

Research on the Artistic Characteristics of Screenwriting

Jiayi Yang

Qingdao Mengnuo School, No. 17 Wenhai Road, Jimo Lanse Guigu Hexinqu, Qingdao City,
Shandong Province, China

angela@cas-harbour.org

Keywords: Characteristics; Screenwriting; Scriptwriting; Antagonism

Abstract. The ultimate goal of screenwriting is to produce a highly specialized and compacted story that communicates a clear vision and art values to the audience. This paper will focus on the artistic characteristics of scriptwriting and explore that the scriptwriter can deliver values through various ways, namely, design of structures, setting, characters, protagonists and antagonists, crisis, climax and resolution as well as mystery and suspense. Meanwhile, even the morally or legally wrongful values in the real world can be understood and accepted by the audience, as long as the empathy of the audience is aroused by the script.

1. Introduction

Screenwriting or scriptwriting is the art of writing screenplays for mass media. To a certain extent, screenwriting is a form of art as it is often interpreted upon an artist or script writer's own performance and unique experiences[1]. A skillful and talented script writer can have many tools in hand to deliver the values to target audiences[2]. Compared with narratives and novels, the screenplay focuses more on the literal and visual aspects of the chosen story than on the internal thoughts of the characters. In this paper, various artistic characteristics of screenwriting including structure, characterization, crisis, climax and resolution, mystery and suspense will be discussed in detail.

2. Structure

2.1 Structure of a story

Structure is a selection of events or activities from main characters' life stories which are further composed into a strategic sequence to arouse empathy and emotions among audiences or express a particular view of life[3]. The story event illustrated in the structure of a script can create very meaningful changes in main characters in terms of altering values or moral reasoning process. The value system of the characters is not necessary to be positive or negative. In other words, it may shift either to a positive or negative direction[4]. The changes in character's value system also depend on the design of the structure and genre. In film Noir, for instance, protagonists are not always exhibiting morally correct behaviors. The changes in values are often achieved through conflicts. In *Godfather*, the youngest son of Don Vito Corleone, Michael initially was reluctantly joining the Mafia but lately, he was convinced that he had to take over the family business[5]. The values depicted the *Godfather* is not necessarily positive. The story revolves around how the Mafia empire was constructed. There are a lot of crime scenes appeared in the script such as murder, assassination, gangsters, etc. However, through arranging various acts of the story, it is possible for audiences to realize how the changes are taken place from the major conflicts within characters. Michael Corleone initially is seriously against the idea of joining a gangster. He demonstrated his loyalty to the country during WWII but he also noticed how corruptions became rampant. When his father and brother were attacked by other gangsters, he finally decided to do his family business and joined the Mafia. The change is not occurring in a positive direction but the empathy among audiences is effectively aroused. It is because audiences can understand that Michael, as the protagonist, had to protect his family members and the country had a very severe problem of corruption.

2.2 Structure and Setting

The setting of a story has four dimensions[6]. Period is mainly referring to a broad time-setting of a story. The Godfather narrates a story in the 1950s just after WWII. Duration, on the other hand, is a story's length through time[5]. As the aforementioned, the script of Godfather I, mainly tells a story about how Michael finally becomes a member of Mafia. The duration is thus covering Michael's experience within this duration. Location is about a story's place in physical space. For instance, the story of Godfather takes place in the U.S and Italy. However, as compared with the other three dimensions, the level of conflict is always the major part of the story in a script[6]. It reflects the story's position in regards to human struggles. In the film, Chinatown (1974), the major conflict is that Evelyn Mulwray is struggling whether she should tell Jake, a private detective about an astonishing truth, that is, she had his father's child[7]. McKee [8] in his book, "Story", explains the level of conflict of Evelyn in details. McKee states that a scriptwriter can easily write that Jake, as a private detective, could know about the dirty truth not from the mouth of Evelyn. Many people including the butler of her father actually knows the secret. But only through high level of conflict, audiences will be as shocked as Jake when hearing that Mrs Mulwray's daughter is also her sister[7]. The art of script design should carefully follow a unique structure and setting which arouse audiences' feeling and empathy about main characters.

2.3 Structure and Characters

The function of a structure is to provide a progressively building pressures that allure or force main characters into a more and more difficult situation[6]. So to speak, characters have to make risk-taking decisions or actions that ultimately reveal their true natures or even the unconscious "self". The function of characters, on the other hand, facilitates the characterization process such that audiences can predict or understand characters' actions based on their qualities and personality traits. Santino "Sonny" Corleone is brave but also rash person in the script of the Godfather[5]. He can fight directly with his enemies without fear and even punish his younger sister's husband for his wrongdoings, but his rash and impatient qualities ultimately lead to his death. Even without finishing the film, audiences can predict that Sonny's ending. Characters can be young or old, educated or ignorant, brave or timid, generous or selfish. Different personalities will lead to different actions, mental activities and decision-making of characters in a script. (refer with: Eq.1, Eq.2, ...) should be placed in the middle and transformed by equation conversion manager, do not use PrintScreen. There should be 6 pounds of space above the equation and 6 pounds of space below it before the text continues. The equations have to be numbered sequentially, and the number put in parentheses at the right-hand edge of the text. Equations should be punctuated as if they were an ordinary part of the text.

3. Protagonist and Antagonist

3.1 The design of Protagonist

In a screenplay, the protagonist is often given the capacity and intelligence to pursue his conscious or unconscious desire defined by the story setting and structure[6]. The ending with respect to a protagonist should not be easily predictable. Scriptwriters should focus on building to a final action beyond audiences' imagination. In the film "Inception," audiences have to guess very hard about whether the protagonist is in a real-world or still trapped in a virtual dreamland as the top is spinning on and on[9]. Very similarly, Michael Corleone, in the film Godfather I, fled to Italy but many audiences might assume that he was going to succeed his father's business smoothly[5].

3.2 The principles of antagonism

Antagonists, on the other hand, serve as a direct contrast to make the protagonists more adorable, intellectually fascinating or emotionally compelling[6]. For instance, in the screenplay of Chinatown (1974), Mrs. Mulwray's father has to be sufficiently evil. He violently raped his daughter. The contrast shows that Mrs Mulwray is a helpless female who is sacrificed for compulsory

heterosexuality. According to the script of Chinatown, “She [Mrs Mulwray] kept the man’s name to herself throughout her labour and dying: she did not accuse him that he be punished with her”[7]. The scriptwriter intends to deliver a message to audiences without telling. Audiences can realize that women were at a very inferior social position as compared with their male counterparts at that time. When Mrs Mulwray committed suicide, the tragic ending further arouses audiences’ empathy about women. Audiences are expected to develop some further thinking, such as the power of men to force male sexuality upon women.

4. Crisis, Climax and Resolution

Crisis is referring to the dilemma which confronts protagonist with the most powerful antagonist in his or her life. The protagonist must make a critical and difficult decision to take actions in order to achieve his purpose and desire[6]. Michael Corleone initially was strongly against the idea of joining the Mafia family business, even though his father was the Godfather. Don Vito Corleone did not reach an agreement with drug baron vigil “The Turk” Sollozzo as he personally believed that drug-dealing was highly immoral even though it generated a huge profit[5]. Sollozzo, backed by the Tattaglia family thus was plotting against Vito Corleone. The Godfather was severely injured by the Tattaglia members but he ultimately survived. When Vito Corleone was receiving treatment in a hospital, Michael realized that local police was bribed by Sollozzo and Tattaglia. All the body-guards at the hospital were removed by the police. Then Michael was in a crisis. His bottom-line was to protect his family members. Therefore, he had to make a very difficult decision whether he should join the Mafia.

In addition, the climax is a stage or revolution in a script that values are changed either from positive to negative or negative to positive[10]. The change itself will significantly move target audiences. The movie, “Catch me if you can” starred by Leonardo, show that the protagonist finally realizes that it was wrong to be a swindler[11]. He decides to help the police and local government to fight against false checks with his knowledge and skill. In the climax, audiences can resonate with the value changes within the protagonist’s mind. Audiences will feel happy for the protagonist as he is now moving toward the right direction in his life.

Furthermore, in the resolution part, like the aforementioned, scriptwriters should craft an ending that is beyond audiences’ imagination. It is also applicable for them to dramatize flashbacks in order to create a turning point of a story. However, scriptwriters should be very careful for using flashbacks. They should not bring audiences in a flashback if the desire for doing so is not being created[8]. For instance, in the script of the Godfather, audiences are strongly interested what makes Don Vito Corleone become such a great person. Audiences can read about Vito’s behaviors and values at very early stages. For instance, Amerigo Bonasera, a fictional character, though he is a not very important figure in this screenplay, chose to keep away from the Mafia[5]. He came back to beg Vito Corleone for helping him punish his daughter’s boyfriend who brutally beat her. Albeit Vito criticized him for not treasuring their friendship. He still chose to help Amerigo as Vito’s wife was the Godmother of his daughter. Through telling a lot of Vito’s stories, the scriptwriter is successfully created a desire that audiences expect to learn more about Vito’s past. Then he starts to use a flashback and tell the past story of Vito in Italy and how he managed to create his mafia empire in the U.S.

5. Mystery and suspense

Sometimes, the artistic characteristics can also be reflected through creating a mysterious and suspenseful environment. In mystery, audiences tend to know less than the script writer. In Chinatown (1974), only the writer knows that the daughter of Mrs Mulwray is also her sister[7]. Audiences never know about this truth until the story reaches its climax when Mrs Mulwray confessed everything to the private detective. Very similarly, script writers can dupe audiences about the plot of his or her script. For instance, McKee[8] points out that in a movie, when audiences judge from the shadow of a person, possibly a criminal, is holding up an axe and ready to kill someone, they will feel strained about the ongoing crime. The next minute, script writer may show his audiences that the person is just

cutting fireworks. The other person is just watching aside.

Apart from mystery and suspense, script writer should also avoid the problem of coincidence. Many script writers have the mistake of over-using coincidence especially in a very situation that they cannot find any appropriate solution. McKee [8] uses the example of Jurassic Park to showcase the problem. When the protagonists are attacked by a tyrannosaur, audiences will know that there is no way for them to escape. The script writer cannot work out any solutions for them to escape either. Therefore, he decides to use a coincidence. At the same moment, another tyrannosaur walks by and start to fight against the giant creature. The protagonists thus escape from being eaten. Here, McKee [9] believes that the script writer does not respect the intelligence of audiences because audiences think very hard and find solutions for the main characters.

6. Conclusion

As a result of this paper, a script writer can deliver the values to the audiences not only through the actor's lines but also through the structure, characterization, crisis, climax and resolution as well as mystery and suspense of a script. Meanwhile, these values mustn't be morally or legally correct in the real world. As long as the story or the characters of the script can arouse the empathy of the audience, the wrongful values in the real world can be understood and accepted by the audience. However, due to limited time and research materials, there are still many artist characters like rhetoric that haven't been discussed in this paper. For instance, in the script, "Boys and Girls", Munro [12] intensively uses symbolism in her article. "Raising" foxes is a connotation of raising children. It shows that children are raised for parent's use. Each child must have a gender role to play in the future. Therefore, in future researches, symbolism and other literature tools should also be discussed in detail.

References

- [1] J. Ratcliffe, Learning from screenwriting techniques: how to tell your patient's story, not yours., *Journal of Aesthetic Nursing*, vol.7 (4), pp. 226-227, 2018.
- [2] J. D. Larson, "Why Do We Obsess Over What's 'Relatable' ?" . [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/magazine/the-scurge-of-relatable-in-art-and-politics.html>, [Accessed Oct. 18, 2019].
- [3] K. Dancyger and R. Jeff, *Alternative scriptwriting: successfully breaking the rules.*, Taylor & Francis, 2007.
- [4] A. Horton, *Writing the character-centered screenplay*, Univ of California Press, 2000.
- [5] M. Puzo, *The godfather*, Penguin, 2005.
- [6] F. Murtagh, G. Adam, and M. Stewart, "The structure of narrative: the case of film scripts.", *Pattern Recognition*, vol. 42(2), pp. 302-312, 2009
- [7] J. G. Cawelti, Chinatown and generic transformation in recent American films, *film genre reader*, vol. 3, pp. 243-261, 2003.
- [8] R. McKee, *Story*, Dixit, 2001.
- [9] C. Nolan and N. Jonah, *Inception: The shooting script.*, Insight Editions, 2010.
- [10] C. Batty, *Movies that move us: screenwriting and the power of the protagonist's journey.*, Springer, 2011.
- [11] A. Mullins, *The plot against character: Towards a character-centred model of screenwriting.*, Diss. Queensland University of Technology, 2004.
- [12] A. Munro, *Boys and girls*, Atlantis Films, 1983.