

Can there be a science of screenwriting? If so, what can it tell us? And, do we care?

The *Journal of Screenwriting* Volume 3 #2 carried a paper by Melvyn P. Heyes, “a biomedical research scientist and psychotherapist with 25 years of laboratory and consulting experience” whose website carries the domain name, *Screenwriting Science*. (www.screenwritingscience.com).

The paper in question, ***Development of a Fundamental “19-Sequence Model” of Screenplay and Narrative Film Structure***, purports to have examined and quantified “the sequence content of 132 feature-length Hollywood-style and independent films made between 1941 and 2010 that were produced in the United States, Great Britain, Russia, Germany and Japan.” As Dr Heyes says:

“There are ... few objective quantitative studies of film structure models. Therefore, new interdisciplinary approaches for the analysis of creative writing are warranted.”

Sounds good to me: an objective examination of the actual content of such a wide range of screenplays, as opposed to what contemporary writers and their mentors might imagine to be there, would surely produce interesting results. However, Heyes immediately runs into problems with his definitions of *SCENE* and *SEQUENCE*. Rather than looking at how these terms are used by creative professionals he attempts to distill “composite definitions” from the descriptions given in screenwriting books. Hence from McKee he gets:

“A SCENE is an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character’s life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance. Ideally, every scene is a story event, which “creates meaningful change in the life situation of a character that is expressed in terms of value and achieved through conflict.” (McKee 1997: 34-35)

Development of a Fundamental ‘19-Sequence Model’ of
Screenplay and Narrative Film Structure
(Expanded and Revised Version)

In his use of this material Heyes makes the fundamental error of failing to distinguish between descriptive and prescriptive definitions. This is not a description of what a scene in a film script necessarily is, but what McKee thinks it should be. These qualifications for what constitutes “a scene” have been carried over from stage dramaturgy where scene divisions are far more marked, and, hence, important, than in film.

From Cowgill Dr Heyes gets a more succinct definition:

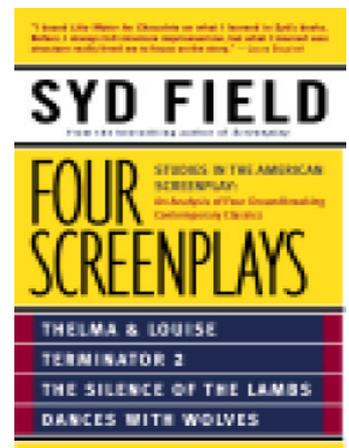
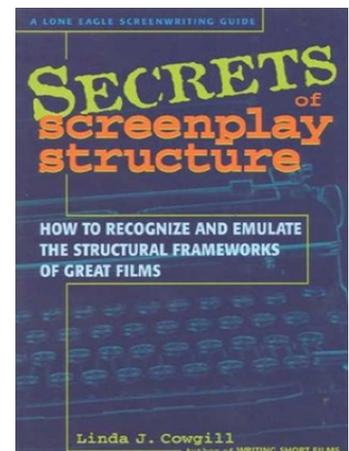
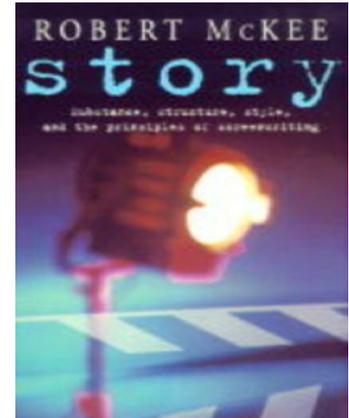
“The SCENE is a unit of action, a single event or exchange between characters, with unity of time and place which propels the plot forward toward the final climax and resolution” (Cowgill 1999: 241)

But even she has to indulge in a little finger wagging.; there is no requirement for a scene in a film script to move the plot forward, and, in fact, almost every script contains some scenes which do not do this. They are there for other purposes, emotional identification, visceral thrills, scene-setting, visual impact, sex, humour, etc., etc. And, similarly, a scene does not have the obligation of being a complete unit of either action or meaning. In film meaning is more often spread over multiple scenes, and, in fact, both the culmination and/or impact of a scene may be deliberately suspended to keep the audience guessing.

Really, there is no mystery as to what constitutes a scene: it is what follows a Scene Heading in a standard formatted script, which is a line in capitals that marks a rough division of time and space. Of far more consequence for Heyes’s thesis is the confusion he gets into over the term SEQUENCE. This word, nowadays, rarely appears printed in film scripts, but is in constant use among film professionals , and, in my experience, is readily understood by just about everyone. The definition, given by Heyes, from Syd Field covers this:

“... a SEQUENCE is a series of scenes connected by one single idea, with a beginning, middle, and end; a wedding, a funeral, a dance, a sporting event, a chase, a seduction could all be sequences.” (1994a: 180)

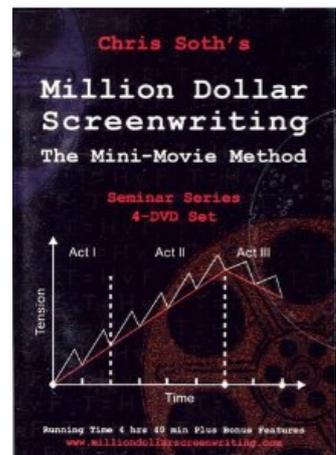
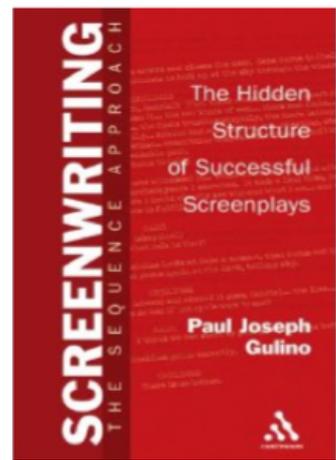
Unfortunately, Heyes then compounds this with a totally different use of the word, derived from the teachings of Frank Daniels as presented by Paul Joseph Gulino. This recalls an historic use of the word “sequence” to denote the separate reels of film that comprised a feature, and a subsequent use of the term to mark major subdivisions of the screenplay. The script of *Double Indemnity* (1944) written by Billy Wilder and Raymond Chandler, for example, is explicitly divided into just four sequences, the whole of what would now be referred to as, “Act 1” bring marked as Sequence A. This is definitely not the way that the word sequence would be used today. Gulino, following Daniels, retains this term when he develops a standard template of eight “sequences”, dividing the 3 Act structure into 2/4/2 (though with considerable variation). However, these sub-divisions are more like chapters of a book than the present-day idea of sequence as — a succession of scenes connected by



one single idea that can be named. It is significant that in Chis Soth's presentation of his own take, on essentially the same idea, he elects to rename these sub-divisions "mini-movies" (Million-Dollar Screenwriting: The Mini-Movie Method EBook). I prefer to call these major divisions, **segments**.

Melvyn Heyes claims that "The 19-Sequence Model is based on a stringently developed composite definition of 'sequence'"; but, in practice, what this refinement has done has left him suspended somewhere between the commodious use of the term employed by Gulino and the simple one-idea understanding of the term in every day professional usage. One imagines that it would not have been too difficult for Gulino to divide the screenwriters "Sequence A" — which lasts for thirty minutes — into two. Likewise, it is hardly surprising that Heyes could detect sequences within these, and divide them again.

Heyes uses **Double Indemnity** as his demonstration movie, in order to be able to contrast his analysis with that previously made by Gulino. Watching the movie again, we may note that immediately after the opening credits there is just the kind of sequence to which Field was referring, which we might name "The Arrival" — a car being driven wildly at night, making a hazardous crossing, drawing up at an office block; a man getting out and being let in by the janitor; a vignette in the lift where we learn that his name is Neff and that he is an insurance salesman; Neff (Fred MacMurray) passing the cleaners, going to his office — where the first sequence ends and the next scene begins (SC. A-11). In

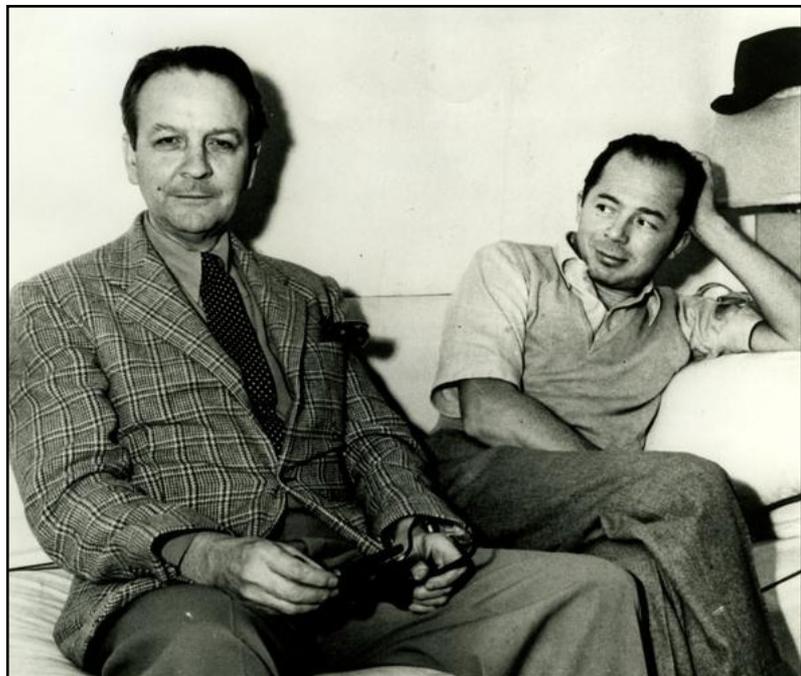
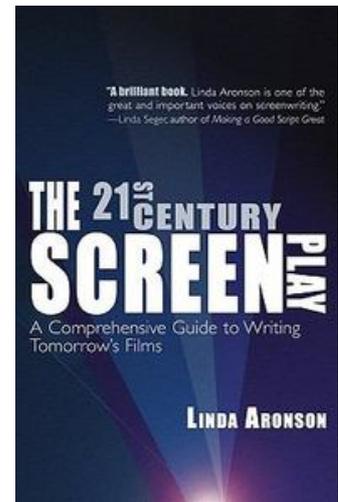


this scene Neff starts up a dictating machine and promptly confesses to murder. At the time this was revolutionary because it was unheard of for a genre picture to give away who dun it at the start. This is what Aronson calls a **triggering crisis** (Aronson, 2010), which gives way to the

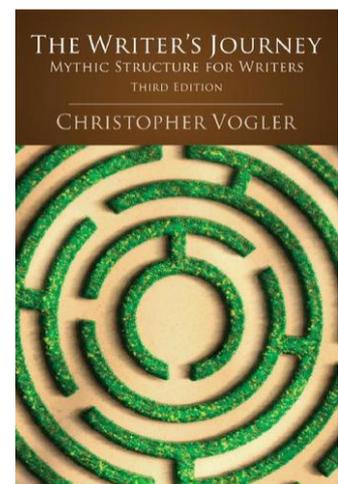
beginning of the story told in flashback.

Again, we run into a problem with the use of terms. In his examination of 132 screenplays Heyes identified a **prologue** in just 28% of the sample. While a prologue in formal terms may be relatively unusual, it is my contention that most contemporary films have some kind of **prelude** — most notably, a slice of action known as a **hook**. This is completely disregarded in Heyes' model. *Double Indemnity* has a clear flashback structure and after the opening segment there is a marked and explicit jump back to the previous year. But Heyes just labels this opening as "Set-up"; which might not seem so bad except we now find that we are on a rigid progression through his 19-Sequence Model. By the time we get to the chronological start of the story, which, of course, needs setting up, we are in the second of his "Sequences", which he labels "Inciting Incident". However, in the single scene that follows there is no **inciting incident**. This is clear from the fact that Neff leaves the Dietrichson House in much the same breezy frame of mind as when he entered it. His head may now be full of vague erotic fantasies, but what's new? Nothing has been set in train that could lead to murder — which we already know is the culmination of the story.

Heyes labels his next Sequence: "Call to Action". The difference between an *inciting incident* and a *Call To Action* is not clear. The latter term could be used legitimately when the protagonist is not present at the inciting incident, but that is not the case here. The term has, perhaps, been derived from Vogler's **Call To Adventure**, but, in fact, Vogler uses this term quite synonymously with inciting incident. Perhaps Heyes is following the idea of a **Second Call**, coming after **The Refusal of the Call**, but, as far as *Double Indemnity* is concerned there has certainly been no refusal — as yet. In fact, what follows is another set-up scene; having set up Neff and Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck), the writers now set up the third main character, Neff's potential nemesis, Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). Heyes argues that this scene, showing Keyes dealing with a false claimant, establishes Neff's fear of Keyes investigational capabilities. Retrospectively this may carry some weight — as far as the audience is concerned — but what Neff observes in the scene is nothing new to him. He watches from the side-lines (out of the frame much of the time) with amused affection more than anything else. It is after this (and a brief linking scene) that Gulino makes the break between his



Raymond Chandler & Billy Wilder



“Sequence A” and “Sequence B”. And, it is only after this that we get the true Inciting Incident.

Robert McKee allows that the **Inciting Incident** can be placed anywhere within the first twenty-five pages, and cites *Taxi-driver*, as a highly successful movie with a

particularly late inciting incident. By tying the label “Inciting Incident” to a segment Heyes does not allow that flexibility. In *Double Indemnity* the **inciting incident** actually occurs around twenty minutes into the first act, halfway through Heyes’ third “Sequence”. In this case the relatively late placement may be compensated for by the early shock revelation that Neff is the murderer. When the **inciting incidence** does occur there is no mistaking



it. Despite the roundabout way that Phyllis broaches the subject of her husband’s potential “accidental death”, Neff immediately sees where she is heading and is visibly shocked. His entire attitude changes, he refuses the call in no uncertain terms, and leaves. This is followed by a true sequence that we might name — “Neff’s Inner Turmoil”:

Neff leaves the Dietrichson house:

— “I knew I had hold of a red-hot poker and the time to drop it was before it burnt my hand off”

Neff stops off at a drive-in to get a bottle of beer:

— “to get rid of the sour taste of her iced tea — and everything that went with it.”

Neff does not want to return to the office so goes to a bowling alley:

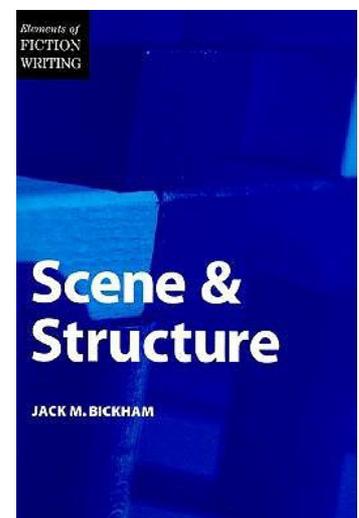
— “to get my mind thinking about something else for a while.”

Neff drives home to his apartment:

— “I watched it get dark and didn’t even turn on the light.”

This kind of sequence following a major turning-point in the action is what Bickham calls a scene-sequel:

“A sequel begins for your view-point character the moment a scene ends. Just struck by a new, unanticipated but logical disaster, he is plunged into a period of sheer emotion, followed sooner or later by a period of thought, which sooner or later results in the formation of a new goal-orientated decision” (Bickham: 1993)



These linking sections are often known as *aftermath* and *decision-point*, which is then followed by *preparation* to set-up the next action sequence. To avoid confusion with the way that “sequel” is normally understood in the film industry, I would prefer to call this the *inter-sequence segue*, or simply *segue*.

In *Double Indemnity* at this point Neff’s emotion leads him to a quite different line of thought:

“Then the thought came over me that I hadn’t walked out on anything at all, that the hook was too strong. This wasn’t the end between her and me. It was only the beginning.”

The scene that follows comprises the whole of Heyes’ “sequence 4” which he labels “First commitment to act” and contains the Act 1 *Turning-point*.

“We’re going to do it and we’re going to do it right. And, I’m the guy who knows how.”

However, this turning-point is both preceded and followed by cuts back to the confession scene of the prelude, which are missing from Heyes analysis. After the heavy emotion of the scene in the apartment the cuts to Neff’s bitter reflections puts the turning-point into the context of thinking over a longer time-span and stages the segue as self-narration. We can now see that Heyes does not break the screenplay down to genuine scenes and sequences (as defined by Field), nor are the divisions he does make large enough to accommodate multi-layered through-lines.



All Heyes attempts to achieve a “science of screenwriting”, all his charts and statistics, come to nought unless the criteria for identifying a sequence is clear and to the point. Despite his repeated claims of objectivity it is not all easy to discern the logic of his breaks from one numbered “Sequence” to the next. This is brought into sharp relief when we enter the second act which he divides into ten “sequences”, as opposed to Gulino’s four. Heyes claims that:

“... the criterion (sic) Gulino uses to define ‘sequence’ in the 8-

Sequence Model is unstated and difficult to discern.”

And:

“The 8-Sequence Model is thus deficient in not accommodating distinct narrative and emotional character milestones.”

This assessment is unwarranted; It is a simple matter to discern where Gulino’s sequence breaks come, and the logic of them, because each comes after one of the established milestones or markers that are agreed by the majority of analysts. The four major blocks of a screenplay, established by Thompson, are each divided by Gulino into two:

- ACT 1: Sequence A ends after The Inciting Incident
Sequence B ends after The First Turning-point
- ACT 2/1: Sequence C ends after Pinch 1 (First Focus Point)
Sequence D ends after the The Mid-point Crisis
- ACT 2/2: Sequence E ends after Pinch 2 (Second Focus Point)
Sequence F ends after The Second Turning-point
- ACT 3: Sequence G ends after The False Resolution (Act 3 break)
Sequence H ends after The Resolution (or end)

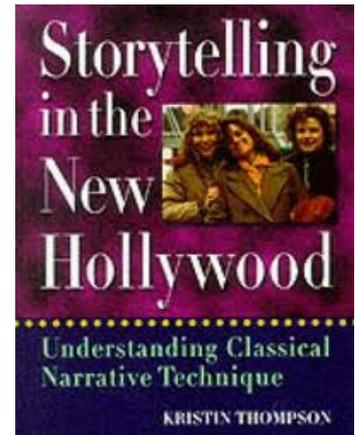
Heyes defines “Sequence” in his 19-Sequence Model as follows:

“... linking scene(s) of directly connected events that advance distinct components of the story, plot, character development and/or emotional experience.”

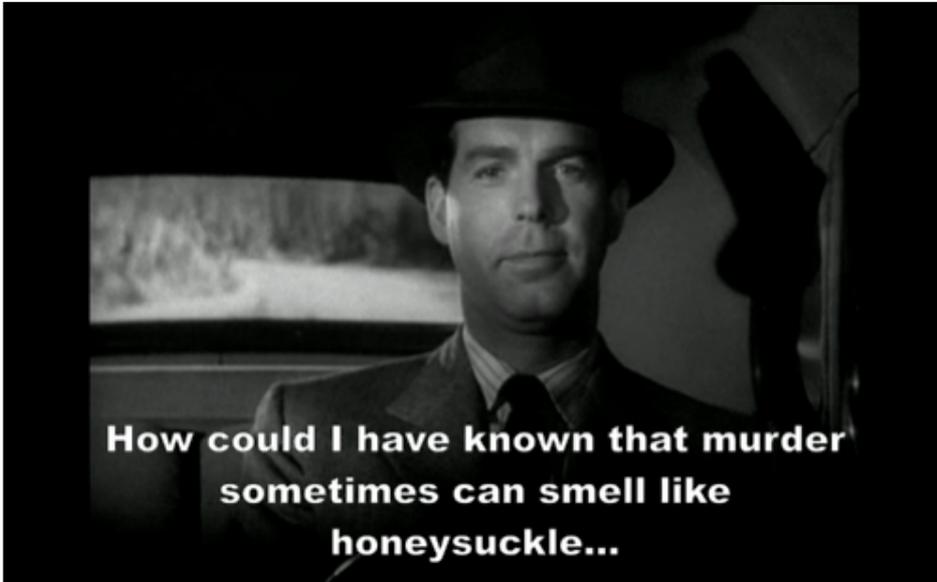
What that means can only be seen in practice. Act Two, Heyes’s “Sequence 5”, starts with a 3.45 minute scene in the Dietrichson house. The purpose of the scene is for Neff to trick Phyllis’s husband into signing a life insurance policy that he believes to be for car insurance. This is accomplished, and as he is leaving Neff explains to Phyllis (out of earshot of her husband) the meaning of the double indemnity clause: that the payout will be doubled if the fatal accident occurs while travelling by train. Phyllis seals the scene by telling Neff:

“It will be the train, Walter, just the way you want it — straight down the line.”

However, Heyes does not end his “Sequence” at that decisive point, but continues it over the next scene which involves Neff giving Phyllis’s step-daughter, Lola, a lift to meet her boyfriend, Nino Sachetti. This scene serves a quite different narrative purpose: it is a **set-up** scene for a subplot that will not come to fruition until Heyes’s “Sequence 15” in Act Three.



Heyes's confusion between scenes, sequences, and segments is further compounded by his practice of assigning sequence numbers and names to what are frequently referred to as narrative milestones/signposts/markers. In Act 1 we saw that he ascribed the name "Inciting Incident" to a whole "Sequence", and one in which there was no such incident. Now, in Act 2, following the opening two scenes, he gives different "Sequence" numbers to two relatively short consecutive scenes. The first (Sequence 6)



he labels "First Focus Point". This is a term which he references as having been taken from Frensham (1996):

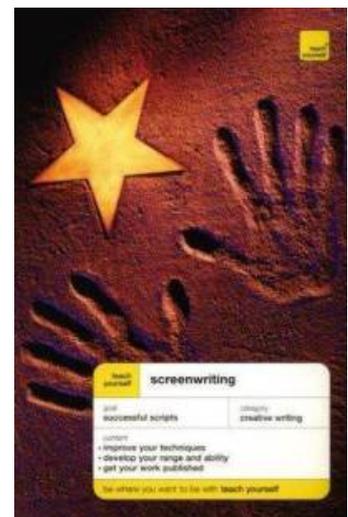
"This is a scene or moment which:

- tightens the storyline action
- reminds the audience of the "problem"
- pushes the story forward helping to keep it on track (and stopping the audience and writer from getting lost)
- may indicate the first beginnings of character change or growth in your protagonist"

Firstly, we should note that Frensham defines the **Focus** as a "scene or moment". In drama terms, putting the emphasis on logic rather than time, a moment of this sort would usually be described as a **beat**. In *Double Indemnity* the **1st Turning-point** is simply the *beat* when Neff decides that he and Phyllis will go through with the plan to murder Dietrichson. The *Focus*, however, can often not be pinned down and delineated so sharply.

To all intents and purposes, Frensham's *First (and Second) Focus Points*, are just a renaming of Syd Field's **Pinch 1** and **Pinch 2**. These were the last points which Field added to his influential "Paradigm", which formulated the classic Three Act Structure for Hollywood screenplays. Both in name and specification, however, Field is far more vague about the Pinches than his other structural markers:

"The term "pinch" cropped up over and over again, and I thought



that was the appropriate label because this one scene or sequence “pinches” the story line together. It ties it together and keeps your story on track”.

But what does this mean? In a good script isn't the story always “on-track”?

Firstly, we should note that, for Field, the *Pinch* is a return to focus on the plot. In Fresham's four points delineating the *First Focus* the first three are taken directly from Syd Field, but the fourth point, citing character change is derived from another source — quite possibly Viki King, who speaks of a “page 45 growth point” and *metaphor of change*. In *Double Indemnity* the single scene that comprises Heyes Sequence 6, which he labels “First Focus Point”, is a scene in a grocery store where Neff, sotto voce, outlines the plan to Phyllis and she informs him that it cannot go ahead because Dietrichson has broken his leg. This concentrates entirely on the plot. Following this is another short scene, which Heyes calls Sequence 7, in Neff's office that begins with voice-over from the confession:

“... maybe those Fates they say watch over you had got together and broken his leg to give me a way out.”

He is then surprised by Keyes who comes in to offer him a promotion (though with less pay) to a claims investigator. After some light-hearted banter over the money, he tells Neff:

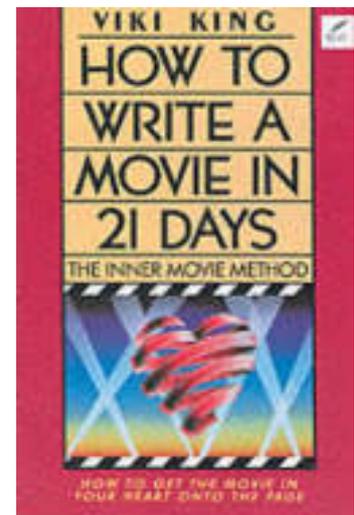
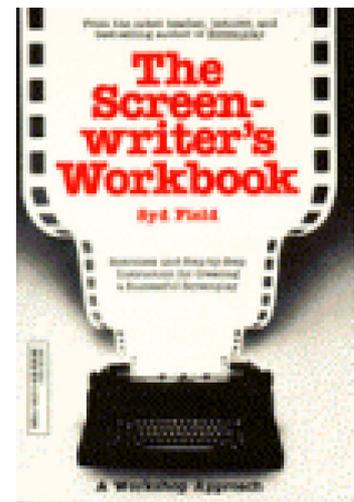
“You're too good to be a salesman. The job I'm talking about takes brains and integrity. It takes more guts than there is in fifty salesmen.”

He then goes on to compare it with that of a surgeon but his waxing lyrical is cut short by a telephone call from Phyllis to tell Neff that they can go ahead that night because Dietrichson will take the train on crutches. What is the point of this curious little stop-go device? First, of course, it allows a *forewarning* of the dangers that lie ahead for Neff; but, more importantly, it brings to the fore his moral *dilemma*. While the previous scene set-up the plot, this scene focussed on character. However, Neff is not a *change character*, but a resolute or *steadfast character*. At the end of the scene Neff turns down the job, and, in voice-over, he comments:

“The gears had meshed. The time for thinking had all run out.”

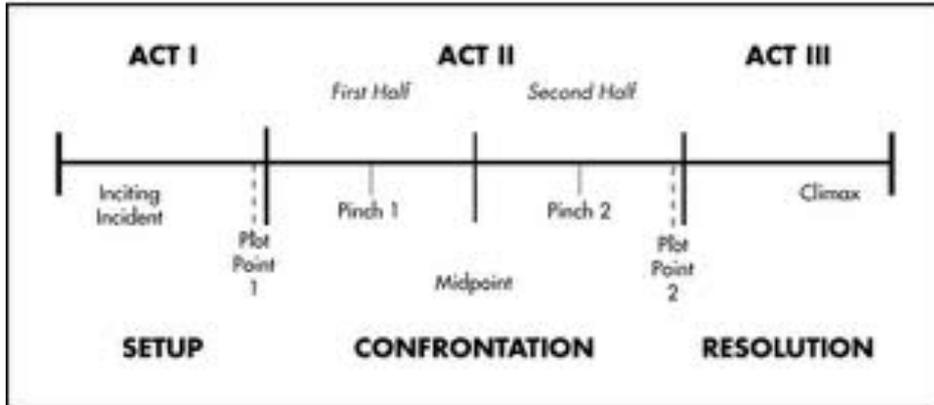
This reiterates the air of fatalism that was invoked by Neff's initial scene of confession. We then Immediately go into the start of the long action sequence which will lead to the Mid-point.

So, the scene in the grocery store, after preparing the ground for the action ahead, erected a *barrier*, and brought the plot to a complete standstill. It was only after the following scene in the office, after Neff had made a decisive moral choice, that it was allowed to go ahead once



more. Is the first or the second the *First Focus Point*? While the second concentrates on character, it also contains an essential plot point without which the action cannot go ahead. I would suggest that we must take the two scenes together as the focus.

The Syd Field "Paradigm"



In fact, these two scenes are a reiteration and amplification of the two scenes that preceded them. The first of these, with Neff talking to Phyllis outside the Dietrichson front door explicated the plot; while the second, in which Neff gives Phyllis's step-daughter a lift, focuses on Neff's moral conscience. In voice-over he ruminates on her and her boyfriend, Sachetti:

“It gave me a nasty feeling to be thinking about them at all with the briefcase right behind my head that had her father's signature in it — and what that signature meant. It meant that he was a dead pigeon. It was only a question of time.”

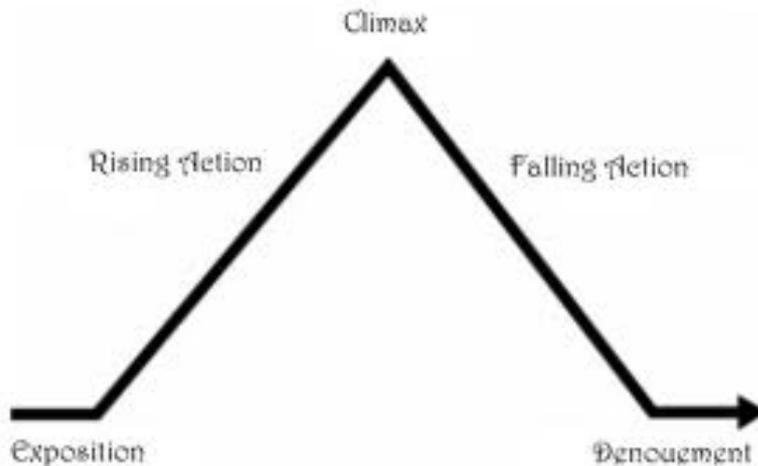
Clearly, with all four scenes, we are in the *segue* between the first and second major segments of Act II. As we have seen, the *segue* moves from emotional reaction, through thought, to a decision, and preparation for the next action sequence. And, we can see more clearly how Pinch 1 (or First focus point) functions as a part of this *segue* between the two segments. Heyes's "Sequence 8" covers Neff around his home establishing his alibi, and is, indeed, a true sequence. It is not, however, a narrative unit comparable with the long segment which follows. Even though the voice over continues without a break to cover Neff arriving at the Dietrichson house



“I could smell that honeysuckle again, only it was even stronger now that it was night.”

— Heyes here makes a division prior to this to “Sequence 9”, which he labels “Mid-point”. This covers all the ensuing action, from Neff hiding in

Freytag's Pyramid



the back of the car, through the murder, through Neff impersonating Dietrichson on the train, through the disposal of the body, through Neff's drive away with Phyllis, and does not end until Neff arrives back home, over ten minutes running time later.

What this division does not recognise is that at the centre of the film is a symmetrical dramatic structure which has sometime been termed the **dramatic core**, or, to use Sam Peckinpah's more homely term, the **centrepiece** on which the whole narrative is hung. The build-up, which, following Freytag, we'll call the **rising action**, culminates in the murder of Dietrichson. This, in fact, takes place quite close to the actual metrical mid-point of the film finishing at 51.12 minutes, from a total running time of 107.05 minutes. Then follows a dissolve to the next scene and we are into the **falling action**. From this point, as we shall see, the plot starts to slowly unravel. On the train Neff finds that the observation platform is already occupied by a potential witness which he must get rid of, before he can jump. After he and Phyllis set Dietrichson's dead body on the track, the car, at first, will not start. When it does Phyllis drops Neff near his apartment and they profess their love for each other before parting. We then have a matching

— all we see of the murder is on Phyllis's face:



companion-piece to the sequence with which the *core* action began; Neff checks the alibi he had arranged and finds everything in tact. This ends with a striking conclusion in the accompanying voice-over:

“... as I was walking down the street to the drugstore, suddenly, it came over me that everything would go wrong. I couldn't hear my own footsteps. It was the walk of a dead man.”

Heyes does not recognise this pattern, nor does he register that we are then into the *segue* to the next sequence, over which the voice-over continues in the same doom-laden tone. Whereas Neff entered the *core* cocky and confident, he is now a shadow, a wreck.

“I tried to hold myself together but I could feel my nerves pulling me to pieces.”

The following scene, in which Phyllis is summoned to the insurance offices by the boss, Mr Norton, is a counter-balance scene to that before the Mid-point, when Phyllis put Neff on the spot by ringing up in the middle of his conversation with Keyes. Yet, whereas the prior scene was given a separate ‘Sequence’ number by Heyes, this longer scene, that introduces new plot complications, proceeds under the same number as both the montage of checking the alibi, that ended in a fade-to-black, and the return to the confession scene. (This also runs over the sequence division between B and C in the original script.) The reason would appear to be that, in practice, Heyes has only one criteria for making the cut to a new ‘Sequence’ number; that is a change of intention or mindset of the protagonist. We have already seen how this has failed, on several occasions, to distinguish key building blocks of the narrative. In the *falling action* of the second half of Act II, it again proves inadequate because it is now, not Neff, but Keyes who is pro-active, while Neff in the reactive position tries to hang on. This situation will continue until the *second turning point*.

When Keyes knocks Norton's suicide theory on the head, so letting Neff off the hook, Heyes changes the ‘Sequence’ number. Then, in a, briefly, up-beat mood, Neff returns to his flat, and, when Phyllis telephones, invites her to join him. Before she arrives, however, Keyes turns up suffering from indigestion as the result of another hunch; he is now certain that Dietrichson's demise was somehow arranged by his wife. From the other side of the door Phyllis overhears and manages to hide until he is gone. The scene ends, following the abrupt reversal brought about by Keyes, with Neff telling Phyllis that they must not see each other for a while. This is a return to the same situation that pertained before the murder. He asks her if she is afraid:

“ Yes, I'm afraid, but not of Keyes. I'm afraid of us. We aren't the same anymore. We did this so we could be together, but, instead of that, it's pulling us apart. And you don't really care whether we see each other or not.”



... a dead man walking ...

Neff shuts her up with a kiss, which is followed by another fade-to-black. And with this we exit from the core. Heyes numbers this scene “Sequence 11, and adds the label “Second Focus Point.”

From there to the end he has another eight “Sequences” to enumerate, whereas Gulino divides the same ground into only three. This throws into relief the difference in approach between the two. Whereas Gulino is concerned with large structural units — each of which can be considered to have a beginning, a middle, and an end — Heyes divides the screenplay up into units more akin to the “steps” of a *step outline*. The irony is that, when we get down to these micro units there is no exact number that is generally prescribed, yet Heyes is much more rigid in imposing an exact number than is Gulino in dealing with his longer segments.

The peculiarity of Heyes’s “Sequence” divisions is particularly evident when we get to the final resolution. This is the only place in his analysis, since “the set-up”, that Heyes assigns separate “Sequence” numbers to a cut to the confession scene; and, now, only because it is here that it joins the chronological progression of the telling of the story. We now get two “Sequences” in quick succession. In the first, Keyes, having been called by the janitor, intrudes on Neff dictating his confession and tells him:

“Walter, you’re all washed up.”

But Neff refuses to face reality and says that he is heading across the border. Keyes tells him that he will not even make the elevator. Neff staggers to the outer office — and we are into a different “Sequence” number. As Neff collapses about twenty yards beyond the open door, Keyes is so sure of his prediction that he does not even bother to look before calling an ambulance. He then wanders out to crouch beside Neff’s body for his final goodbye.

This hardly warrants a separate scene number, much less a sequence number. But, Heyes, it would appear, is bent on vindicating his “19-Sequence Model.”

On the Screenwriting Science website there are currently all 132 analyses of feature films downloadable — at a price. A quick sampling of five of these finds that, indeed, they would all appear to be composed of 19 “Sequences” despite the number of scenes ranging from 48 in *Casablanca* to 215 in *Inception*. From an



examination of these it soon becomes evident that Heyes’s approach is rigidly predefined; that he is clearly on the lookout for signs and events that will meet the requirements of his model, and not weighing the evidence first.

Let us briefly look at *Casablanca*, which is unusual because of its very late Inciting Incident. In fact, Robert McKee locates it precisely at 32 minutes in, when Rick first hears Sam playing *As Time Goes By*. (McKee p201) Before this happens there are four different strands that the screenwriters set-up:

1/ **The Objective Story** (also known as *The Greater Conflict*, or *Contextural Story*); this concerns the progress of the Second World War, the status of Casablanca as a free zone, and the arrival of the new boss, Major Strasser.

2/ **The Action Story** (also known as the “A” Story); this concerns the theft of the Letters of Transit by Ungarte, how Rick gains possession of them, and the news that a great hero of The Resistance, Victor Lazlo is en route to Casablanca and looking for a means of escape.

3/ **The Relationship Story** (also known as the “B” Story); this concerns Rick’s self-serving relationship with Yvonne, Renault’s suspicion that he was once a sentimentalist, the signature tune, *As Time Goes By*, and the devastating reappearance of Ilsa Lund.

4/ **The Subjective Story** (also known as *The Character Arc*); this concerns Rick’s Opening Values, “I stick my neck out for no man.” at the same time as his insisting on his independence, and Renault’s knowledge that he was once a freedom fighter.

Heyes ignores all this and powers on through with his one-dimensional template. This decrees that “Sequence 2” is (or contains) the Inciting Incident. In the case of *Casablanca* “Sequence 2” is comprised of four disparate scenes, including Strasser arriving at the airport, Rick refusing a German banker credit, and Ungarte asking Rick to hold the stolen Letters of Transit for him. However, none of these occurrences are *The Inciting Incident*. How do we know that? The same way that we knew that the “Sequence 2” scene in *Double Indemnity* was not *The Inciting Incident*. Just as Neff left that scene in much the same frame of mind as he entered; so, in *Casablanca*, none of the occurrences of “Sequence 2” upset Rick’s prevailing attitude. As Robert McKee defines it:

“The Inciting Incident radically upsets the balance of forces in the protagonist’s life.” (McKee, p189)

When Walter Neff understands that Phyllis wants to implicate him in the murder of her husband, he is visibly disturbed to such an extent that he cannot bring himself to return to the office or go home. Likewise, when Rick Blaine sees that Ilsa has walked into his bar on the arm of Victor Lazlo, he first breaks his rule never to drink with customers, and then, when she has left, falls into a self-pitying drunken reverie. In both cases

THE OUTER STORY

The Objective Story

The Action Story

The Relationship Story

The Subjective Story

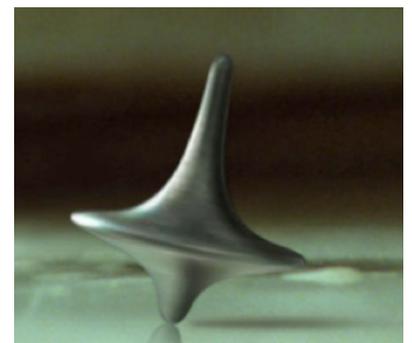
THE INNER STORY

the foundations of the characters' lives are severely shaken. This is the mark of *The Inciting Incident*.



Now, let's turn briefly to *Inception*. The problem that Heyes's model had in dealing with the multi-layered structure of *Casablanca* is multiplied by the sheer complexity of *Inception*. We immediately run into a major problem because Dr Heyes does not recognise the modern movie *Hook* where the audience from the off-set is plunged into an action sequence. In *Inception* this is long and particularly bewildering because the film cuts between different dream worlds and time-frames without warning — flashbacks within dreams within parallel dreams with intrusions from one dream into another. As we gradually discover, we enter the movie in the midst of a dream operation to steal ideas from the mind of a dreamer via a dream — but none of this is explained until later. In the first two scenes which Heyes (as always with his first "Sequence" labels "Set-up") absolutely nothing is set-up. We start with a mysterious image of children playing on a beach, and then are taken into a bizarre confrontation with an old Japanese man who seems more interested in a small spinning top than he is in the protagonist. He says, "I know what this is," but we do not.

(The gloss on it that Heyes gives in his breakdown does not appear at this stage in the film — or, as expressed by him, anywhere in the film. All that we are ever told is : "... when you examine your totem ... you know beyond a doubt that you are not in someone else's dream" — not that it is an indication of being in reality. This becomes important with regard to the deliberately ambiguous ending. It is also key as to why at



the opening of the film Saito appears as an elderly man.)

The opening “Sequence” raises questions but makes no attempt to answer them, before, via a flash-back, we are plunged into a long “Sequence” of fourteen scenes. As always, with his “Sequence 2” Heyes labels this “Inciting Incident”, though precisely which of these scenes is thought to contain “The Incident” is not stated. Rather, we might better call this segment — **set-up by demonstration** — as it immerses us in a world the rules of which are quite unlike those with which we are familiar. Embedded in the segment is one of the important ideas of the film; that of the idea as virus (meme) and that of an “extractor” as a man who can steal these ideas by entering the other’s dreams. Certainly, this segment could be seen as a “mini-movie” in itself, but all of this is just a prequel to the main action, or, as Saito (Ken Watanabe) puts it, “an audition”.

The Inciting Incident is still to come; but not until after the protagonist, Cobb (Leonard Dicaprio) makes a telephone call to his estranged children, which goes some way to explaining the opening image. It is not until Sc 20 that Saito introduces the title word, “Inception” — not just to steal an idea from another’s mind, but to plant an idea. Cobb refuses the idea, (in the tradition of **the reluctant hero**) but Saito clinches the deal by linking it with the possibility of him seeing his children again — an offer he cannot refuse. And this is *The Inciting Incident*. It is here that the story with which the film is concerned takes off.



In the mythic take on screenplay structure, based on the work of Joseph Campbell and popularised by Christopher Vogler, the first act takes place in **The Ordinary World**, and, at the *First Turning Point* we enter **The Special World** of the adventure; but that is not the way that this film works. The explicit set-up does not begin until after the *first turning-point*, and Nolan now employs the old device of instructing an ingenue in order to explain to the audience the very special world of the “Dream Extractor” — of which we have already had a taste. We are now into Heyes’s “Sequence 4”; there seems to be no reason, other than his own numerical scheme, why Heyes makes the change to Act 2 half-way through Ariadne’s training, when Cobb goes off to recruit further members of the team. However, we can see here, if not before, the

inadequacy of Heyes's "19-Sequence Model" in dealing with a film of the complexity of *Inception*. We find here that "Sequence 5" is broken down into parts A, B, C, and "Sequence 6" into A and B; from the simple one scene "Sequences" resembling a *step outline*, that we saw in *Double Indemnity*, we now have something much more compendious that more resembles the sequences of Gulino. Yet, whereas Gulino adjusts the number of sequences according to the complexity of the screenplay, Heyes does not. Instead we have these A, B, C numbers, but without making explicit any unity to these parts. Indeed, he makes no attempt to give a synopsis of the whole of the "Sequences", but only of each part separately; so why are they not given different sequence numbers?

The same stratification of through-lines, that we demonstrated in *Casablanca*, can also be traced through *Inception*, but here they are greatly complicated by weaving in and out of different levels of dream and reality. Further the **Inner Story** (*Subjective and Relationship throughlines*), is strikingly at odds with the **Outer Story** (*Action and Objective throughlines*). While providing the motivation for Cobb undertaking the main action, it is also the main obstacle to its success. Heyes tries to cope with this complexity by the structural innovation of doubling the number of

Focus Points, but there is no discernible rationale for this. His *First Focus Point* — both 1 and 2, deal with explicating the plan of action; while in the case of his *Second Focus Point* — 1 deals with Browning priming their target, Robert Fischer Jr; while 2 deals with Cobb telling Ariadne the backstory of his relationship with Mal. Once again, his analysis misses the overall pattern; that the *Inner Story* of *Inception* intrudes on the *Outer Story* at all the key points of the structure, and that "Cobb's Elevator Dream" where he and Ariadne descend to Limbo is the *centrepiece* of the movie.

centrepiece

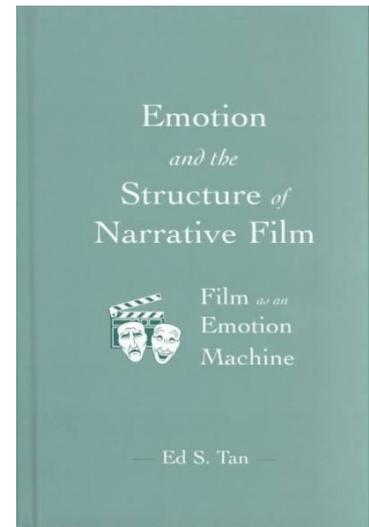


Sadly, despite his professional background, and all his tables and charts, there is absolutely nothing scientific about Melvyn Heyes's analysis of screenplays. It is astonishing that someone with a psychological background should not be cognisant of the fact that there is no "innocence of perception". It is not that through the rigor of scientific method he has discovered a numerical pattern that no-one before him

has; but, rather, that having once set on this magic number 19 he sees it wherever he looks. Even if his argument falls short, the theory might still have some value, if it could show that these 19 blocks add up to telling us something new about the whole screenplay. But, on this showing, that is not the case. Towards the end of the paper Heyes remarks:

“... I propose that a primary role of sequences is to generate ... autonomous ‘contextual emotional meaning’ within the viewer. In other words, emotional impact units (shots) represent what characters feel at the moment (perceived vicariously and empathetically), while sequences create autonomous experiences of what the emotions mean in the context of the narrative and characters’ lives, as well as the viewer’s own life.”

This might well have been a platform for fruitful scientific research. It suggests a similar line to that of Ed Tan’s “emotion machine”, set out in his book *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film*. Unfortunately this is not explored further in Dr Heyes’s paper. Instead he appears to have been seduced into chasing that old will o’the wisp — a winning Hollywood formula.



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