

Cinematics Cinematics

21st Century Style

— = work in progress —

Cinematics is a series of succinct statements of aesthetic principles intended to be used as tools through successive stages of the movie-making process. By offering fresh criteria on which to make choices it aims to move creative thinking about cinema beyond tired adages and open up the game to new perspectives, new possibilities.

Roger Tucker

#7 Core Synergy

www.rogerjtucker.co.uk



Today every screenwriter, every director, is expected to have a grasp of the screenplay template known as *The Three-act Paradigm*. Basically this just states that a movie should have a beginning, a middle and an end: Act 1, in which the story is set-up; Act 2, in which it is developed; and Act 3 in which it is brought to a resolution. And, in addition, that Act 2 should be approximately twice as long as Act 1 or Act 3.

In his autobiographical book, *Going To The Movies*, (2001) Syd Field tells how the book that introduced the idea to Hollywood, *Screenplay: the Foundations of Screenwriting*,(1979) was an immediate surprise success with three printings within the first six months of publication. It was only when he actually started to teach a screenwriting class that he discovered that there was something seriously lacking.

Field had isolated a dramatic moment, which he called *Plot Point 1*, which spun Act 1 into Act 2; and another, which he called *Plot Point 2*, which spun Act 2 into Act 3, but, when his students began on the long stretch of Act 2 their work fell apart. As he put it in his Chandleresque prose:

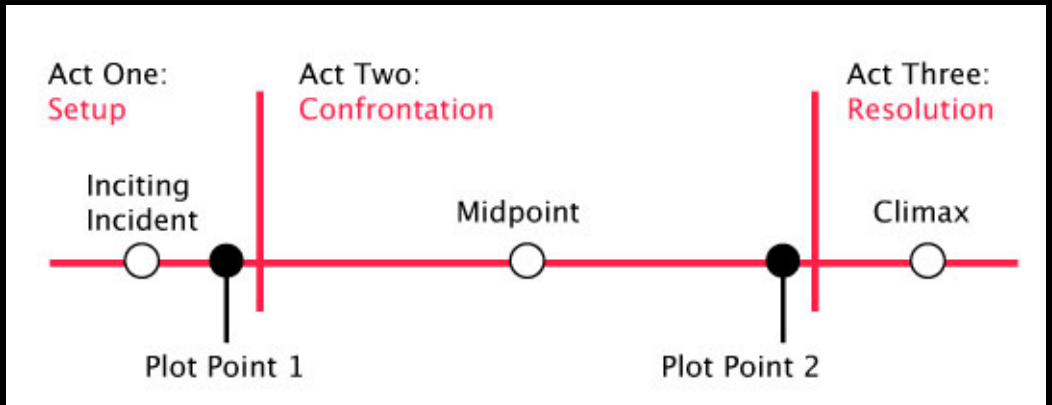
“When it came to the second act, they were like blind men in a rain storm.” (1984)

Syd racked his brain as to what he could do to help his students. Then, one day while he was out jogging, he recalled a comment that, writer-director, Paul Schrader had once made to him; to the effect that *something happens about page 60*. A light-bulb went on over Syd's head:

“Page 60. I hadn't thought too much about it at the time, but now I realized that page 60 is half way through the second

From this came his introduction of the **Mid-point**, which divides the second act into two. However, the definition was left exceedingly vague:

“What is the Mid-point of your story? What is the incident, episode, event, line of dialogue, or decision that links the first half of Act 2 with the second half of Act 2?” (1984)



So, we now had a paradigm of four equal parts. However, Syd Field was resolute in keeping his three act division, with its long central act:

“It is a unit of dramatic action that is broken down into two basic units that are 30 pages each, the first half of Act 2 and the second half of Act 2 connected by the mid-point.” (1984)

One of the very few attempts at an objective survey of “large scale portions of classical films” was made by Kristin Thompson who analysed ninety Hollywood films from the 1910s through to the 1990s. Of these she found that 71 broke into four major segments of roughly equal parts of between 20 to 30 minutes, while ...

“... features lasting significantly less than 100 minutes may break into three parts. When they do, those parts tend to be approximately equal thirds. likewise, very long films, of, say, 150 minutes or more frequently fall into five roughly balanced parts.” (Thompson 1999)



For Thompson four “large scale portions” carries more weight than three acts. Should we, then keep the cumbersome terminology that Field adopts, or, as others do, like Dan Calvisi (Calvisi 2012), simply name the parts Acts 1- 4? Before taking the easy route, we must recognise that an *act*, is more than just a large scale “portion”. An *act* implies a direction. When we join Act 1 an on-going aim or intention

is already in play, even if that is only to preserve the status quo. This is what is challenged by the *inciting incident*. As a consequence, at the *first turning-point* (the more usual name for Plot Point 1) a new commitment to act is made by the protagonist, the success or failure of which gives rise to the *dramatic question*. And, it is this that forms the backbone of the action through the second act of the 3 Act Paradigm.

Thompson maintains that, through all the films that she analysed, she only found one, *Speed* (1993), that maintained a constant and consistent goal running through the whole of the second act (as specified by Field); and that modification of the protagonist's goal is the norm. For sure the protagonist's intent will invariably undergo severe pressure during the second act, but, as a rule, (contrary to Thompson's claim), this does not result in another turning point halfway through that is comparable to Field's Plot Points 1 & 2. This would produce a flip-flop hero lacking in gravitas. Rather, the Mid-point can be better seen as a *point of no-return* that presages a change of dramatic perspective, that, as we will see, may lead to either an altered goal or an altered strategy at the second turning-point (Plot point 2).

Field distinguished the two halves of the second act with what he called a change of "*Dramatic Context*". For example, in *Chinatown* the first half of Act 2 has the context of "*What's going on?*", while the second half has the context of "*Who's behind it?*". In *E T* the first half has the context "*Getting Acquainted*"; while the second half has the context "*Helping E T to phone home.*" Thompson characterises her two large portions that make up the middle of the screenplay as "Complication" and "Development"; however, both these words are commonly used to signify other dramatic elements. The most telling labels, I believe, are those devised by Viki King who describes the first half as *Stakes of Obstacles*, and the second half as *Stakes of Issues*.

"For the first half of Act 2 (pages 30 to 60) your hero is saying "I want it. I want it." And the stakes against him are obstacles that seem to say "You can't have it".

Then on page 60 your hero says "I am going to have it". He's saying obstacles don't matter, he'll just knock them over. He's committed.

Now what he wants starts to change from a dream to a reality, and when *your dream changes to reality is when you get realistic about your dream.*

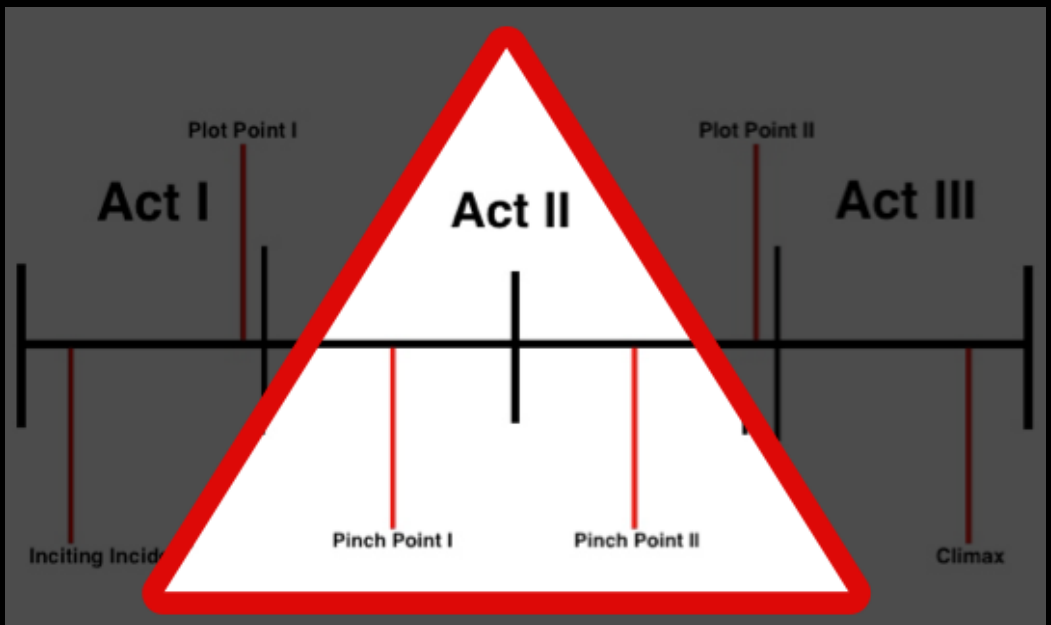
Stakes of Issue are questions like "Do I really want it?" "Am I willing to give up this to have that?" "Now I'm standing on

the precipice looking at this thing, is it worth it ...” (King, 1988)

At the same time that Syd Field introduced the Mid-point to the Paradigm he also introduced two other points which he termed **Pinch 1** and **Pinch 2**. Again these were defined only in the vaguest terms, as a scene or sequence that “pinches” the story line together and keeps it on track.

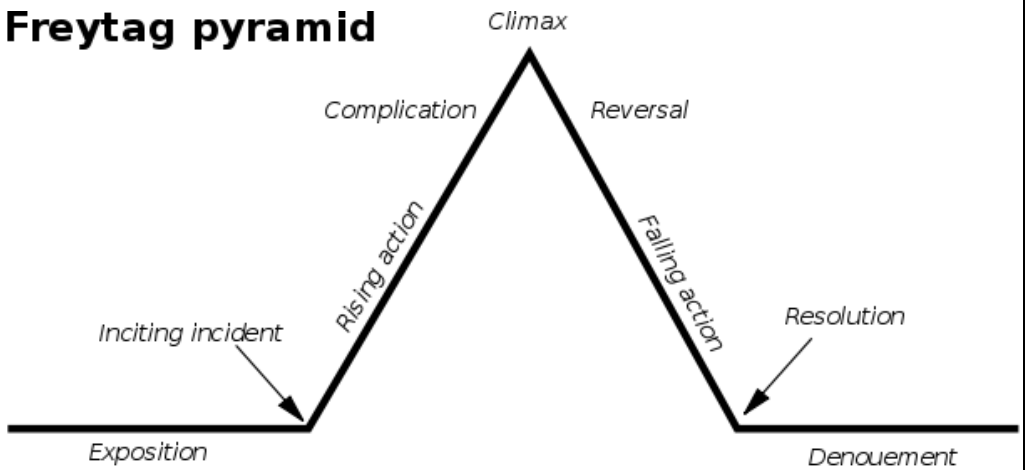
“... if you’re looking at a 30 page unit of dramatic action, all you need is one major scene or sequence to tie it all together. You lead into that scene or sequence on page 45, then move to the mid-point on page 60, then to the scene on page 75 ...” (1984)

What Syd Field did not seem to realise was, that with these three points, he was outlining the **Dramatic Core**.



In screenwriting manuals one often comes across a lob-sided triangle that is said to represent “rising tension”. From zero at the opening it indefatigably rises to its apex at the climax, around page 110, and then falls to the denouement at around page 120. I noted that this was often referred to in passing as “Freytag’s Triangle” or “Freytag’s Pyramid” or “Freytag’s Axis”. Sometimes the vector would have a more forgiving saw-edge, but at its simplest, and most direct, it would be a straight ramp up followed by a vertiginous nose-dive to *The End*. One day I decided to find out who this cat, *Freytag*, was. Research revealed that he was a nineteenth century German novelist who, in 1863, had written a manual called *Die Technik des Dramas*. I was rather more surprised to discover that the famous triangle, as originally drawn by the master, looked nothing like the charts drawn by Hollywood script gurus. Freytag’s triangle was symmetrical, as the name pyramid would suggest, and its apex was at the centre of the dramatic work, not shortly before the end.

Freytag pyramid



“The point of climax is the turning point of the story, where the main character makes the single big decision that defines the outcome of the story and who he is as a person.”

Freytag On Plot / [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plot_\(narrative\)#Freytag_on_Plot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plot_(narrative)#Freytag_on_Plot)

No doubt the confusion among script analyst's first arose because Freytag named the Mid-point of the drama “The Climax”. However, Freytag was not attempting to graph tension in the audience, which may well rise to its heights leading up to the resolution, but, rather, the tension internal to the plot structure. We might use the analogy of a watch spring. During the **rising action** the watch is wound up. This reaches its pitch at Freytag's “Climax” — which we have called the **point-of-no-return** — and, and then begins to inexorably unwind through the **falling action**. We can see this idea reflected in the adage generally accepted among fiction writers that all important plot elements should be set-up by the mid-point of the work.



Syd Field's focus on a three act structure divided by two plot points obscured the central importance of the middle segment, or **core**, of the screenplay. In *Going To The Movies* (Field 2001) he relates how, long before he had come up with his “paradigm”, he asked Sam Peckinpah how he structured his scripts. He got the

answer from Peckinpah that he liked to hang his stories around a **centrepiece**. He would build the action up to a certain event, about midway through the script, then let everything else be a consequence of that event. It is ironic that even when the later remark by Paul Schrader, that “something happens around page 60”, lead Field to rethink his paradigm and introduce “The Mid-point”, he still did not reconnect with this concept previously offered him by Peckinpah.



Field’s demonstration movie in *The Screenwriter’s Workbook* (1984) is *Chinatown* (1974), and it is clear from his analysis here that what he was looking for was a simple *sign-post* akin to plot points 1 & 2. He locates the Mid-point at the moment when Gittes (Jack Nicholson) sees a picture of Mulwray with Noah Cross and intuits a connection between Noah Cross (John Huston) and Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway); this he says happens on page 63 of the script (Field. 1984). Now, either Field was working from a very early draft of the script which bears little resemblance to the final film, or he has simply got his page numbers muddled. The incident happens on page 51 of my script, or at 48m 34s (excluding opening credits) into a 119m 12s total running time (excluding opening and closing credits). My point is that Gittes spotting the photograph is just a lead-in to the **centrepiece** of the movie — the meeting of Gittes with Noah Cross. This sequence starts with a close shot of the Albacore flag at 56m 41s and ends at 62m 54s after Noah’s parting line, “Just find the girl.” The special significance of this sequence is that it is the only time Gittes and Cross meet before the climax, and it does, indeed, send Gittes’ investigation off into another dramatic context.

It is curious that Field recognises *Chinatown* to be one of the most perfectly structured screenplays of the 70s, yet gets his page counts all wrong. Mulwray’s murder is discovered not on page 45 (as Field claims), but at 30m 2s (and page 30 of my screenplay), and is certainly, not pinch 1, but the 1st Turning-point. Gittes **enters the core** when he confronts Evelyn in the restaurant ; “Mrs Mulwray, I think you’re hiding something.” (43m 33s) At the structural mid-point, or **pivot**, is the key statement by Noah: “You may think you know what

you're dealing with, but believe me you don't." This occurs at 59m 57s in. He **exits the core**, when Evelyn rescues him from an ambush at the retirement home (75m 00s).

I must also take issue with Field over his idea of the contexts of the first and second parts of Act 2. He characterises the first context as, *What's going on?* and the second context as , *Who's behind it?* This, however, is a simplistic view which overwrites the theme of the film emblazoned in its title. At the half-way point Gittes may be well on his way to figuring out the water scam, but he has no idea of the bigger picture of what's going on. He enters Act 2 with all the presumptions and precepts of his life situation, as set up in Act 1. He is a slick, LA, private dick and wise guy. This is the context of Act 2/1. In the restaurant he tells Evelyn, "I do matrimonial work. It's my metiay. (sic)" And, when he decides that she is hiding something, immediately assumes that she must be having affairs of her own.



At the pivot Noah Cross tells him, "You may think you know what you're dealing with, but believe me you don't", and Gittes smiles:

NOAH CROSS
Why's that funny?

GITTES
It's what the district attorney
used to tell me in Chinatown.

NOAH CROSS
Was he right?

Gittes does not answer; however, from now on he will find himself increasingly drawn into acting in the same blundering, well-intentioned but foolhardy way he did once before. Soon after he exits from the core he is reminded again of Chinatown:

EVELYN

... I'm only judging on the basis of one afternoon and an evening, but if that's how you go about your work I'd say you're lucky to get through a whole day.

GITTES

Actually this hasn't happened to me in some time.

EVELYN

When was the last time?

GITTES

Why?

EVELYN

Just. I don't know why. I'm asking.

GITTES

It was in Chinatown.

So we might characterise the first context as that of the *Private Dick*; the second with the mysterious metaphor of *Chinatown*. At this point the exact meaning of that remains to be seen, but at the second turning-point the action precepts and motivation (P2) that carries him into the final act are far different from those that previously carried him into the second (P1). However, although this change **pivots on the mid-point**, there is no new plot point here; that must wait for Gittes to catch up with himself.

Field's focus was mainly on plot; Vicki King saw the core from a perspective of character change.

"Inner Movie Axiom: We will do anything to change until we start to: then we do everything to stop it. Page 45 to 60 is when your hero has put one foot in the boat but the other foot is still on the pier. You play him from 45 to 60 as wanting to get the other foot off the pier and into the boat so he can go on." (King, 1988)

While this beautifully catches the self-contradiction of the protagonist in the core it runs astray in suggesting that he consciously wants to change. This is rarely the case. Gittes no more wants to change than Schindler did (*Schindler's List*, 1993). Both characters are doing just fine, until they get snared by the call of conscience. Change is something that sneaks up on them unbidden.

Let's look at *Tootsie* (1982): Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) is a male-chauvinist actor who impersonates a woman in order to get job in a TV soap. He is desperate for work and that is his sole aim. He uses all his professional skills to change on the outside but has no

CENTREPIECE



intention of changing on the inside. Professionally he proves a great success in the role and just after the mid-point meets up with his agent George (Sydney Pollack), who is quite bemused by his client's new take on the role:

MICHAEL

I am Dorothy, Dorothy is me. No-one's writing that part; it's coming out of me.

GEORGE

You are Michael. You are acting Dorothy.

MICHAEL

It's the same thing. I'm experiencing these feelings.

GEORGE

Please.

MICHAEL

Why can't you get me a special? I feel I have something to say to women.

GEORGE

Listen to me, Michael. You have nothing to say to women.

MICHAEL

That's not true; I have plenty to say to other women like me.

GEORGE

There are no other women like you. You're a man!

MICHAEL

Yes, I realise that, of course. But I'm also an actress.

Michael is two things at the same time: he is still the same old manipulative male who blags his girlfriend, Sandy, and lusts after his co-star, Julie. But, at the same time, he identifies with his role as

Dorothy who demands to be treated first as a person, and not just a woman. This is the state that psychologist, Michael Apter, calls, **cognitive synergy** — the experience of incompatible characteristics in relation to an identity.

“The idea is that the opposite characteristics may co-exist in the sense that we are aware of both in consciousness, in relation to a given identity, and that these opposites both contribute something to the full meaning of the identity, or contribute alternative meanings to the identity.” (Apter, 1982)

When the protagonist enters the dramatic core he is subjected to forces from another frame of reference. We may call this the meeting of the **prevailing myth** with the **emergent myth**. Even when the character remains steadfast this clash of values must be confronted to forge change. This is often thought of as a slow process of growth, and this may have relevance to the character portrayal by the actor, but structurally this is not how it happens.

“.. when characteristic B is assigned to the identity, characteristic A takes a short time to recede and the synergy is experienced in it's full force during this short time. so the synergy derives from a kind of “carry-over” effect.

$A \rightarrow A\&B \rightarrow B/A \rightarrow A/B \rightarrow B\&A \rightarrow B$ “

In *Casablanca* (1942), for example, Rick is presented as a **cynic**; “I stick my neck out for nobody”. A man who has a relationship of convenience with his girlfriend, Yvonne, without any emotional involvement. When Ilsa turns up he has something of a bitter emotional breakdown, and we could say that **he is a cynic and he is a romantic**. Then, by means of a flashback to Paris, the cynic is presented as a man who was once an idealistic freedom fighter and a romantic who fell deeply in love., so we could say that he is **a romantic/cynic**. When he meets Ilsa in the market he pursues her cynically, telling her that someday she will lie to her current companion, Laszlo as she once lied to him, so we could describe him as **a cynic/romantic**. At the pivot point Ilsa tells him that she left him in Paris not through the cynical duplicity that Rick had presumed, but from moral idealism, because she was already married to Laszlo, a hero of the resistance whom she had thought to be dead. Rick is stunned; when he returns to his bar he instructs the croupier to rig the roulette wheel in favour of young lovers needing money to escape together, so he acts as **both romantic and cynic**.

When Rick enters the core he cares only for himself and his own satisfaction; when he exits he finds himself in a crisis of identity comes to see him just as he predicted that one day she would, and he tries

to reaffirm the character that he was before:

RICK
I'm not fighting for anything
anymore. I'm the only cause I'm
interested in.

But when Ilsa pulls a gun on him, he tells her:

RICK
Go ahead and shoot. You'll be
doing me a favour.

When Ilsa breaks down and confesses that she has loved him all along, Rick is forced into making a decision as to who he really is. This is, perhaps the perfect example of what John Vorhaus calls *Caught in a Trap of His Own Making* (Vorhaus 1994). After confessing her enduring love for Rick Ilsa tells him:

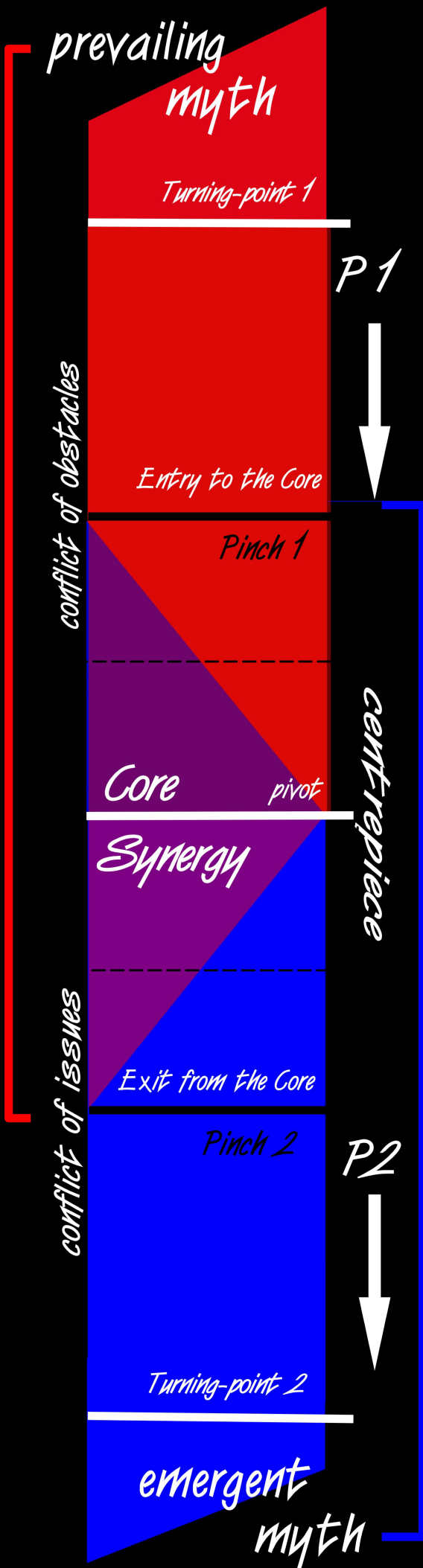
ILSA
Oh, I don't know what's right
any more. You'll have to think
for both of us ...

If Rick chooses the cynical path he will destroy the idealism of the woman he loves; if he chooses the idealistic path he must let her go.



This is Rick's *moment of realisation* of how he must act from now on. It is not until the 2nd Turning-point that Rick makes a new commitment and takes on a new identity, and it is not until the climax that this is revealed to the audience.

Core synergy is what happens in the central depths of the play where two opposing forces come together within the protagonist or the situation that he is in. The contrast can be funny, tragic, touching. Often the character knows no more as to what is going on than the audience does. After exiting the core, he must find a new way to go forward, and then, perhaps, another door will open before him. But it



will not until the 2nd Turning-point that he is ready to make a new commitment to that new course of action that will carry him forward into the climax and the future beyond.

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