well versed in countless movies and plays, and can hardly guess at where the structural conventions they use have come from.

## 5. Conclusion

Talking about screenwriting manuals means talking about the building blocks of the imaginary and the transmission of ideas through cinema. In particular, it means comprehending something about how people understand reality through stories. This article delves into the intellectual conversation on the roots and practices of screenwriting and highlights some of the key stages in its development during and since the Golden Age. The thrust of this article (under the banner of “discourse”) is the consideration of a structural continuity between playwriting and screenwriting, and the belief that intersections between screenwriting and its narrative ancestor are significant. Despite the existence of other equally profound contributions to cinema, like Anglo-Saxon popular fiction, radio, and journalism, this essay seeks to follow the thread leading from theatre to cinema, starting from the advent of sound in film, which by historians is believed to be the most critical moment of dialogue between the two art forms. In particular, this article hopes to demonstrate how dramatic structures, narrative models, and playwriting techniques remained embedded within the practices of Classical Hollywood Cinema and the degree to which the practitioners were aware of them. To this end, it analyzes shared traits between playscripts and screenplays through the work and theories of authors who had experience writing both, like Lajos Egri and John Howard Lawson.

The theatre of the Twenties and Thirties, with its repertoire of stories and characters, provided precious raw material which the Hollywood factory could extract, expand, and turn into a glossy motion picture. This process relied on individual talents but also on knowledge and expertise normalized and transmitted inside the industrial production environment.

This essay focuses on screenwriting manuals, books which intrigue film historians because of light they shed upon the film production machine. These manuals establish the value of screenplays as prominent discursive entities on the eras that produced them. This article also deals with an issue that has fascinated both historians and theorists of screenwriting: the division of films into acts and the professional considerations for the length of each act.

This article puts forth a proposal from a 1930s British screenwriting manual (*Money for Film Stories*) of subdividing a story’s narrative parts (setting, development, and resolution) according to the number of reels comprising the film. The author of this manual, Norman Lee, is among the firsts –perhaps *the first*– to propose this tripartite division in the proportions of a quarter, half, and quarter, before the matter was reiterated in the same terms by the manuals of the Seventies. This essay links Lee’s three-part proposal to writings in other screenplay manuals (previous, contemporary, and subsequent) and to statements made by screenwriters and theorists. In doing so, this essay attempts to delineate a pathway that includes screenwriting schools as well as various generations of writers and experts who studied the way in which cinema has established itself as the main medium of the twentieth century.

From the perspective of historians, it is vital to attribute the paternity of an idea or its first application to a particular scholar. From the point of view of this article, it may be even more illuminating to examine the ways in which different people have arrived at a similar conclusion. The formulation of the three-part structure in diverse storytelling environments suggests its underlying fundamental nature. Whether Norman Lee’s proposal is link in a greater chain of orally transmitted movie history remains a mystery to us, but it is surely an essential tile in a rich and complex mosaic.

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