Screenwriting: Setting up the Story

"A Comparative Analysis of Screenwriting Manuals"

Universiteit Utrecht – Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen

MA-scriptie Film- en Televisiewetenschap – Studiejaar 2014/2015

Naam: Tom in 't Veld

Studentnummer: 3403408

Versie: Definitief

Scriptiebegeleider: Jasmijn van Gorp

Tweede lezer: Vincent Crone

Inleverdatum: 12 januari 2015

Aantal woorden: 8.431

Abstract

This thesis will analyze how authors of screenwriting manuals talk about the first ten pages of a screenplay and how the story is set up by establishing character and illustrating the world. There is a differentiation between function, what kind of information is exposed, and structure, how this information is structured within the screenplay. With the use of categories the dominant discourses are mapped out. The analysis will confirm the use of different terminologies even though little difference exists between the definitions. It will become clear that the perspectives of the authors are influenced by the way they think about certain discourses. Discourses such as: function versus structure, which one is more important? The involvement of the audience and the starting point of the story, when does the first action or change takes place? These discourses are compared to the ones gained from theory which led to a better comprehension of the gap between academics and practitioners. If there will be a practical 'interlingua' of the narrative theory within screenwriting manuals then research will have to be done towards the complexity of the audience and the practical use of screenwriting manuals during the writing process.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

The discipline of screenwriting studies has emerged in the last few years. The first yearly international conference on 're-thinking the screenplay' was being held in 2008.[1] In 2010 the first edition of *The Journal of Screenwriting* was published. Patrick Cattrysse, an academic in the field of screenwriting, sees these initiatives as an opportunity where the 'traditional' academic research and practice-orientated research could come together. Or as he puts it: "the know-how from practical writing classes can encounter academic narrative studies."[2] The practice-orientated research is mainly represented by the screenwriting manuals. These manuals show their reader how to write a screenplay by giving them story models and tips on structure, character and story.[3] In the last decade there has also been an increase of screenwriting manuals published.[4] Now, with the emergence of screenwriting studies, both sides should learn from each other and make up the lost years of working separately. But there are problems that should be overcome. As a consequence of ignoring each other for a long time both sides use a very different terminology. The practitioners terminology, or the 'how to' texts as academic Craig Batty calls it, rarely reference their predecessors. Therefore not developing an argument but only giving their viewpoint which leads to imprecise and confusing terminology. Academics texts go through thorough review and revisions but results in to sophisticated and not practical terminology.[5] That is why there should be created an 'interlingua' to which both sides can work with.[6]

To exemplify the problem of confusing terminology: Robert McKee, author of the screenwriting manual *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the principles of screenwriting*, uses the term 'inciting incident' to point out an event in the story that radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life.[7] Christopher Vogler, author of the screenwriting manual *The Writer's Journey,* uses the term 'call to adventure'.[8] This is the moment when the protagonist is presented with a problem, challenge or adventure that forces her out of the 'ordinary world'.[9] These two terms are identical except for the fact that the inciting incident can be an event where the protagonist is not present. Other terms used with similar meaning are 'point of attack' and 'catalyst'. While this

---

[1] Patrick Cattrysse, *The protagonist's dramatic goals, wants and needs* (Journal of Screenwriting, 2010, 1.1): 84.
[2] Cattrysse, 84.
[3] The professional screenwriting community refers to professionals active within Hollywood cinema. Hollywood cinema is the main focus in the screenwriting manuals.
[4] Steven Maras, Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice (London: Wallflower press, 2009): 9.
[5] Craig Batty, *The physical and emotional threads of the archetypal hero's journey: Proposing common terminology and re-examining the narrative model* (Journal of Screenwriting, 2010, 1.2): 292-293.
[6] Cattrysse, 85.
[7] Robert McKee, Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting (London: Methuen, 1999): 189.
[8] This term coined by Joseph Campbell. Christopher Vogler is one of the rare authors that based his work on another work.
[9] Christopher Vogler, The Writer's Journey (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007): 10.

difference in terminology can be overcome, the real confusion comes when someone uses the same term but with a slightly different meaning. Syd Fields, author of the screenwriting manual *The Definitive Guide to Screenwriting,* also uses the term inciting incident, but for him it means an event that sets the story into motion and draws the main character into the story line. But he adds a second function to this term; it should also grab the attention of the reader and audience.[10] A clear overview is needed to create a space where people can debate with each other using the same terminology.

In this research I will look for the dominant discourses within screenwriting by unraveling the terminologies used, and therefore the narrative theories, within screenwriting manuals. By showing these dominant discourses within screenwriting manuals and comparing them to the dominant discourses within academic theory I hope to create a starting point from which this 'interlingua' can be created. Within this research it is important to note how the term discourse is being used. Hall defines it as: "Discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society"[11] When looking at the screenwriting manuals we are looking at how the authors write about a particular topic concerning screenwriting.

Because of the time and length limits of this research the focus will be on how the authors write about the function and structure of the first ten pages of a screenplay. The focus is on the first ten pages of a screenplay because it is regarded by many as the most important part. The audience, consciously or unconsciously, determines within this period of time if they will like the movie (or screenplay).[12] This quick judgement also translates towards the readers within the professional community. Most authors of these screenwriting manuals had jobs as screenplay analysts. They could not possibly read every screenplay that was given to them. So they came up with a way to quickly notice which screenplays were worth their time; reading the first ten pages of a screenplay.[13]

Therefore the main question is:

What are the dominant ideas about the function and structure of the first ten pages of a screenplay within the screenwriting discourse?

Before answering this question previous work concerning creating 'interlingua' will be discussed. Other questions surrounding the screenwriting discourse raised in the screenwriting manuals will be

---

[10] Syd Fields, The Definitive Guide to Screenwriting (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005): 129-131.
[11] Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. (London: Sage, 1997): 6.
[12] Fields, 23.
[13] Steven Price, A History of the Screenplay (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013): 206.

mapped out. Film studies also concerns itself with narrative theory which is useful to this research. After placing this research within its theoretical framework the method used will be explained and motivated. The analysis that follows is structured by the following sub-questions:

1. *How do the authors write about the categories concerning the function of the first ten pages of a screenplay?*

This question focuses on what kind of information (and why) should be placed in the first ten pages.

2. *How do the authors write about the categories concerning the structure of the first ten pages of a screenplay?*

This question focuses on how the information should be placed in the screenplay and in what way it is exposed to the reader and audience. After having analyzed every manual separately the viewpoints or arguments will be compared to each other. Do the screenwriting manuals support each other's ideas or to they differ from them completely? This will give us insight into the screenwriting discourses to which the screenwriting manuals contribute to.

3. *How do the screenwriting manual discourses compare to the academic discourses about screenwriting?*

By making this comparison we can find discourses that are dominant in both fields. Asking this question can give us insight into the gap between practitioners and academics.

2. Theoretical Framework

Screenwriting studies concerns itself with the discourse surrounding screenwriting. Researching screenwriting means thinking about film in general, the production process, the function performed by the movie screenplay, and the nature of expression in cinema. [14] In this research the focus is on screenwriting manuals. These manuals are handbooks for writing a screenplay that will sell.[15] Screenwriting studies talks about screenwriting manuals in two ways: the debate surrounding the academic value of these screenwriting manuals and the normative narrative theory used in screenwriting manuals. Normative narrative theory is used to create ideal models for the narrative structure.

---

[14] Maras, 1.
[15] Maras, 1.

2.1 Academic Value of Screenwriting Manuals

Steven Maras, an Australian academic, notices a key issue within screenwriting studies: the 'object problem'. Screenwriting is a practice where the screenplay is not the final product. It will transition into a movie and the screenplay itself changes continually during this process. The line where the script stops and the film starts can be blurry.[16] If there is the need to derive a story structure from a finalized product, question marks could be placed at the practical use of the result because the writer's process has not been taken into account. This is the problem that David Bordwell, an American film scholar, sees.[17] Most authors of the screenwriting manuals are not established writers. They were analysts. Notable authors of screenwriter manuals like Fields, McKee and Vogler were studio readers. Their job was to look for good scripts among the pile of scripts written by aspiring writers.[18] Therefore academics should be careful at deriving new meaning from screenwriting manuals.

Steven Price, an English academic and author of the book *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice,* says that the manuals have a significant influence on the screenwriting discourse. He renders the following question surrounding screenwriting manuals problematic: "To what extent can they be said to represent or emanate from film industries or practitioners themselves, and what is the nature and degree of their interaction with them?"[19] Price does not give an answer to this question and if there would be an answer to this question more extensive research would have to be done. A question he does answer is to what extent these manuals represent a discourse from within the screenplay themselves. He answers this question by showing how the manuals contribute to the discourse about two distinctive qualities of the screenplay: story structure and format.[20] How the screenwriting manuals use normative narrative theory.

2.2 Normative Narrative Theory

Steven Price compares the three-act structure to the four-act structure and eight-act structure (the sequence approach). The three-act structure is popularized by Syd Fields in his screenwriting manual *Screenplay* (1979). Kristen Thompson, a film scholar, contested the three-act structure and offers the four-act structure. Paul Gulino, another film scholar, suggests the eight-act structure because this structure was used in the late 1920s till the 1950s.[21] Price notices that the analysis and arguments revolve around films instead of screenplays. Both the work of Thompson and Gulino is established by

---

[16] Maras, 11.
[17] Bordwell, 28.
[18] Price, 206.
[19] Price, 206.
[20] Price, 207.
[21] Price, 207-208.

doing analysis on classic movies, movies which Fields also uses to strengthen his arguments. He concludes that the screenplays are susceptible to interpretation to any division of acts and each method of analysis can be equally convincing.[22] While the method of analysis is lacking, the fact that screenwriting manuals do contribute to the screenwriting discourse concerning story structure is another reason to take a closer look at the theory used by these screenwriting manuals.

Patrick Cattrysse is one of the scholars that works with normative narrative theory. He re-defines the interpretation of the wants and needs of the protagonist by analyzing the discourse raised within the screenwriting manuals and using them to create the before mentioned 'interlingua'. His focus is on the dramatic goal of the protagonist. The dramatic goal is explained by juxtaposing internal versus external, conscious versus unconscious. This duality within the dramatic goal is referred to as the want and need of the protagonist. He finds fault within all proposed explanations because of the fact that the dramatic goals are not played out on the story level. It is constructed at the level of interaction between plot and audience. Therefore he suggests further research between the screenplay and viewer engagement.[23] The 'wants and needs' debate is much more complex when adding audience involvement, relationships to the value systems expressed in a narrative and those experienced by the viewer. While this conclusion does gives a starting point for further research in assessing the wants and needs within a particular movie, it does not give a practical tool that will also help the practice-oriented research.

In contrast to the lack of practicality within Catrrysse's re-definition Craig Batty, an English scholar, ventures deeply in the normative narrative theory by creating his own normative story model. He takes the hero's journey from Joseph Campbell and the reworked version of this journey by Vogler and creates his own, academically correct, narrative structure. To create this new model he refers from using any examples in order to propose a strong sense of universal ideas and concepts. He focuses, within this model, on the physical and emotional journey taken by the protagonist.[24] At the core of his new model are these two narrative threads that show us that there is a special relationship between plot and character. In short; character transformation is encouraged to take place within the frame of the physical action of the plot. Batty does give the writer a tool to connect the protagonist's emotional transformation to the intent of the writer.[25] His new model also shows how a screenplay is set-up (the first ten pages). Physically the protagonist is located in an ordinary world where he has his own way of living. But between his world and him some negative associations are made and a physical goal is added to solve this negative association: his physical want. Emotionally the protagonist has negative feelings towards this world and a desire to lift these

---

[22] Ibidem.
[23] Cattrysse, 93-95.
[24] The physical and emotional journey can be interpreted as the wants and needs used by Cattrysse.
[25] Batty, 305 – 306.

feelings: his emotional need. Essentially this stage sets up a physical and emotional baseline between the ordinary world and the world he will soon enter. This stage ends with the call to adventure; he is given an opportunity to go on a physical journey that will aid his emotional transformation.[26]

2.3 Narrative Theory within Film Studies

The work of Kristen Thompson within the field of film studies is the closest towards the theories used in the screenwriting manuals.[27] Within her analysis of story structure in Hollywood films the first ten minutes should include the characters traits, social situations and the protagonists' goal. She also says that in American films a great deal of expository information is introduced as soon as possible.[28] The reason why this information should be given as soon as possible is because of the unity and clarity within the narratives in Hollywood films. In Thompson's words: "This means that everything in the movie should be motivated; that is each event, object, character trait, and other narrative component should be justified, explicitly or implicitly, by other elements in the film.[29] This is another reason why the first ten pages/minutes are so important. The narrative has to be as logical as possible. The audience needs to understand the characters motivations to avoid plot holes. That is why the early exposed character traits should explain the character's motivation. The main character is placed in a situation in which he desires something, a desire that is not easy to obtain and therefore pushes the narrative forward.[30]

Thompson recognizes a trend in which the opening start with a credit sequence in which there will be cut to different spaces and times showing the protagonist in his world.[31] This is one method to quickly expose character traits. In her analysis she does not specify what kind of structure is used in the first ten minutes of a movie besides the opening sequence. Thompson focused on the structure of the whole movie.

2.4 Academic Discourses

Within this theory some discourses are already visible. While normally this would not be discussed this early on, these discourses are derived from the theory and logic dictates that it should be discussed here. The first discourse is *clarity.* Especially Thompson focuses on making clear that everything should be motivated. This justification of events makes sure that the movie is logical and

---

[26] Batty, 303-304.
[27] Price, 256.
[28] Kristen Thompson, Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Narrative Technique (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1999): 53.
[29] Thompson, 12.
[30] Thompson, 14.
[31] Thompson, 53.

without plot holes.[32] In the book *Film Art: An Introduction* Thompson writes in collaboration with David Bordwell about film narrative. Once again the focus is on clarity, even though they call it cause and effect here. Simply said; if something happens, an effect, the cause has to be shown at one point during the movie.[33] Batty does not explicitly say that clarity is needed, but he does say that the emotional journey is the underlying universal story to the plot which appeals and speaks to the audience.[34] The emotional journey is the engine that drives the story, the protagonist's motivation. If a screenplay has a solid emotional journey the motivation of the protagonist are explained, it has clarity.

The second discourse is the *amount of protagonist's goals.* Within the first ten pages of a screenplay, the setup, the initial situation is established. According to Thompson the protagonist will receive one or more goals during the setup. The setup ends with complicating action, an event that sets the protagonist on the road to pursue this goal.[35] Thompson does not go deeper into how the initial situation should be established. Batty and the hero's journey do. They agree with the fact that an initial situation or ordinary world is established. But there can only be one main goal. This goal surfaces because of the negative association the protagonist has with the ordinary world.[36]

3. Method

To answer the main question, qualitative research will be used in the form of a comparative analysis. Six screenwriting manuals will be analyzed. This is more than the works of Batty, Cattrysse where only one or two manuals have been used. The six manuals consist of three seminal manuals and three manuals that build upon those works. The seminal works consists of Syd Field's *The Definitive Guide to Screenwriting (1988)[37]*, Robert McKee's *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the principles of screenwriting (1997)* and Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey (1998)*. These three works contain the normative narrative theory that is the foundation for the screenwriting discourse constructed within screenwriting manuals.[38] Recent works that builds upon this foundation are *The Tools of*, *Screenwriting Updated* by Linda Aronson (2000), *Save the Cat* by Blake Snyder (2005) and *Screenwriting (2011)* by David Howard and Edward Mabley. It should be noted that *Screenwriting* by Howard and Mabley is from Britain and *Screenwriting Updated* by Aronson is from Australia. I regard this difference of little relevance because they often refer to the American film industry and use Hollywood films to test their theory.

---

[32] Thompson, 12-13.
[33] David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, Film Art: An Introduction (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008): 77-79.
[34] Batty, 296.
[35] Thompson, 28.
[36] Batty, 305.
[37] Syd Fields first book *Screenplay* came out in 1979.
[38] Maras, 10.

An Iterative process will be used to analyze these screenwriting manuals. This means that there is continues interplay between theory, data collection and analysis. In the following image an iterative process is shown:

In practice this means that the screenwriting manuals already had been read; underwent the initial analysis, before undergoing the final analysis. This iteration process is reflexive by nature. Due to the visiting and revisiting of the data and connecting them to emerging insights there will be a better focus and understanding of the material.[40] The categories are derived out of the theories and used to analyze the screenwriting manuals. Due to the iterative process these categories can be linked to significant concepts. By focusing on categories we can notice small similarities or differences about how the authors talk about these themes. This is valuable in this research because the authors use different terms for (almost) similar meanings.

The categories used to analyze the function are derived from the theory used by Thompson and Batty. Thompson says that in Hollywood films the first ten minutes should include the characters traits, social situations and the protagonists' goal.[41] The audience needs to understand the characters motivations from the beginning. That is why the early exposed character traits should explain the character's motivation.[42] In the story model created by Batty the protagonist starts in an ordinary world where the protagonist does his ordinary business. There are negative associations between him and the world which makes him feel negatively towards his way of living. The protagonist his

---

[39] Robert Yin, Case Study Research: Design and Methods. (London: Sage, 2014): 1.
[40] Prachi Srivastava and Nick Hopwood, *A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis* (International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2009, 8.1): 77.
[41] Thompson, 53.
[42] Thompson, 14.

goal for the story is to remove this negativity.[43] Note that the protagonist's goal is a result from the conflict. In general, there is a difference between the character and the world which will undeniably result in conflict. Their relationship between these themes is shown in the following image:
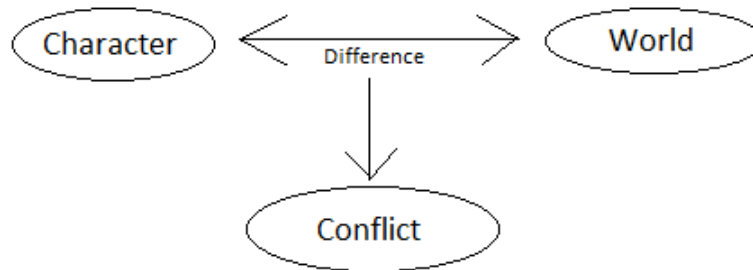
Therefore the categories used when analyzing the function are character, world and conflict.

According to Batty's model the story can begin with an opening scene that contains a symbol of what lies ahead, a prologue, visual sequence or voice-over. Essentially there is a lot of exposition to set a baseline to compare the special world the protagonist is about to enter. The ordinary world is changed when the protagonist gets the call to adventure, to go to the special world.[44] Thompson notices a trend in which the opening starts with a credit sequence in which there will be cut to different spaces and times showing the protagonist in his world.[45] Such a credit sequence is a visual sequence to expose the characters traits. The categories used to analyze structure will therefore be the opening scene, exposition and change. Note that these generic categories are used to analyze the screenwriting manuals and are not the dominant academic discourses.

4. Analysis

According to Syd Fields, former script analyst, the function of the first ten pages should be setting up the story, establishing the character and illustrating the situation.[46] All screenwriter manual authors will agree to this. This definition of function can be seen as too generic. Robert McKee, former script analyst, does not focus on the first ten pages. He sees this part as setting up the story, may it take 7 pages or 22 pages. He believes that the plot of the story determines which structure should be used. There is no magic model to follow that will create a good screenplay.[47] David Howard, a professor at the University of Southern California shares the same view. Establishing the character and illustrating the situation is setting up the story: which always happens in the beginning. The screenplay

---

[43] Batty, 303-304.
[44] Ibidem.
[45] Thompson, 53.
[46] Fields, 23.
[47] McKee, 43.

consultant Christopher Vogler says that the hero should be introduced as soon as possible.[48] Such an introduction means establishing the character. Blake Snyder, author of the popular book *Save the Cat*, also says that the hero should be set up in the 'set-up', the first ten pages of a screenplay.[49] This analysis will go deeper into the function than such a generic definition.

4.1 Function

The function of the first ten pages of a screenplay is analyzed by character, world and conflict.

4.1.1. Character

How do you establish your character? Syd Fields says: "to establish the protagonist you have to establish the dramatic need." The dramatic need is defined as: "what the character wants to win, gain, get, or achieve during the course of the screenplay". The dramatic need is both internal (emotional) and external (physical).[50] A physical goal always stems from an internal problem. Now we know who the story is about. Howard sees this almost similarly. The audience gets to know the protagonist by knowing its chief characteristic, which is usually an intense desire to achieve a certain goal.[51] This main object of the protagonist can be the only goal of the movie if the film is to have unity. If a protagonist has more than one aim it will dissipates the interest of the audience.[52] While Howard does not exclude the duality of internal versus external he also does not include it. Can unity still be achieved when the protagonist wants something, but needs something else?

Christopher Vogler establishes the character in a different way. He involves the audience. He describes a journey where he sees the protagonist as a hero, also called the hero's journey. The first thing that has to be done is to invite the audience to identify, to merge with the hero; to see the story world through his eyes.[53] This can be done by giving the hero a universal flaw that the audience can relate to. The hero has to overcome this flaw during his journey.[54] The difference between giving the protagonist's goal and the hero's flaw is that the protagonist is aware of his goal. The hero is often unaware of his flaw. According to Blake Snyder there has to be more than one flaw. He calls it his rule: 'six things that needs fixing'. While six is arbitrary, these things stand for character tics and flaws that will be exposed later on.[55] The flaws will be exposed; they create an obstacle and will be

---

[48] Vogler, 90.
[49] Blake Snyder, Save the Cat (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005): 74-75.
[50] Fields, 25.
[51] David Howard and Edward Mabley, The Tools of Screenwriting (London: Souvenir Press LTD., 1993): 21-23.
[52] Howard and Mabley, 43-45.
[53] Vogler, 30.
[54] Vogler, 31-33.
[55] Snyder, 75-76.

cured later in the screenplay.[56] This means the flaws are not exposed so that the audience can connect with the protagonist. But Snyder does think that it is important that the audience likes the protagonist. His book is even named after this rule: 'save the cat'. This means that in the set-up there must be a scene where the protagonist does something which makes the audience like him; like saving a cat. This is especially true for anti-heroes and semi-bad guys.[57] According to Vogler and Snyder the protagonist's appeal to the audience is highly important.

Robert McKee holds the attention of the audience by making the character dimensional. McKee says: "Dimensions fascinate; contradictions in nature or behavior rivet the audience's concentration. Therefore, the protagonist must be the most dimensional character in the cast to focus empathy on the star role." To create a multi-dimensional character is to create contradiction within the character. It can be a conflict of emotion (guilt-ridden ambition) or simply a characteristic in conflict with a characterization (a charming thief).[58]

4.1.2. World

Syd Fields describes the world the protagonist is in as presenting the dramatic situation; the circumstances surrounding the action. This can be a science fiction world or simply a social situation the protagonist finds himself in. The dramatic situation stated in the first ten pages often foreshadows obstacles that the protagonist has to overcome during the movie.[59] This dramatic situation is similar to Snyder's rule: 'six things that needs fixing'. They both create obstacles later in the screenplay. The difference however is that the six flaws are a result from character tics and flaws which will be exploited later on.[60] Field's dramatic situation does not have to be limited to character flaws.

McKee approach to the world is more theoretical. He uses the term 'story setting'. A story setting is four-dimensional: period, duration, location and level of conflict.[61] The period is the story's place in time. The duration is a story's length through time. The location is a story's place in space. Finally, the level of conflict is the story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles.[62] The story setting will always be exposed early on because it dictates the internal laws of the (fictional) world. McKee has, as opposed to Fields, a much more literal interpretation of what the world means. If you would compare them Fields only talks about the level of conflict. If the circumstances, the world, the

---

[56] To create obstacles means having more smaller objectives in the second act.
[57] Snyder, 120-123.
[58] McKee, 378.
[59] Fields, 107.
[60] Snyder, 75.
[61] Note that the level of conflict has nothing to do with the conflict within the story. It refers to in which part of society the conflict takes place; in individuals, the political, economic, ideological etc.
[62] McKee, 68-69.

surrounding or the situation adds to the conflict, then it is of value.

Christopher Vogler does not talk about explaining the circumstances surrounding the action or conflict. Before there is conflict the ordinary world needs to be established. This is the first stage the hero goes through. Before the hero starts with his journey an ordinary world has to be established as a baseline for comparison. The journey to a different world is only special in contrast to a mundane world where the hero does his normal routine. While this world seems boring and calm the hero's problems and conflict are present in the ordinary world waiting to be activated. [63] This means that according to Vogler character and the world are always shown together. Instead of presenting the circumstances surrounding the action we can interpret the ordinary world as presenting the circumstances surrounding the character. Linda Aronson does the same thing as Vogler. Instead of calling it the ordinary world she calls it 'normality', but it serves the same function: creating a baseline before to emphasis change.[64]

4.1.3. Conflict

After establishing the character and illustrating the world the main conflict of the movie will present itself. Just like the other categories a lot of different terms have been used to describe this. Syd Fields uses the term dramatic premise to talk about the conflict that results from a protagonist having an undeniable difference with the world. The dramatic premise is what the story is about; it provides the dramatic thrust that drives the story to its conclusion.[65]

McKee uses another term for describing the main conflict: a controlling idea: "A controlling idea may be expressed in a single sentence that describes how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end."[66] The controlling idea consists of a value, the resolve of the whole movie, and a cause; the reason why the protagonist tries to change the value.[67] For example: crime does not pay because the protagonist got too greedy. Now we know how the story ends (value) and what causes the change. Just like Syd Fields' dramatic premise the controlling idea drives the story.

Christopher Vogler main conflict will be exposed in the ordinary world, the first stage in the hero's journey. Here the dramatic question will be raised. Will the hero achieve his goal, overcome his flaw or learn his lesson?[68] The function of this dramatic question is that, besides driving the story forward, it hooks the audience and involves them with the emotion of the characters. Again Vogler

---

[63] Vogler, 87.
[64] Linda Aronson, Screenwriting Updated (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2001): 45-46.
[65] Fields, 23.
[66] McKee, 115.
[67] McKee, 115-116.
[68] Vogler, 88.

points out the importance of connecting the story to the audience. Syd Fields also states that the dramatic question should be raised in the first ten pages because by stating the dramatic question you show the audience what the dramatic premise is.[69] Vogler and Fields use the dramatic question in exactly the same way. Fields just (unnecessarily) adds the dramatic premise to the equation.

For Snyder the audience, again, plays an important role. The main conflict that drives the story forward is the thematic premise. This premise should be stated in first ten pages and should be primal. The protagonist's desire must be so primal (universal) that it will connect to the audience on a basic level.[70] To connect the main conflict to the universal desire of the protagonist limits the theme.

Howard also uses the term premise but in a whole different way. For Howard the premise is the entire situation that exists as the protagonist starts moving towards his objective. This means all the necessary information about the characters, world and all the other background material to understand what the conflict is about. [71] The main conflict should not be exposed in the first ten pages. Only at the ending the theme should be stated. Otherwise the whole movie becomes about proving a point which leads to lifeless characters and clichés.[72] Howard is the only author that says that the main conflict should not be driven by the theme.

In general, the goal of the protagonist often reflects the main conflict in the movie. It is what drives the story from the beginning to the ending. Vogler and Snyder link the main conflict to the protagonist. The other three leave room for a less strict interpretation. While the protagonist should play an important part it does not have to be the center of all the conflict.

4.2 Structure

We know what information should be in the first ten pages of screenplay. But how do we begin? How do we give this information to the reader and when is enough information conveyed to start the story?

4.2.1 Opening Scene

Christopher Vogler says that the opening image should set the mood. This can be done by using visual metaphors, suggesting the theme or foreshadowing the story. In cases of a lot of backstory prologues can be used. Which of these methods will be used is determined by the story.[73] Blake Snyder suggests a similar opening image: one that sets the tone or the mood of the film. It basically

---

[69] Fields, 24.
[70] Snyder, 158-160.
[71] Howard and Mabley, 49-50.
[72] Howard and Mabley, 55-56.
[73] Vogler, 85-87.

says to the audience: this is going to be good! This image is often the opposite of the final image.[74]

Syd Fields says that the opening scene should be a visual grabber, which grabs the audience by the throat and seizes their attention.[75] A visual grabber can be a scene which immediately sets the story into motion: the inciting incident.[76]. By showing this incident he grabs the audience by their throats. After this scene all the necessary information will be exposed. Only after the first ten pages, where normally the inciting incident would be, the audience would fully understand the scene.

The other authors do not have a particular preference for an opening image/scene. The opening scene can be whatever needs to be shown; the story dictates the structure. Howard puts emphasis on his use of the term premise. Show what the audience needs to know to start the story.[77]

4.2.3. Exposition

The opening scene has been written. It is appropriate to fill the rest of the first ten screenplay pages with exposition and backstory.[78] But how should we expose information? Syd Fields and Vogler do not give methods of exposing information, but McKee does. He cares about the way that the information is conveyed to the audience. This is done through exposition. "Exposition means facts – the information about setting, biography, and characterization that the audience needs to know to follow and comprehend the events of the story".[79] To be skillful in exposition means making the exposition invisible. This can be done by dramatizing the expositions. Expose information through action or convert information to ammunition in dialogue to create conflict. While the beginning of a story is often filled with exposition it is not exclusive for the beginning, it is sparsely given throughout the story. Withholding information is equally important as giving it.[80] Methods often used to quickly expose information are flashbacks, dream sequences, montages and voice-overs.[81] One of the best ways to display true character (establishing character) is by making them make choices. The greater the pressure the truer the choice is to the character's true nature.[82]

The other authors do not talk so extensively as McKee on the subject of exposition. What does come back is dramatizing expositions. Blake Snyder has a rule for this: 'the pope in the pool'. The pope in a swimsuit at the Vatican's pool takes the viewer attention away from the information give. The rule means to expose the information in an entertaining way.[83]

---

[74] Snyder, 72.
[75] Fields, 128.
[76] Fields, 129-130.
[77] Howard and Mabley, 49-50.
[78] Vogler, 95.
[79] McKee, 334.
[80] McKee, 334-335.
[81] McKee, 340-344.
[82] McKee, 101.
[83] Snyder, 123.

The main problem Howard has with exposition is that it is only necessary for the audience; the characters already know it themselves. This makes unmasked exposition seem unnatural. Therefore it should be used sparingly as a narrative device, a tool to drive the plot forward; not to create conflict.[84] A trick to mask exposition is by using conflict or by making the audience work to figure out the past. But not too much information should be given. Delay exposition as much as possible, this will hold the audience interest longer.[85] Howard does say the same thing as McKee; mask the information by using conflict. He does differ from him by saying that the first ten pages are not necessary the place where information should be exposed.

This is in contrast with Linda Aronson's vision. According to her the identity of the protagonist must be established as close as possible to the start. This means exposing a lot of facts unnoticeable. There does not have to be much conflict. It can be enough to show the protagonist walking through his normal world (normality) and talking about himself via voiceover. This method contains almost no conflict but is very practical.[86] This is only one of the methods to expose information. The information that needs to be conveyed determines which method is used. Sometimes this is a voiceover, other times a prologue or a visual sequence. Another method according to Aronson: "sometimes showing a character behaving in a certain way but not explaining what caused this behavior provides for interest and suspense".[87] This corresponds with Fields suggestion to put the inciting incident in the beginning as the opening scene.

4.2.3. Change

Now, ideally, the audience is hooked and the story is set-up. There has to be an event that drives the protagonist into action: the change. If the inciting incident did not open the movie, as Syd Fields suggested, then it should be placed here to end the first ten pages of a screenplay. If the inciting incident was the opener then from this point on the story can build upon that incident.[88]

McKee also using the inciting incident, for him it is an incident that radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist's life. As the story begins the protagonist's life is relatively in balance. This balance will be upset and sends the protagonist on a quest to restore balance, the goal of the protagonist.[89] The inciting incident of the protagonist does not have to happen in the first ten pages, it can also be later on in the first act. If this is the case than an inciting incident of a sub-story

---

[84] Howard and Mabley, 60.
[85] Howard and Mabley, 61-62.
[86] Aronson, 85.
[87] Aronson, 87.
[88] Fields, 129-130.
[89] McKee, 189 & 208.

will be placed early on to gain the attention of the audience.[90] This upset in balance also happens in the hero's journey of Christopher Vogler. The protagonist has been given the opportunity to remove the negative association he has with the ordinary world, this is the 'call to adventure'.[91]

Snyder calls the 'call to adventure' the catalyst: something bad will happen to the protagonist that eventually will bring the hero happiness.[92] It is essential that the catalyst happens at page 12 because of his rule: laying pipe. This means that if too much information is given the audience will get bored.[93] Aronson's term for this change is the 'disturbance'. She explains it as "the disturbance will force the protagonist in a new direction, therefore starting the story."[94] Aronson uses specifically the term 'disturbance' because: "the term disturbance is useful because it clarifies the link between the *protagonist* and what is about to happen, therefore makes identifying a potential *disturbance* easier".[95] This link is not insinuated by the term catalyst or inciting incident.

The authors are divided on the timing when to introduce the protagonist's goal. Fields clearly says that the dramatic need, the protagonist's goal has to be established in the first ten pages. Snyder says that the thematic premise, the strong desire of the protagonist must be place in page five of your screenplay. Howard is not clear on when the protagonist's goal should be revealed, only that is should be one goal. The timing of Fields and Snyder is in contrast with the theories of McKee and Aronson. According to McKee the protagonist's goal must be made clear after the first ten pages of a screenplay because the inciting incident upsets the balance of the protagonist's world. His goal will be to restore the balance. This is the same with Aronson. The protagonist's goal is made clear when the 'disturbance' comes. This forces the protagonist to leave his normality. The problem that arises from this disturbance needs to be solved; this is the protagonist's goal.

4.3. Screenwriting Discourse

The goal was to point out dominant discourses within these screenwriter manuals. It is not meaningful to only name the ideas that gain the most support. However it is important to name the discourses in which these dominant ideas come together or these ideas are shaped. The following table gives an oversight on the positions the authors have taken concerning the categories:

---

[90] McKee, 198-201.
[91] Vogler, 88.
[92] Snyder, 77.
[93] Snyder, 128-129.
[94] Aronson, 41.
[95] Aronson, 46.

Function	Fields	McKee	Vogler	Snyder	Howard	Aronson
Character	Dramatic need	Dimensional characters	Audience identifies with hero	Likeable character	Unity: One Protagonist's goal	-
World	Dramatic situation	Story setting	Ordinary world	-	-	Normality
Conflict	Dramatic premise	Controlling idea	Dramatic question	Thematic premise	Premise	-
Structure	**Fields**	**McKee**	**Vogler**	**Snyder**	**Howard**	**Aronson**
Opening	Visual grabber / Ending	Story dictates opening	Setting the mood / Conveying backstory	Set the tone / Hook the audience / Opposite of ending	Premise	-
Exposition	-	Dramatizing / Create choices	-	Expose entertaining	Mask and delay expostion	Invisible exposition
Change	Inciting incident	Inciting incident	Call to adventure	Catalyst	-	Disturbance

Table 1: An overview of the screenwriter manual authors' standpoints.

It is also important to notice that some categories aren't talked about much. Mostly the category world and exposition are being left out. In the category exposition most of the other authors agree that exposition must be invisible by masking it with entertainment or drama. Those are not the dominant discourses that revolve around screenwriting.

I have discerned three discourses that are dominant. The first discourse is *function versus structure*. Does the story dictates what the structure has to be or does the structure dictates the story? Syd Fields, Blake Snyder put the emphasis on structure. They give a model that makes clear on what pages which information should be given, regardless of content. This focus on structure is visible in the fact that Syd Fields says that in the first ten pages of a screenplay the dramatic need, dramatic situation and the dramatic premise has to be established.[96] Blake Snyder takes it a step further and gives the exact page numbers for the theme stated and the catalyst.[97] The other authors do not focus on page numbers. If what needs to be told is told than the story can move forward. If the function of setting up the story has been fulfilled then the plot can be driven forward. The structure is subject to the story.

The second discourse is the *involvement of the audience*. The reason this is such a delicate topic is because involving the audience is not practical. How do writers, sitting behind their computers, gauge what the audience likes? Still authors like Vogler, McKee and Snyder often advise: "it has to relate to the audience" or "the audience has to like it". This can be seen in their position

---

[96] Fields, 90.
[97] Snyder, 70.

about character, conflict and the opening scene. Even though they involve the audience they do so in a practical way. They tell how to appeal to the audience: by making a dimensional character or by creating a universal flaw/desire within the character. The only aspect they do not make practical is 'hooking' the audience. How do you hook the audience? According to Aronson a hook is "a crisis of some kind to get the audience interested in their story".[98] But how do you get the audience interested? That is the question that every manual tries to answer.

The last discourse is *the placement of the protagonist's goal*. Is it before or after the change? Should the change completely change the protagonist's life and therefore give him a goal? Or is the life of the protagonist already unbalanced and the change brings them an opportunity to restore the balance. The inciting incident and the 'call to adventure' insinuate the latter; they give the protagonist an opportunity to restore their world. Or they make the problems so big that they cannot be ignored anymore. The term catalyst is complex. While the word catalyst has an inherent meaning to accelerate a reaction Snyder clearly states that the catalyst is a life-changing event that gives the protagonist a goal.[99] Just like Aronson's term 'disturbance' gives a problem to the protagonist that needs to be solved.

4.4 Comparative Analysis

By comparing discourses we know how the focus within screenwriting manuals compares to the focus within academic works. If you look at both the discourses the protagonist's goal stands out. In screenwriting manuals they are more concerned with the placement of the goal instead of how many goals there should be. This has two causes. This first cause is that in film studies the movies that are analyzed already have proven themselves, the placement of the protagonist's goal is not in question anymore. When you are writing a screenplay the important thing is to keep the attention of the audience. A well timed protagonist's goal is a powerful tool for this. Another cause is the difference in defining goals. According to Vogler a character has one ultimate flaw; this flaw makes us like the protagonist, but it also gives him purpose. Only in the finale of the movie this flaw will be overcome.[100] Between the beginning and the end there can be side goals. Snyder would call these side goals "six things that need fixing". These are obstacles/side goals that have to be overcome during the movie.[101] Within screenwriting manuals the standard is to give the protagonist one main goal.

The academic discourse about Clarity is about the discourse function versus structure. To

---

[98] Aronson, 111.
[99] Snyder, 77.
[100] Vogler, 31-33.
[101] Snyder, 60.

have clarity is a function. If a movie or screenplay explains and motivates everything that happens then it has served its function. A majority of the perspectives seem to favor function over structure.

When analyzing a movie the audience is of less importance because mostly proven movies are subject to analysis. The way that the screenwriting manuals talk about involving the audience is of no importance to film studies. A potential topic of interest can be the construction of meaning. Cattrysse, the Belgian scholar, proposes this as a solution in his article about how values are attached to narrative elements.[102] But this kind of research is less interesting for writers because it does not give them any practical tools.

By comparing these discourses the gap between academics and practitioners is shown. Especially if we keep in mind that we should question how much these manuals represent the writers. A characteristic for this gap is the difference in focus. Screenwriting manuals and the scholars working in screenwriting studies focus heavily on the protagonist. Every other character in the screenplay fills a role to serve the protagonist. Film Studies, in this case Thompson, does not focus solely on the protagonist; they take the whole movie into account. The finished product can be seen as a whole.

5. Conclusion

In the last few decades there has been explosive release of screenwriting manuals.[103] In these manuals normative narrative theory is used without referring to the theories used in other manuals. These manuals show the reader how to write a good screenplay that will sell. They show how to structure your screenplay. Especially the first ten pages are important because "if you did not have captured the interest of the audience by then the audience will get bored".[104]

The main question for this research was: *What are the dominant ideas about the function and structure of the first ten pages of a screenplay within the screenwriting discourse?* The reason this question is asked, is to create a starting point from which 'interlingua' can be created. If we take a look at the dominant discourses, function versus structure and the protagonist's goal, then we see that the different terminology used has often a slightly different meaning. This difference is meaning is created by a difference in interpretation or working style. To create an 'interlingua' means to combine them all under a new term/definition. This is hard to do if we talk about matters of interpretation. A better option would be to create an overview. Even then the question still remains if this new 'interlingua' will also be used by the practitioners.

---

[102] Cattrysse, 91-92.
[103] Maras, 9.
[104] Snyder, 77.

This research also had its limitations. There are many ways to write a script but these screenwriting manuals give normative models to break through into Hollywood. A lot of movies and screenplays made in Europe do belong to this category. Another shortcoming is that screenwriting has not gotten a lot of attention within film studies. Now with the emergence of screenwriting studies this should change. The fact remains that the works of Cattrysse and Batty mostly used screenwriting manuals as their source for narrative theory.

Because of my own personal interest with screenwriting manuals an iterative process was inevitable. To visit and revisit the data with new categories gave me the opportunity to really make an overview of the different perspectives.

There can be a continuation of this research by using these results as the basis for a new 'interlingua'. Even though I earlier said that an overview could be a better practical tool, from an academic standpoint creating this 'interlingua' is still valuable to increase our understanding of storytelling. This includes doing research in different disciplines. Just like Patrick Cattrysse notices the audience as an important part of establishing meaning this research showed that the audience is one of the unknown territories that can be explored. Take for example the following advice: "All the complex theories of structure and its components boil down to the same basic storytelling problem, namely, how to keep a live audience engaged."[105] To make a practical tool out of this extensive receptive research needs to be done. Even if there is an 'interlingua' that will practically help screenwriters, we would still need to know what the practical value of it is. How much does a writer benefit from using story models? Or does a screenplay only gain its value when it is translated into a movie?

---

[105] Aronson, 40.

6. Bibliography

Aronson, Linda. *Screenwriting Updated: New (and Conventional) Ways of Writing for the Screen.* Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2001.

Batty, Craig. "The physical and emotional threads of the archetypal hero's journey: Proposing common terminology and re-examining the narrative model" *Journal of Screenwriting* 1.2 (2010): 291-308.

Bordwell, David and Kristen Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.

Cattrysse, Patrick. "The protagonist's dramatic goals, wants and needs" *Journal of Screenwriting* 1.1 (2010): 83–97.

Field, Syd. *The Definitive Guide to Screenwriting*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2003.

Hall, Stuart, ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage, 1997.

Howard, David and Edward Mabley. *The Tools of Screenwriting*. London: Souvenir Press Ltd., 1993.

Maras, Steven. *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice*. London: Wallflower Press, 2009.

McKee, Robert. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting.* London: Methuen, 1999.

Price, Steven. *A History of the Screenplay*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.

Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat*. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005.

Srivastava, Prachi and Nick Hopwood. "A Practical Iterative Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis" *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8.1 (2009): 76-84.

Thompson, Kristen. *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey*. Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007.

Yin, Robert. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods.* London: Sage, 2014.