



ACTION IN A SCREENPLAY

by Nicholas Proferes

You are what your deep, driving desire is.
 As your desire is, so is your will.
 As your will is, so is your deed.
 As your deed is, so is your destiny.

Upanishads

Deed or action is the prime dramatic category of a screenplay and its creation, modulation, and organization are of paramount importance for the screenwriter. Something must happen and this something must be made available to the audience, not merely so they can understand what is happening, but so they can *participate* in the *unfolding* of what is happening.

Where does the screenwriter start in the process of creating action? First there needs to be a story and there are three places that story can come from: character, circumstance, or theme. This latter is the most inimical to compelling action because it often leads to one-dimensional characters who represent one side of a polemic. When someone praised Henrik Ibsen for dealing with social problems he became offended and answered, “I don’t deal in social problems, I deal in characters who have interesting dilemmas.”

The next two sources of story are much more conducive to the creation of stories that will engage an audience; one is circumstance, the other is character. A gorilla on the loose is a circumstance. The screenwriter then has to invent characters who will best serve such a story; characters who would be *tested* by such a circumstance. If we start with character, then circumstance has to be invented to test the character. But whatever the seed of our story, it should quickly lead to a character (protagonist) who is *defined by action*. The character is what s/he does, not what s/he thinks. This does not mean that the character does not have an interior life, in fact that life can be very rich, but, the interior life of a character – the moment by moment psychology must be made available to the audience. How is this done? By turning the psychology into behavior (which is just another name for action) that can be rendered by a camera. Now this is not solely the responsibility of the actor and the director; *the potential for the psychology being turned into behavior must be imbedded in the text*.

The three act dramatic structure (not necessarily in chronological order) can be viewed as the macro-organization of action. In the first act you have *ordinary life* (what does the character do?). The *point of attack* (also action) interrupts this ordinary life causing a dilemma that the protagonist must solve, *through action*.

The invention – the concocting – of the protagonist’s *rising action* is the “meat and potatoes” of screenwriting. Obstacles (action) must be created to oppose the protagonist’s *want*, which leads to *conflict*, the essence of drama. At the end of the second act the protagonist exhausts his or her action *in relation to extricating themselves from the dilemma set up in the first act*. The third act renders the *consequences of the protagonist’s action*.

Each of three acts can be broken into sequences, which organize the action of individual scenes. Each scene can then be broken into what I call dramatic blocks (a main action). Each well-constructed scene will have a turning point, what I call a *fulcrum*. This is the point in a scene where for an instant, action stops, allowing the audience to phrase a question in their minds: what will happen next?

Finally, the screenwriter must *modulate* the action, much as a composer modulates music; fast/slow, loud/soft, dark/light. This differentiation in tone offers not only variety for an audience, but can lead to dramatic “collisions”, much like what happens in a musical symphony.

This introductory article presents in an outlined fashion the basic theoretical framework of the work done during the script workshops organized by the Mediterranean Film Institute (M.F.I.)

Picture of Nicholas Proferes courtesy of the M.F.I.

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