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## Quoting and Misquoting Aristotle's Poetics in Recent Screenwriting Bibliography

### *La Poética de Aristóteles en los manuales de guion: valoración crítica*

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**ABSTRACT:** Between 2007 and 2012 more than 100 new books on screenwriting have been accessioned to the United States Library of Congress. The present work reviews 68 of these books and another 27 manuals on screenwriting published since 1979, the year of publication of *The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Syd Field's seminal work on this discipline. This article seeks to explore the range of Aristotle's influence on these manuals and to suggest that there should be a second reading of *Poetics*, that considers not only its didactic and technical dimension, but also that pertaining to philosophy and wisdom, and thus the professional interest for writers and viewers.

**RESUMEN:** Entre 2007 y el 2012 se han registrado más de cien nuevos libros sobre guion en la Biblioteca del Congreso de Estados Unidos. En este trabajo se estudian 68 de esos libros y otros 27 manuales de guion publicados desde 1979, fecha en la que apareció el texto de Syd Field, *The Foundations of Screenwriting*. El objeto de este artículo es explorar el alcance que tiene la Poética de Aristóteles en estos manuales y proponer que cabe una segunda lectura sobre la Poética, que tome en cuenta no sólo su carácter didáctico y técnico, sino también su dimensión filosófica y sapiencial y, por tanto, el interés profesional para guionistas y espectadores.

**Keywords:** Poetics, screenplay, Aristotle, García-Noblejas, screenwriting manuals.

**Palabras clave:** poética, guion, Aristóteles, García-Noblejas, manuales de guion.

The objective of this article<sup>1</sup> is to explore the range of interpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics* in screenwriting manuals published in the United States since 1979, which was the year of publication of Syd Field's *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*<sup>2</sup>. In particular, the article seeks to show that most of the times the quotations of *Poetics* in screenwriting manuals have the purpose of teaching a way to write screenplays and do not concern themselves with a more in-depth study related to the other works of the Greek philosopher (his *Rhetoric*, *Politics*, *Metaphysics*, *Ethics*, etc.). In this sense, this article suggests that there should be a second reading of *Poetics*, that considers not only its didactic and technical dimension, but also that pertaining to philosophy and wisdom<sup>3</sup>, and thus the professional interest for writers and viewers<sup>4</sup>.

Before analyzing the texts it is important to make three clarifications. The first one is that on writing a story the author's first encounter is habitually with the characters. It is the characters that through their actions give rise to the fictional world in which they are housed. Most of the screenwriting books studied in this article approach *Poetics* from

<sup>1</sup> This article has been funded by the National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development and is part of Fondecyt Initiation Project 11110275. It is the second of three articles dealing with the relation between Aristotle's *Poetics* and screenwriting. The initial theoretical approach was published in BRENES, Carmen Sofia, "The Practical Value of Theory: Teaching Aristotle's *Poetics* to Screenwriters", *Communication and Society*, vol. XXIV, fasc. 1, 2011, pp. 101-118. The first article suggests that a deeper understanding of the poetic myth as "representation of action (*Poetics*, 1450 a 16-17) and "the soul of tragedy" (*Poetics*, 1450 a 40-41) may be of great use to the screenwriter when rewriting the story and to the spectator in the synthetic comprehension progress that the critical reception of a work presupposes. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the bibliography studied does not take this interpretation into account.

<sup>2</sup> FIELD, Syd, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. RORTY, Amélie Oksenberg (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992, back cover, where Rorty points out that Aristotle's *Poetics* must be related with his psychology, history, ethics and politics. Cf. also, *ibid.* p. 1: "If we accept his explanation [about tragedy], then we must also accept a good deal of his psychology and ethics".

<sup>4</sup> I understand, with García-Noblejas, that the communication professions, which include fiction creators, require "something more than mere technical skill". They also involve "the practical character of knowing-how-to-act" and thus are strongly related to "dimensions typical of ethical reason, aesthetics, politics, rhetoric and poetics". Cfr. GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS Juan José, *Comunicación borrosa: sentido práctico del periodismo y de la ficción cinematográfica*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2000, p. 49.

this “first reading” or “first navigation” perspective, in which the means of access to the story are the characters. For this reason it is understandable that most of these books fail to address the “senses” proposed in the stories, which accounts for what happens in them, given that in *Poetics*, the “sense” is associated with the notion of *mythos* as the assumption that gives life to the characters and other elements in the story. But, in fact the *mythos*, which is “like the soul of the tragedy” (*Poetics*, 1450 a 40-41), is an assumption that “has not” yet materialized when writing or watching the story for the first time, but which “appears” once it is over. It is therefore natural that manuals should not take it into account<sup>5</sup>.

The second clarification has to do with reminding ourselves that Aristotle wrote *Poetics* not only thinking of the poets and authors of the dramatic works he studied, but also addressing the spectators of these works. Such is the opinion of Hallvard Fossheim on commenting *Poetics* 1448 b 4-9, which refers to the two causes that have given rise to poetic activity. Fossheim argues that the first cause enunciated by Aristotle—imitation is connatural to men from childhood, and by imitating men acquire their first knowledge—refers to the poet qua author, whereas the second cause—everyone enjoys imitation works—refers to the spectator of the play<sup>6</sup>. This means that in addition to a reading of the text as a handbook on “how to make” stories, a “second”, more global reading of *Poetics* is called for, from which one can reflect on the senses that each story makes to the viewer about the life action that it represents<sup>7</sup>.

The third clarification, also of a general nature, has to do with the title of this article. ‘Quoting’ and ‘misquoting’ have been used in a broad sense. In some cases, as will be seen, some authors have misquoted *Poetics* itself. However, in others, the quotations have been drawn from secondary sources, which has originated the misinterpretations. For instance, it is frequently said that the division into three acts was originally put forth by Aristotle. However, this attribution is not entirely fair. Thus, one of the recommendations of this work is to go back to *Poetics* using a good translation (ideally in a bilingual edition) and read it in the light of what other experts on this work have said.

The present study is introduced by a section that delimits the corpus of works studied and presents a preview of the results obtained. The following sections deal with 26 books in some detail, and make critical commentaries of the way in which they quote Aristotle's *Poetics*.

<sup>5</sup> I have dealt with this issue in BRENES, “Good and Bad Characters: A Poetic Difference”, *Revista de Comunicación*, vol. 11, December 2012, pp. 7-23. Cfr. also GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, “Resquicios de trascendencia en el cine. Pactos de lectura y segundas navegaciones en las películas”, in JIMÉNEZ CATANO, Rafael, GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José (eds.), *Poética & Cristianesimo*, Edusc, Roma, 2004, pp. 29-70.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. FOSSHEIM, Hallvard, “Mimesis in Aristotle's Ethics”, in ANDERSEN, Øivind, HAARBERG Jon (ed.), *Making Sense of Aristotle. Essays in Poetics*, Duckworth, London, 2003, p. 84. The same clarification appears in DONINI, Pier Luigi, *La tragedia e la vita. Saggi sulla Poetica di Aristotele*, Edizioni dell'Orso, Alessandria, 2004, p. 41, and in GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, “La identidad temática en *Hero*, un hermoso y extraño cuento chino”, in FRAGO PÉREZ, Marta, MARTÍNEZ ILLÁN, Antonio, CUEVAS ÁLVAREZ, Efrén (eds.), *Personaje, acción e identidad en cine y literatura*, Eiusa, Madrid, 2006, pp. 75-76.

<sup>7</sup> The idea that the object of poetic *mimesis* is life is explicitly developed in GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Poética del texto audiovisual. Introducción al discurso narrativo de la imagen*, Eunsia, Pamplona, 1982. Cfr. for example, pp. 470-471. Cfr. also RICOEUR, Paul, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, London - New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 12 [Kindle DX ebook], Amazon.com.

### 1. Aristotle and screenwriting manuals

Between 2007 and 2012 more than one hundred new books on screenwriting were accessioned at the Library of Congress<sup>8</sup>. This work has studied 68 of these books and also other 27 manuals published since 1979, which was the year of publication of Syd Field's book, considered to be pioneer in this discipline<sup>9</sup>. This vast bibliography can be initially grouped into two categories: some books, which we shall call manuals were written with the intention of helping script writers do their work; other texts, which we shall call academic, have a critical rather than a creative standpoint and study the scripts or stories as objects already completed or being completed or consider historical, sociological, economic, and/or other aspects. This article focuses on manuals.

Let us first examine some basic data. Of the 95 manuals studied, 59 quote Aristotle and 36 do not. Of the 27 books published before 2007, 22 quote *Poetics* and 5 do not, whereas of the 68 most recent books, 37 quote *Poetics* and 31 do not. An initial analysis of these data permits to say that before 2007, reference to Aristotle's *Poetics* was proportionally greater than in the last five years<sup>10</sup>.

In turn, in the 59 manuals that cite Aristotle, there is a difference. On the one hand, some of the texts mention *Poetics* only tangentially, often referring to the division into three acts, the unity of the action or the priority of action over the characters. In this group are the books by D. Baboulene, T. Baehr, M. Beker, D. Calvisi, J. Clark, M. Dimaggio, S. Field in the analysis of four scripts, D. M. Flinn, S. Frank, A. Horton, N. Iandolo, K. Iglesias, Ch. Keane, R. Krevolin, N. Landau, W. C. Martell, D. McKenna and Ch. Vogler, M. A. Phillips and Ch. Huntley, M. Rabiger, J. Selbo, J. Schechter, A. Sokoloff, R. Suppa, and J. Truby<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand are the books that cite Aristotle's *Poetics* on more occasions or discuss some of the Greek philosopher's claims.

The overall results indicate that in the screenplay manuals studied, the references to Aristotle's *Poetics* are made from the perspective of artistic creation. That is, the authors read Aristotle's text in search of advice on *how* to make stories. In most of the cases, the reading focuses on what, by analogy, can help to write a script.

The most quoted subjects are the priority of plot over characters; the division of the action into three moments—beginning, middle and end; the distinction between genres; the effect of drama on the spectator; the twists of the dramatic action—reversals and revelations; the unity of action; and the inevitable and unpredictable nature of the end. To a lesser extent, *Poetics* is also referred to in the context of the meaning of fiction for human life, the extension or magnitude of the plot, the relationship between history and the stories; and mimesis.

<sup>8</sup> Books on screenplays are generally classified under "Motion picture plays" or "Motion picture authorship". Cfr. Library of Congress [online] Available at <http://www.loc.gov/index.html>, accessed 21 June 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. CUNNINGHAM, Keith, *The Soul of Screenwriting: On Writing, Dramatic Truth, and Knowing Yourself*, Continuum, New York, 2008, p. 4. "Syd Field's *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* has been the highest selling-manual since its first publication in 1979", MURPHY, J. J., *Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work*, New York, Continuum, 2007, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> The selection of these 95 books has been made bearing in mind their influence on other authors (in the case of classical manuals such as S. Field's, R. Walter's, L. Seger's, R. McKee's, etc.), the use that has been given to them in screenwriting programs, and their accessibility. All the texts mentioned were found in the libraries of four universities with a screenwriting MFA program in California: USC, UCLA, CSUF, and CSUN, or in Amazon's bookstore. Obviously, not all the published manuals have been included in this work. However, the size of the sample appears to be large enough to account for the way in which these texts quote Aristotle.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. the complete references in the Bibliography.

With the exception of M. Tierno, Ch. Kallas, Z. Rush and G. Gallo, the authors do not concern themselves with what has been said by other experts on this classic text. That is, they have not considered *Poetics* as a reflection on “the theming of the principles that guide the production of a peculiar type of artifacts such as artistic works of an imitative nature”<sup>12</sup>, but only inasmuch as it can be used as a guide for the creation of stories. That is, in most cases, *Poetics* is only understood as a creator-oriented “how-to book”.

These approaches to *Poetics* have led to different scenarios. In some cases, it has been considered a required reference book for screenwriters (S. Field, R. Walter, D. E. Howard & Mabley, L. Hunter, R. McKee, L. Cowgill, R.U. Russin & W.M. Downs, D.B. Gilles and J. McBride, for example); in others as a background text for the ideas that each author is interested in developing (L. Seger, R. Tobias, W. Froug, D.M. Flinn, L. Lee, P.J. Gulino, H. Suber, L. Schellhardt, K. Cunningham and R. Krevolin); in others, in dialogues with *Poetics* to improve upon it (K. Dancyger & J. Rush, and C. Batty); or even to deny its value (Z. Rush).

The following section presents a brief review of each manual in terms of these categories. Under each epigraph, the works appear in chronological order according to publication date of the different authors' works. The last epigraph refers to works that have delved deeper into Aristotle's *Poetics*.

## 2. *Poetics as required reference for screenwriting texts*

Syd Field's *The Foundations of Screenwriting* was published in 1979. Before him, there had been other publications on playwriting and interviews to screenwriters<sup>13</sup>, but Field “is the first to write a popular book on the craft of screenwriting”<sup>14</sup>. Field quotes Aristotle to refer to what he calls *dramatic principles*, which include the three-act structure “first laid down by Aristotle”<sup>15</sup>; “the three unities of dramatic action: time, place, and action”<sup>16</sup>; and the relation between action and characters, from which Field concludes “your character has to be active, has to be doing things, causing things to happen, not just reacting all the time (...) Your character is what he/she does”<sup>17</sup>. At the end of the book, Field says: “I didn't really discover anything new; this concept of storytelling has been around since Aristotle's time. I simply uncovered what was already there, gave it a name, and illustrated how it worked in contemporary movies”<sup>18</sup>. In 2006, in the revised edition of *The Screenwriter's Workbook*<sup>19</sup>, Field adds nothing to what he said about Aristotle before. One of the most frequent misquotations of *Poetics* has originated in an oversimplification of Field's, when he says that the three-act structure is mentioned in Aristotle's text. As has already been mentioned, *Poetics* never refers to acts. When Aristotle speaks of three parts in the dramatic action, he wants to

<sup>12</sup> VIGO, Alejandro, *Aristóteles. Una introducción*, Instituto de Estudios de la Sociedad (IES), Santiago de Chile, 2007, p. 241.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. for example, LAWSON, John Howard, *Theory and Technique of Playwriting*, New York, Hill & Wang, 1960.

<sup>14</sup> BOON, Kevin Alexander, *Script Culture and the American Screenplay. Contemporary Approaches to Film and Television Series*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2008, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> FIELD, Syd, *Screenplay*, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> FIELD, Syd, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> FIELD, Syd, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> FIELD, Syd, op. cit., p. 305.

<sup>19</sup> FIELD, Syd, *The Screenwriter's Workbook* (Revised Edition), Delta, New York, 2008.

emphasize the fact that nothing precedes the beginning of the action and nothing happens after the action ends (*Poetics*, 1450 b 25-32).

Field's proposals have been criticized for being formulaic<sup>20</sup>. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that his work was one of the first to systematize in writing what was being had taught in the United States in the, at the time, young screenwriting schools. And by doing so, he facilitated the creation of works that were successful in the Hollywood of those years.

Richard Walter, founder and professor of the MFA Program in Screenwriting at UCLA, wrote his first screenwriting book in 1988<sup>21</sup>. In it he refers to *Poetics* as the screenwriters' "Bible", as he will reassert more than 20 years later, in *Essentials of Screenwriting: The Art, Craft, and Business of Film and Television Writing*, published in 2010<sup>22</sup>, where he holds that if he had to choose between Aristotle and another author, he would still promote Aristotle: "I predict the old fellow will last"<sup>23</sup>.

Walter does not use *Poetics* strictly as a writing manual, but as a source of inspiration. In the 2010 book, he draws support from what Aristotle says about the length of the work to refer to the three-act structure, although he clarifies that "in fact Aristotle never mentions 'Acts'. Aristotle speaks instead of beginnings, middles, and ends"<sup>24</sup>. He also mentions *Poetics* in connection with the characters when he points out that for Aristotle the story is "the first principle of solid dramatic craft"<sup>25</sup>. However, Walter disagrees with the Greek text by holding that when a viewer finishes watching a movie, what he recalls are not the actions but the character.

As can be seen, both Field and Walter quote notions of *Poetics* which guide on *how* to write a story and therefore give priority to the characters. Since their aim is to produce a text that helps professionals to write scripts they do not stop to ask the reason *why* of these assertions, nor *which* is their sense with respect of the purpose of the poetic work. From this point of view, they rightly cite the Aristotelian text, understood as a bag of tricks for aspiring screenwriters, but do not go beyond what might be called a "first reading".

In 1993, David Howard took over the reedition and adaptation for screenwriting of a book by Edward Mabley, *Dramatic Construction, an Outline of Basic Principles: Followed by Technical Analyses of Significant Plays by Sophocles... and Others*<sup>26</sup>. This work gave rise to *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*<sup>27</sup>. Eleven years later, Howard published *How to Build a Great Screenplay: A Master Class in Storytelling for Film*<sup>28</sup>, with his experience of 24 years as professor at USC's School of Cinematic Arts. In both books, Howard argues that

<sup>20</sup> For example, MURPHY, J.J. *op. cit.*, pp. 7-15, where the author makes a concise although critical presentation of S. Field's, R. Walter's, L. Seger's and R. McKee's proposals. Cfr. also DAVIS, Robert, DE LOS RIOS, Riccardo, "From Hollywood to Tokyo: Resolving a Tension in Contemporary Narrative Cinema", *Film Criticism*, vol. 31, n° 1/2, 2006, pp. 157-172.

<sup>21</sup> WALTER, Richard, *Screenwriting: the Art, Craft and Business of Film and Television Writing*, Plume Book, New York, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> WALTER, Richard, *Essentials of Screenwriting: The Art, Craft, and Business of Film and Television Writing*, Plume, New York, 2010, p. 374.

<sup>23</sup> WALTER, Richard, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> WALTER, Richard, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>26</sup> MABLEY, Edward, *Dramatic Construction. An Outline of Basic Principles: Followed by Technical Analyses of Significant Plays by Sophocles... and Others*, Chilton Book, Philadelphia - New York, 1972.

<sup>27</sup> HOWARD, David, MABLEY, Edward, *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of a Screenplay*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 1995.

<sup>28</sup> HOWARD, David, *How to Build a Great Screenplay: A Master Class in Storytelling for Film*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 2004.

“one can't write about dramatic theory without in some way using the ideas of Aristotle”. At the same time, Howard recognizes that Aristotle is not enough, and that one should also learn from the European playwriting tradition.

This relation between the script and playwriting is of particular interest when it comes to regarding *Poetics* not as a how-to book, but as a text that also reflects on the principles of dramatic and narrative art<sup>29</sup>.

Howard quotes Aristotle a couple of times in each book. In *The Tools of Screenwriting*, he does it in connection with the unity of the action, from which he deduces that most of the times the stories have one single protagonist, for it is the pursuit of his goal what creates the unity of the action. However, he recognizes that there are stories in which this is not the case, as in *Rashomon*<sup>30</sup>, where unity comes from time<sup>31</sup>. He also refers to *Poetics* when he speaks of plausibility, which he relates to the mistake of resolving the plot with an external agent (a resource known to the Greeks as *Deus ex machina*). Howard recognizes that a good ending is, as Aristotle says, one that although inevitable is unpredictable. “This feeling of inevitability—a combination of characters moving along a course from which there is no possible turning —is perhaps a screenwriters's finest achievement”<sup>32</sup>.

In his book *How to Build a Great Screenplay*, published in 2004, Howard quotes Aristotle only in the chapter entitled “The Classical Screenplay Structure”. There he warns the screenwriter that a classical structure does not guarantee a good story and should not be taken as a recipe. Howard's objective is to show that Hollywood's way of making movies follows Aristotle and the playwrights of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries “for the simple reason that it worked extremely well”<sup>33</sup>.

In short, Howard gives a right interpretation of the passages from Aristotle he quotes, without attempting to probe deeper into them.

Lew Hunter arrived at the UCLA school of screenwriting hired by William Froug. In 1993 he wrote *Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434*. Eleven years later, the revised version of this book does not show substantial changes in the way in which he quotes *Poetics*<sup>34</sup>. Hunter refers to *Poetics* and to *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, by Lajos Egri, as “the two bibles for performance drama/comedy”<sup>35</sup>. Hunter adds Egri's book because it focuses on characters, while Aristotle gives priority to the plot. For Hunter “character and plot must intertwine”<sup>36</sup> and, therefore, he has no problem in saying that “Aristotle and Egri are both right about plot and characters. Chickens come before eggs, and eggs before chickens”<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> On the importance of dramaturgy as a source for screenwriting teaching it is interesting to read STUTTERHEIM, Kerstin, KAISER, Silke, *Handbuch der Filmdramaturgie*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. HOWARD, David, MABLEY, Edward, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. *op. cit.*, p. 244.

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 319.

<sup>34</sup> HUNTER, Lew, *Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434: The Industry's Premier Teacher Reveals the Secrets of the Successful Screenplay*, Perigee Trade, New York, 2004. He himself tells how it came about: “To prepare for this reissue of *Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434*, I reread the whole book with the idea of a somewhat gentle updating —maybe some new thoughts or anecdotes, or examples. About halfway through, my memory flashed on Aristotle and Egri and how the syllabus I devised in 1979 for my original Screenplay 434 graduate class at UCLA, is still intact with Ari and Egri as its centerpiece. Getting students back to Aristotle and Egri was my real teaching job because superior storytelling has not changed since the time of the cave people”. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>37</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

Hunter mentions the Aristotelian notion of catharsis when he speaks of the effect that the third act should have on the audience, and his interpretation, following S. H. Butcher, is that “the story beneath the story” is what fills the audience with emotion once the story is over. For Hunter, ending a story in such a way as to cause that emotion is very difficult. In this point, Hunter concedes that although he prefers unhappy endings, he understands that Hollywood writers must often yield to the pressure from the industry and provide the happy endings that please large audiences.

In 1997, Robert McKee published *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*<sup>38</sup>. According to J. J. Murphy, no author “has achieved more notoriety and success on the workshop circuit than Robert McKee”<sup>39</sup>. Precisely for this reason, it is interesting to explain in detail at which points the manual quotes *Poetics*. It is worth noting that in 466 pages, Aristotle's text is quoted 14 times. The references appear in the context of the origin of narrative art, genres, characters, length of the plots, endings, beginnings, the “deus ex machina” error and dialogues.

McKee quotes Aristotle for the first time when he reframes the question that the Philosopher asks in the *Nicomachean Ethics* about how we should live. The answer, according to McKee, is nowadays more often found in stories than in philosophy, science, economics, sociology and politics<sup>40</sup>. The second quotation appears in the chapter on genre in which McKee says:

Aristotle gave us the first genres by dividing dramas according to the value-charge of their ending versus their story design. A story, he noted, could end on either a positive or a negative charge. Then each of these two types could be either a Simple design (ending flat with no turning point or surprise) or a Complex design (climaxing around a major reversal in the protagonist's life). The result is his four basic genres: Simple Tragic, Simple Fortunate, Complex Tragic, Complex Fortunate<sup>41</sup>.

However, this distinction is not to be found in *Poetics*. The genre distinction proposed by Aristotle is between tragedy and comedy, “the latter tends to represent men worse than present humanity, the former better”<sup>42</sup>.

McKee quotes Aristotle three times when he speaks of the characters (twice in the chapter on “Character and Structure” and once in the chapter on “Character”). When he asks which is more important, the story/plot or the character, Aristotle, he notes, gives priority to the story. McKee interprets this part of *Poetics* distinguishing between characterization and character. Characterization is the observable qualities of a human being (age, gender, intellectual ability, way of speaking and behaving, way of dressing, etc.), while the “true character” is the result of the decisions taken by man in situations of pressure. According to him, Aristotle spoke of the priority of the story referring to characterization, because there is no priority of one element over another: “structure *is* character; character *is* structure”<sup>43</sup> because “story structure and true character are one phenomenon seen from two points of view”<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> McKEE, Robert, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, Methuen, London, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> MURPHY, J. J., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. McKEE, Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>42</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1448 a 17-19. I quote according to HALLIWELL, Stephen (trans. and comm.), *The Poetics of Aristotle*, Duckworth, London, 1987.

<sup>43</sup> McKEE, Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 109.



At this point, it is interesting to note that McKee joins structure and character: what moves a story forward are the decisions of the character. There is no story if there isn't a character that decides to do something under the pressure of circumstances. "A character is the choices he makes to take the actions he takes"<sup>45</sup>. This way of dealing with the essence of characters allows us to see that McKee takes them as "a metaphor for human nature"<sup>46</sup>. Although he insists that a character is not a person, when speaking about how to create a character, he treats the character as a person. And this is why he speaks of the vices and virtues that shape the character into who he is.

In the chapter on "Act Design", *Poetics* is once again quoted in reference to what McKee calls the macro-structure of the story: the acts. According to him, Aristotle "deduces that there is a relationship between the size of the story –how long it takes to read or perform– and the number of major Turning Points necessary to tell it"<sup>47</sup>. The longer the story, the more Turning Points must there be, in order not to bore the audience with a show where "nothing happens"<sup>48</sup>. However, Aristotle's reasoning on the size of the plots is not directly related to their effect on the audience in terms of boredom, as McKee holds, but to the ability of the story to represent "an action that is serious and complete"<sup>49</sup> in which there must be at least "a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad"<sup>50</sup>.

As can be observed, Aristotle's position has a more radical sense than to avoid boredom, which is what McKee posits. In the Greek text, the transition from good fortune to bad involves an inner change, a "tragic transformation"<sup>51</sup> that is not restricted to mere "turning-points" of the characters.

In chapter on "Exposition", McKee reproduces the *in medias res* adage, which prescribes that the story must begin in the middle of the action. As it is known, this expression comes from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, and does not appear in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

In short, Robert McKee takes into account the fundamental idea of *Poetics* when he acknowledges that stories are, in a way, representations of human life. In this sense, he captures the essence of the book. However, his way of quoting *Poetics* shows that his intention is not to study the book in depth. In addition, at least in two places, McKee misquotes Aristotle.

Linda J. Cowgill has published three books on screenwriting: *Secrets of Screenplay Structure. How to Recognize and Emulate the Structural Frameworks of Great Films*<sup>52</sup> (1999); *Writing Short Films: Structure and Content for Screenwriters*<sup>53</sup> (2005); and *The Art of Plotting: How to Add Emotion, Excitement, and Depth to Your Writing*<sup>54</sup> (2007). Cowgill quotes *Poetics* nine times in the first one and makes one single reference to it in the third one.

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 377.

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 375.

<sup>47</sup> McKEE, Robert, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>49</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1449 b 24-25.

<sup>50</sup> McKEE, Robert, *op. cit.*, pp. 357-358. Halliwell's translation is: "a transformation either from affliction to prosperity, or the reverse".

<sup>51</sup> HALLIWELL, Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>52</sup> COWGILL, Linda J., *Secrets of Screenplay Structure. How to Recognize and Emulate the Structural Frameworks of Great Films*, Lone Eagle, Los Angeles, 1999.

<sup>53</sup> COWGILL, Linda J., *Writing Short Films: Structure and Content for Screenwriters*, Lone Eagle, Los Angeles, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> COWGILL, Linda J., *The Art of Plotting: How to Add Emotion, Excitement, and Depth to Your Writing*, Back Stage Books, New York, 2008.

Three references in *Secrets of Screenplay Structure* have to do with the term “magnitude”. After quoting the definition of tragedy in *Poetics* 1449 b 24-28, Cowgill argues that Aristotle gives the term “magnitude”, the sense of “importance or relevance”. She adds that “today, we might understand this as ‘theme’”<sup>55</sup>. Further on, she makes another reference to magnitude as “theme”, when she says that it is not enough that the action progresses as an arrow between the beginning and the end, but there must be twists and surprises that come from the relationships between the characters and often from the subplots.

However, Cowgill is not accurate in this point, since she does not take into account that “magnitude” for Aristotle is the temporary extension, as can be seen in *Poetics* 1449 b 13-14, when he says that “tragedy strives as far as possible to limit itself to a single day”.

Cowgill also quotes Aristotle when she speaks of “complete, whole”<sup>56</sup> and explains that this is “the beginnings of structure itself”<sup>57</sup>. When Aristotle points the need for a tragedy to have three parts –beginning, middle and end– she says, he is highlighting “the causal relationship between the parts of the whole”<sup>58</sup>. With this, she rightly underlines the principle of causality that governs drama. As explained by A. López Eire, “a tragedy is not just a string of episodes that follow one after the other, because the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* formula is not true, but it is necessary to highlight the causal link between the subsequent with respect to the preceding”<sup>59</sup>.

In the chapter “The three-part nature of screenplay structure”, Cowgill quotes Aristotle to explain what reversals and revelations are. A reversal is “a change of the actions to their opposite. Generally,” she adds, “when something good turns bad, or something bad changes to good”<sup>60</sup>. “Revelation means something revealed or exposed, especially a striking disclosure, of something not previously known or realized”<sup>61</sup>. Reversals and revelations are two tools to build the plot, says Cowgill quite rightly. We should add to this that Aristotle understands revelations as a shift “from ignorance to knowledge”.

As in McKee's book, Cowgill quotes *Poetics* in an accurate way to account for the usual mechanisms to create narratives. However, she does not seem to be interested in probing deeper into the philosopher's vision on *praxis* or human action, which is the object of poetic mimesis.

Robin U. Russin and William M. Downs wrote their first version of *Screenplay. Writing the Picture*<sup>62</sup> in 2000. When they explain why we need to tell stories, the authors refer to the Aristotelian catharsis, noting that “perhaps, we need to be cleansed of the aimless chaos of our lives”. Thus, they belong in the same place as authors like S. Halliwell and

<sup>55</sup> COWGILL, Linda J., *Secrets of Screenplay Structure...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1449 b 24-28: “Tragedy, then, is a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude –in language which is garnished in various forms in its different parts– in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative –and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions” (Halliwell's translation).

<sup>56</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1450 b 25.

<sup>57</sup> COWGILL, Linda J., *Secrets of Screenplay Structure...*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> COWGILL, Linda J., *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>59</sup> LÓPEZ EIRE, Antonio, *Poética Aristóteles*, Istmo, Madrid, 2002, p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> COWGILL, Linda J., *Secrets of Screenplay Structure...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>61</sup> COWGILL, Linda J., *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>62</sup> RUSSIN, Robin U., DOWNS, William Missouri, *Screenplay: Writing the Picture*, Silman-James Press, Los Angeles, 2003.

M. Nussbaum, who understand that the cathartic effect discussed in *Poetics* has a cognitive purpose and not only a pleasant one<sup>63</sup>.

Russin and Downs account for the origin of genres saying that they are derived from the emotions that movies produce in the audience. Genres are the classification of this effect in the viewer, which is what Aristotle calls *catharsis*. Thus, they propose five major groups of stories: stories of Courage, Fear and Loathing, The Need to Know stories, Laughter; and, lastly, Love and Longing stories.

Russin and Downs quote *Poetics* to refer to other three subjects: characters, structure, and causality as an assumption for the construction of the plot. Regarding the characters, their view is that it makes no sense asking what comes first, action or characters, because they understand, with Aristotle, that stories are an "imitation of human action" and at the same time "characters in action". "You must know your characters as you plot their action, in order to know what actions they would naturally take in any given circumstance. And you must simultaneously know what you want your story to be about, because it provides the circumstances that motivate your characters' actions"<sup>64</sup>.

However, it should be noted that the screenwriter does not usually know what his story is about, and therefore it is not possible to do what Russin and Downs suggest at the same time. The solution is to understand that in the "first writing", the screenwriter follows the characters and the action depends on them; while in the process of re-writing, the writer, who already knows what the story is about, because he has seen it from the end, may review the actions of the characters to make sure they respond to a single life principle<sup>65</sup>.

In their chapter on "Historical Approaches to Structure", Russin and Downs make an accurate and concise presentation of chapters VI and IX of *Poetics*, which speak of the definition of tragedy and its parts, and the causality requirement.

Russin and Downs' position with respect to the contents of *Poetics* is to consider it as valid background to analyze finished stories and as general orientation for writers at the time of writing, but not a catalogue of necessary steps to be followed. That is, they rightly differentiate between a critical reading of *Poetics* and an artistic reading.

D.B. Gilles in *The Screenwriter Within: New Strategies to Finish Your Screenplay & Get a Deal*<sup>66</sup>, published in 2011 (second edition), quotes the Aristotelian text briefly and correctly. The author recommends reading Aristotle because "the ideas and theories on storytelling he set down in his *Poetics* are timelier than ever"<sup>67</sup>.

In 2012, Joseph McBride published his first book on screenwriting. The historian and biographer of famous film directors such as John Ford and Frank Capra, quotes *Poetics* as "the earliest how-to book on screenwriting"<sup>68</sup>. McBride argues that "Aristotle's three-act structure" turns up even in the most sophisticated and postmodern stories and also in commercials, because it is the only way to "sustain audience attention through characters". As already mentioned, attributing the division into three acts directly to

<sup>63</sup> A summary of these two stances can be found in GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, "Pensar hoy un sentido trascendente para la catarsis aristotélica", in FARO, Giorgio (ed.), *Lavoro e vita quotidiana*, vol. IV, Edusc, Roma, 2003, pp. 265-292.

<sup>64</sup> RUSSIN, Robin U., DOWNS, William Missouri, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>65</sup> Cfr. BRENES, Carmen Sofia, «The Practical Value of Theory: Teaching Aristotle's *Poetics* to Screenwriters», *op. cit.*

<sup>66</sup> GILLES, D. B., *The Screenwriter Within: New Strategies to Finish Your Screenplay & Get a Deal*, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, CA, 2011.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>68</sup> McBRIDE, Joseph, *Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless*, Vintage Books, New York, 2012, p. 41.

Aristotle is not accurate. However, McBride is right when he argues that structure gives unity to the story: "Even the most poetic short film needs a structure to keep it from flying off in all directions"<sup>69</sup>.

### 3. The "Rigidity" of Poetics

This section brings together authors who cite *Poetics* as a reference point to work on elements of the script. When referring to technical issues and interpreting *Poetics* only as a handbook of tips for writing, in some cases they end up rejecting Aristotle's proposals because they consider them rigid, and in others, they reduce the scope of the text.

Linda Seger is the author of the classic manual, *Making a Good Script Great*, first published in 1989 and republished in a revised third edition in 2010. Her book is usually cited when discussing the influence of Aristotle on screenwriting manuals. This is a mistake because Seger only mentions *Poetics* but once, when speaking of the scene, and does so to contradict the Philosopher. "Aristotle said that tragedy should engender pity and fear. And many of the best film scenes might awaken those emotions. But they'll also bring out other feelings—such as compassion, joy, anger, frustration, excitement, disappointment, and sadness"<sup>70</sup>.

In 1993, Ronald B. Tobias published *20 Master Plots and How to Build Them*<sup>71</sup>, a book on plots where he quotes Aristotle as the "grandpappy of dramatic theory"<sup>72</sup>. Tobias refers to *Poetics* to explain the difference between life and plot. Human life is full of accidents, coincidences and chance, while a plot is a unitary action characterized by the cause and effect relation, which "creates a whole made up of beginning, middle and an end"<sup>73</sup>. Speaking of the beginning or set-up, Tobias quotes Aristotle when he says "a character wants either happiness or misery"<sup>74</sup>, and from that he goes on to speak of the character's want that gives rise to the beginning of the plot. "This want (or need) is called intent"<sup>75</sup>. When he mentions the middle as one of the parts of the story, Tobias sustains that Aristotle says that it is there that the reversals and recognitions take place, from which a change in the character derives.

He also refers to *Poetics* when he speaks about the relationship between character and action and notes that although Aristotle spoke of the superiority of the plot, "today we don't agree that must be the case". However, he acknowledges that "we understand who a person is by what he does". Tobias says that in the "pursuit plot", the action does not define the character, as Aristotle says, but what matters is the action. Neither does he agree with Aristotle when he says that extremes must be avoided. In the "wretched excess plot" what fascinates audiences is to see "people who push the limits of acceptable behavior, either by choice or by accident"<sup>76</sup>.

<sup>69</sup> McBRIDE, Joseph, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>70</sup> SEGER, Linda, *Making a Good Script Great*, Silman-James, Los Angeles, 2010, chapter 6, [Kindle DX ebook]. Amazon.com. Seger does not cite Aristotle either in SEGER, Linda, *Writing Subtext: What Lies Beneath*, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, CA, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> TOBIAS, Ronald B., *20 Master Plots and How to Build Them*, Writers Digest Books, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2012.

<sup>72</sup> TOBIAS, Ronald B., *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> TOBIAS, Ronald B., *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

As can be seen, Tobias bears in mind the Aristotelian proposals, although in some cases he distances himself from them. However, he does not seem to understand the Aristotelian text correctly when he says that the characters want happiness or unhappiness. Actually what Aristotle says is that the stories are "representations" (*mimesis*) of action and life, and therefore of happiness and unhappiness<sup>77</sup>. Tobias does not seem to understand either that when Aristotle speaks of *mythos* in *Poetics*, he refers both to the chain of events (plot) and the object of poetic representation, that is, human action.

Also in 1993, William Froug wrote *Screenwriting Tricks of the Trade*. Three years later, he published *Zen and the Art of Screenwriting: Insights and Interviews*<sup>78</sup>, where he sums up his experience as a professor at UCLA and his conversations with screenwriters such as Frank Darabont, Robert Goldman, Callie Khouri and Eric Roth. In this work, Froug quotes Aristotle only once in connection with episodic plots, which *Poetics* describes as those in which there is no probability or necessity, and therefore are the "worst". Froug contradicts this principle and argues that there are great movies that are episodic, like *Smoke* and *Forrest Gump*, in which the episodes are anchored to the space unity, or *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Patton*, in which the unity principle is derived from the protagonist's determination to do something<sup>79</sup>.

The last author of the 1990s is Denny Martin Flinn, with *How Not to Write a Screenplay*<sup>80</sup>, published in 1999. Flinn quotes Aristotle just once when he speaks of the structure of the stories and recommends using any structural proposal to organize the story. In this epigraph he puts Aristotle's *Poetics* at the same level as Syd Field, Robert McKee, John Truby, Linda Seger and Joseph Campbell<sup>81</sup>.

Lance Lee has written two books addressed to screenwriters, *A Poetics for Screenwriters*<sup>82</sup> (2001) and *The Understructure of Writing for Film & Television*<sup>83</sup> (1988), with Ben Brady. In his more recent book, he aims to offer screenwriters a modern poetics with roots in classical drama: "Great screenwriters belong in the same company as great dramatists: screenwriting is only our own current variant of playwrighting"<sup>84</sup>.

Lee uses a classical scheme and divides his book into the primary elements of plot, dramatic identification through emotions, types of plot, characters, theme, spectacle, and finally he devotes a few pages to the production process.

Much of Lee's book, which is not strictly a screenwriting manual but a reflection on poetics, compares Aristotle's proposals with those of other authors, including thinkers such as Hume, Kant, Freud and Jung. The interesting thing about this book is that it shows that the parts into which manuals are usually divided have originated in classical drama (not necessarily Aristotle) and he provides enough evidence on how some of these principles operate.

<sup>77</sup> Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1450 at 16-17.

<sup>78</sup> FROUG, William, *Zen and the Art of Screenwriting: Insights and Interviews*, Silman-James Press, Los Angeles, 1996. Subsequently Froug has written two other books on screenplays: FROUG, William, *Zen and the Art of Screenwriting: No. 2: More Insights and Interviews*, Silman-James Press, Los Angeles, 2000, and FROUG, William, *How I Escaped from Gilligan's Island: And Other Misadventures of a Hollywood Writer-producer*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, OH, 2005.

<sup>79</sup> Cfr. FROUG, William, *Zen and the Art of Screenwriting...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-138.

<sup>80</sup> FLINN, Denny Martin, *op. cit.*

<sup>81</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-154.

<sup>82</sup> LEE, Lance, *A Poetics for Screenwriters*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2001.

<sup>83</sup> BRADY, Ben, LEE, Lance, *The Understructure of Writing for Film & Television*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1988.

<sup>84</sup> LEE, Lance, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

However, his way of quoting *Poetics* shows that his objective is not to make a thorough analysis of the Greek philosopher's work, but to use it as a counterpoint to F. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*<sup>85</sup>.

*Screenwriting: The Sequence Approach*<sup>86</sup>, by Paul Joseph Gulino was first published in 2004. The reference to Aristotle's *Poetics* appears when he speaks of "beginning, middle and end" as characteristics of the "whole action" that constitutes tragedy. Gulino, taking Frank Daniel's (1924-1996) paradigm of the eight sequences, argues that a way of structuring the three acts is to divide the action into eight segments of approximately 15 minutes each. The first act consists of two sequences, the second of four, and the third of two.

Gulino goes deeper into the Aristotelian notion of "whole action" and notes that this feature makes the film feel "like one film and not, say, eighty separate scenes, or 120 individual minutes of filmic experience"<sup>87</sup>. The unity of the action comes from the dramatic tension, which in turn accompanies the dramatic question: can the protagonist reach or run away from what he wants? "The main tension is what makes a movie feel like one movie; it's what unifies it; it's what elevates a film above the sum of its parts (providing 'organic unity' in Aristotelean terms); it's what we use when we describe what it is *about*"<sup>88</sup>. So far, Gulino's interpretation is correct. Where he lacks depth is when he says that what the film "is about" is only the dramatic plot, when actually, in the Aristotelian doctrine, the concept of *mythos* (usually translated as plot), also means *mimesis praxeos*, that is, a fast and essential (*kath'òlou*) representation of human action<sup>89</sup>.

However, Guliano's book makes an interesting analysis of eleven films of different genres in the light of the eight basic sequences, providing the writer with a useful tool to restructure stories and the viewer with a way to analyze them.

Howard Suber has published two books, *The Power of Film* in 2006, and *Letters to Young Filmmakers* in 2012. In the latter he does not cite Aristotle, but he does in the former. It is a long glossary, compiled from his class notes in the Film and Television Producers Program at UCLA, where he has been a Faculty Member for almost 50 years. The book does not intend to study Aristotle's *Poetics*, yet it offers some interesting observations. For example, Suber accurately notes that much of what has been said about *Poetics* in screenwriting manuals does not appear in the original text, for instance, the division into acts and the unity of time, place and action. "The point here is not to knock Aristotle, but rather his interpreters"<sup>90</sup>.

In 2007, in her book *Screenwriting for Dummies*<sup>91</sup>, Laura Schellhardt uses Aristotle's *Poetics* to address four topics: the elements of the story, the endings, the three-act structure, and rewriting.

When she talks about the elements of the story she cites and interprets the six parts of tragedy. This author describes the plot as "a series of actions, and an action can be defined as an event that causes something else to occur"<sup>92</sup>. Thus, she distinguishes an action from an event, which would be an act from which nothing is derived. The second

<sup>85</sup> NIETZSCHE, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, Penguin Books, London, 2003.

<sup>86</sup> GULINO, Paul Joseph, *Screenwriting*, Continuum, New York, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> GULINO, Paul Joseph, *op. cit.* p. 11.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1451 b, 6-7.

<sup>90</sup> SUBER, Howard, *The Power of Film*, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, CA, 2006, chapter "Aristolatry", [Kindle DX ebook]. Amazon.com.

<sup>91</sup> SCHELLHARDT, Laura, *Screenwriting for Dummies*, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, 2008.

<sup>92</sup> SCHELLHARDT, Laura, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

element of a story is the character. "A character is any person or presence in your screenplay that performs an action or causes another character to do so"<sup>93</sup>. With this definition Schellhardt undelines that a character is not necessarily a human being: it can be a dog or a ghost provided that it causes others to act. The third element is thought. Schellhardt interprets thought as the idea within the author which he tries to convey to the viewer, that is, the theme. The fourth element is diction. To Schellhardt, diction refers to the type of words the writer chooses to tell the action. The fifth element is music, which can be the soundtrack that accompanies actions, or music that comes from the action being played. Schellhardt considers silence and the sound of words themselves as music. The last element is the spectacle, which Schellhardt understands as a moment that impresses the audience.

It is possible that this way of presenting the six parts of tragedy may be of use to the screenwriter. However, not everything that Schellhardt says appears in *Poetics*. Schellhardt misquotes *Poetics* when she reduces the *mythos* to plot or intertwined actions, without considering that it also has other meanings<sup>94</sup>, among them, being a representation of action<sup>95</sup>. Or when she interprets thought as the theme of the story, when, as Halliwell says, Aristotle refers to "the rhetoric used by the characters to explain, defend or justify themselves, or to state their attitudes to one another"<sup>96</sup>. That is, it's something more like the dialogues in a script than the "points of view that you may want to convey to an audience"<sup>97</sup>. Also Schellhardt's interpretation of diction is different from the meaning in *Poetics*, where Aristotle refers to diction as elocution, as a means by which imitation is made in general<sup>98</sup>, and not only to the characters' way of speaking.

Finally, when she deals with rewriting, Schellhardt advises writers to take the six elements of tragedy, as she understands them, as a guide to rewrite the script. From this point of view, for Schellhardt *Poetics* is a tool for writing.

That is the case also for Keith Cunningham's *The Soul of Screenwriting. On Writing, Dramatic Truth and Knowing Yourself*<sup>99</sup>. This book is aimed at writers, in which drawing from Carl G. Jung's analytical psychology and Joseph Campbell's mythology, the author suggests the paradigm of the 16 story steps: Establishing, Catalyst, Forward Movement, Threshold Crisis, Woundedness, Shift to the Emotional Network, Reminder That Outer Plot Stakes Are Rising, Forward Movement in the Relationship, Core Crisis, Deepening, Polarization of Opposites, Breaking Point, Catastrophe, Calm Before the Storm, Climax and Resolution.

Richard Krevolin has written four books on screenwriting. The most recent one, published in 2011, is *Screenwriting in the Land of Oz: The Wizard on Writing, Living, and Making It In Hollywood*. Aimed at screenwriters, the book quotes Aristotle when it refers to structure and identifies the beginning, middle and end mentioned in *Poetics* with the three acts. In Krevolin's book it is not quite clear which sentences are direct quotations from *Poetics* and which are his own reinterpretation.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Cfr. DOWNING, Eric, «Ὅλον Ψυχή: An Essay on Aristotle's "Muthos"», *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 3, fasc. 2, October 1984, pp. 164-178.

<sup>95</sup> Cfr. GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, "Pensar hoy...", *op. cit.*, p. 272.

<sup>96</sup> HALLIWELL, Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>97</sup> SCHELLHARDT, Laura, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>98</sup> Cfr. HALLIWELL, Stephen, *op. cit.*, p. 266, note 113.

<sup>99</sup> CUNNINGHAM, Keith, *op. cit.*

#### 4. *In dialogue with Poetics*

The fourth edition of the book by Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush, *Alternative Scriptwriting. Successfully Breaking the Rules*, published in 2007, expands on the subjects of the first three editions (1991, 1995 y 2002) in the chapters on the three-act structure and genres. When they revisit the three acts, the authors attribute the origin of this structure to Aristotle's *Poetics* when they point out that "all dramas have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that these parts are in some proportion to one another"<sup>100</sup>. Dancyger and Rush suggest that this structure "implies broad perspectives on issues of free will, the relationship of character to society, our ability to change ourselves, and the transparency of motivation"<sup>101</sup>. Somehow, they consider that the dramatic form used by the author is related to a particular way of understanding human life. The choice of the three-act structure is not neutral, as it expresses that the author wishes to convey a sense of order and stability. "But to create a different feel, to find a way to respond to the arbitrariness and indifference of the contemporary world, we have to look elsewhere"<sup>102</sup>. This is why Dancyger and Rush also explore ways of going beyond the three-act structure.

The book also quotes Aristotle when speaking of the narrator and applies the two categories of *Poetics* to stories: "The poet imitating everyone stands effaced and is an ideal, invisible agent that reproduces, without comment, events that have happened. The poet being himself and not changing is present as a storyteller who stands between us and the events and consciously interprets them"<sup>103</sup>. The authors rightly argue that in most movies, there is no narrator, and yet that does not mean it does not exist. "The narrator is implied, in large part, through dramatic structure"<sup>104</sup>. The structure modulates the interest of the viewer and gives meaning to the events that appear before his eyes.

In his book *Movies that Move Us* (2011), Craig Batty revisits Joseph Campbell's and Christopher Vogler's proposals to suggest that the protagonists of the stories undergo a physical journey which is the manifestation of an emotional journey. "I am suggesting that within the screenplay, both a physical and an emotional journey are traveled by the protagonist"<sup>105</sup>.

Batty describes Aristotle's *Poetics* as "a simple *how to* guide"<sup>106</sup>, suggesting that "it mainly contains rules, practices and suggestions of how drama is *supposed* to work, and when considering screenwriting in particular, gives little variation in style and approach to the texts that reference him in the first place"<sup>107</sup>. Batty makes an analysis of the definition of tragedy suggested in *Poetics* which understands action as a physical action. From this perspective, he points out that Aristotle is wrong, because what is more important in a story, according to Batty, are the characters and their emotions. What Batty disregards is that emotions can be understood as expressions or manifestations of the immanent action represented in the configuration of the plot.

<sup>100</sup> DANCYGER, Ken, RUSH, Jeff, *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules*, Focal Press, Amsterdam, Boston, 2007, 4th edition, p. 17.

<sup>101</sup> DANCYGER, Ken, RUSH, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>102</sup> DANCYGER, Ken, RUSH, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>103</sup> DANCYGER, Ken, RUSH, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>105</sup> BATTY, Craig, *Movies That Move Us: Screenwriting and the Power of the Protagonist's Journey*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, New York, 2011, p. 42.

<sup>106</sup> BATTY, Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*.



Zachariah Rush's book, *Beyond the Screenplay: A Dialectical Approach to Dramaturgy*<sup>108</sup> (2012), quotes Aristotle's *Poetics* on several occasions to distance himself from what he calls "the Aristotelian dogma"<sup>109</sup>. Rush criticizes the priority that Aristotle gives to action over characters, because he understands that the action which the Philosopher speaks of refers to external action ("pyrotechnic spectacle"<sup>110</sup>). He also criticizes the position of *Poetics* when it distinguishes between the universal and the particular, and points out that Aristotle was wrong to say that the universal is inherent to fiction. If so, one should have to take for granted that "all balls are red" or "all books are worth reading"<sup>111</sup>.

The third point about which he criticizes *Poetics* is when he refers to mimesis, which he understands as copy, not imitation. Thus, "We would have to suffer Hamlet eating breakfast or studying at the university in Wittenberg"<sup>112</sup>.

Rush does not seem to be aware that when Aristotle speaks of *mimesis praxeos* he refers to the representation of immanent action, that is, a kind of action whose end is not outside the acting subject, as is the case of the house with respect to its builder, but has its end in the subject himself, making him "progress towards himself"<sup>113</sup>, like the habit of playing the zither for the zither player, or of knowledge with respect to the knower, who by knowing knows himself and continues to know. "It is significant that among them [immanent actions] Aristotle should include an accomplished life, happiness"<sup>114</sup>.

Neither has Rush understood that when Aristotle speaks of universal and particular he refers to the distinction between fiction and history, where the universal, characteristic of fiction, refers to "what may happen to everybody" whereas the particular, characteristic of history, is "what has happened to someone"<sup>115</sup>.

The same can be said about his interpretation of mimesis. As pointed out by García-Noblejas and Halliwell, when Aristotle speaks of mimesis he is not saying that the artistic work is a copy of the original. "What [mimetic works] represent is not, except in occasional cases, actual particulars"<sup>116</sup>, but "for poetry at least, even the use of such particulars –historical data– must be transformed by the poet into the material of unified (and, in the process fictionalized) plot structures". This means that the "mimesis of action and life" (*Poetics*, 1450 a 16-17) which the artistic work consists in, is in the configuration of the plot in that this represents or mimics ("acts as", says García-Noblejas) human life "in its serious or strong meaning"<sup>117</sup>. As can be seen, this is quite different from the conception of copy criticized by Rush.

<sup>108</sup> RUSH, Zachariah, *Beyond the Screenplay: A Dialectical Approach to Dramaturgy*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, 2012.

<sup>109</sup> RUSH, Zachariah, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> RUSH, Zachariah, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>111</sup> RUSH, Zachariah, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>112</sup> RUSH, Zachariah, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>113</sup> GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, "Vámonos de aquí: sobre la salida como espectadores de O Brother!", in JIMÉNEZ CATANO, Rafael (ed.), *Il ritorno a casa*, Edusc, Roma, 2006, p. 225.

<sup>114</sup> INCIARTE, Fernando, LLANO, Alejandro, *Metafísica tras el final de la metafísica/ Metaphysics After The End Of Metaphysics*, Cristiandad, Madrid, 2007, p. 56. Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* 1050b 1-3 [online], available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>, accessed 12 June 2013.

<sup>115</sup> ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1451 b 5-7.

<sup>116</sup> HALLIWELL, Stephen, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2002, p. 199.

<sup>117</sup> GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Comunicación y Mundos Posibles*, Eunsá, Pamplona, 1996, p. 229.

### 5. *Probing deeper into Poetics*

In 2002, Michael Tierno published *Aristotle's Poetics For Screenwriters*<sup>118</sup>, where he aptly quotes and makes knowledgeable comments on phrases from *Poetics* from the point of view of a story analyst. Tierno focuses his entire presentation around the centrality of the action and shows that when Aristotle speaks of the priority of action over characters he is referring to the action that “reveals a truth about the human condition”<sup>119</sup>. He also makes it clear that *Poetics* does not speak of the three-act structure, but Aristotle distinguishes between two movements: complication and *denouement*. In addition, he points out the meaning of the word imitation (*mimesis*), which is not a “copy of something”, but has to do with the way in which the plot is constructed, which makes the spectator “respond imitatively” to what is presented to him. Tierno also explains what Aristotle meant by necessity and probability: “Incidents of *necessity* always happen after a given cause of action and propel the story forward”<sup>120</sup>, whereas probable incidents are only possible. Necessity and probability give unity to a story. When speaking of the relationship between the parts and the whole, Tierno says that Aristotle postulates that the whole is in each one of the parts<sup>121</sup>. The book also deals with what Aristotle says about plots and subplots (a story with one single plot is preferable); about the plot as the soul; the end as the point of arrival of the entire story; the four kinds of plots (complex, tragedy of suffering, tragedy of character and spectacle); the difference between tragedy and epic (like tragedy, epic also has to have the dramatic unity of a living being); the tragic flaw of the hero and the reaction of the viewer in the catharsis (the viewer pities the hero's misfortune and also fears the possibility that the same could happen to him); and the importance of including the moral issue in the hero's life (“the audience wants to see right and wrong addressed, because everyone feels that this gets at the heart of what it is to be human”<sup>122</sup>).

Not all of Tierno's examples respond exactly to what Aristotle posed. Such is the case of the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy or the type of realization that the viewer has before a poetic work. Still, the text succeeds in presenting in a reader-friendly way some of the more obscure passages of *Poetics* and for that alone, it is worth reading. In addition, it is one of the few works that consider *Poetics* to be aimed not only at story creators but also at viewers, and in this regard, it helps to provide an overview of the life sense that a story can make to its reader or viewer.

In *Creative Screenwriting: Understanding Emotional Structure* (2010), Christina Kallas offers more than 60 exercises designed to promote creativity. From this point of view, this is a very practical book. However, Kallas, screenwriting professor at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, also concerns herself with the study of the reception of Aristotle's *Poetics* in screenwriting manuals. Among other things, she notes that it must be borne in mind that “Aristotle's *Poetics* is not only a fundamental work about the nature and development of artistic creation, but is also a cool, scientific and aggressive answer to Plato's views about art”<sup>123</sup>. Plato opposes the myth, the fable, to reason, to logos<sup>124</sup> and understands that drama has great power which he considers “dangerous

<sup>118</sup> TIERNO, Michael, *Aristotles Poetics For Screenwriters*, Hyperion, New York, 2002.

<sup>119</sup> TIERNO, Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>120</sup> TIERNO, Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>121</sup> Cfr. TIERNO, Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>122</sup> TIERNO, Michael, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>123</sup> KALLAS, Christina, *Creative Screenwriting: Understanding Emotional Structure*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, p. 25.

<sup>124</sup> Cfr. KALLAS, Christina, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

and harmful, above all if it fell in the wrong hands"<sup>125</sup>. On the contrary, Aristotle regards it as a positive factor that, in addition to entertaining, "makes sense in the context of the whole, creates meaning, and enriches experience and knowledge"<sup>126</sup>.

Kallas adds an interesting comment to the concept of unity proposed by *Poetics*. According to this author, the unity which Aristotle speaks of is related to a "core event"<sup>127</sup> or "emotional center"<sup>128</sup>, which is "the heart and soul of the screenplay"<sup>129</sup>. From there, she develops the "theory of emotional structure", that "is codified in the deep structure of the dramatic text"<sup>130</sup>, in which she holds that "emotions are the key to the theme or rather the emotional theme and structure of a screenplay"<sup>131</sup>. Kallas' text is the closest to the "second navigation" on *Poetics* proposed in this article.

The book *Screenwriter's Compass: Character as True North*<sup>132</sup> by Guy Gallo, also addresses the relationship between Aristotle's *Poetics* and screenwriting from a global perspective. The book explores some of the phrases from *Poetics* and places them in the context of the writer, rather than in that of the critic or analyst of stories. Despite some inaccuracies, Gallo manages to translate the relationship between plot and character correctly, and explains that when Aristotle speaks of what has been translated as plot, he uses the Greek word *mythos*. "But this word does not mean simply plot. It is much broader. In other writings by Aristotle, and in other places in the *Poetics*, this word can mean story. It can mean Fable. It can be the broad outline of the story content of the drama"<sup>133</sup>.

Using the Russian terminology, Gallo contrasts the fable or *ur-story* with the plot or *sjuzet*. The fable is what exists before the construction of the plot. The construct is the result of this construction. "A fable floats above language, above any specific telling, and resides in the culture, in the imagination"<sup>134</sup>. "Construct fits our need to describe the told story, the tellable story, after composition, as it implies a singular authoritative maker"<sup>135</sup>. This distinction allows us to understand that there is no dissociation between characters and plot, because the plot is constructed with characters that act.

Gallo also notes that the action that Aristotle speaks of has two meanings: "things that happen", and "the outcome of the decisions we make". The action that interests us at the moment of writing stories is not so much "what happens" but what the character decides to do with what happens. This is why, according to Gallo, we can say that "drama is choice"<sup>136</sup> and "character completes plot"<sup>137</sup>.

This distinction allows Gallo to suggest a way to give consistency to the plots: asking about the "why" of a character's action, and "what are the consequences". These questions force the writer to transform events into actions with a beginning, middle and end, that is, with motive, action and consequence.

Where there maybe is a confusion of planes is in the identification of the concept of *praxis* with the story. Here, it must be made clear that when Aristotle speaks of *praxis*

<sup>125</sup> KALLAS, Christina, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>126</sup> KALLAS, Christina, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>127</sup> KALLAS, Christina, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>128</sup> KALLAS, Christina, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> KALLAS, Christina, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>131</sup> KALLAS, Christina, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>132</sup> GALLO, Guy, *The Screenwriter's Compass: Character as True North*, Focal Press, Boston, 2012, [Kindle DX ebook]. Amazon.com

<sup>133</sup> *Op. cit.*, chapter 2, "Upsetting Aristotle".

<sup>134</sup> *Op. cit.*, chapter 2, "Fable and Construct".

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Op. cit.*, chapter 2, "Upsetting Aristotle".

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

he refers to the object of the representation of the story, that is, to the “action, life, happiness, unhappiness” that the story represents, so that the “action represented”, the *mythos*, is present in the story, just as sap is present in a tree, that is, as a life principle and, therefore, the provider of unity for all the parts.

## 6. Conclusion: revisiting Poetics

As we said at the beginning, the analysis of screenwriting manuals shows that most of the times, Aristotle's *Poetics* has been used as a technical reference text when teaching screenwriting. This is the origin of the criticism that it is a “rigid” text that should be superseded. At the same, when the Philosopher's text is studied and cited in its context, we have seen that together with providing technical guidance on *how* to construct a good drama, *Poetics* also sheds light on *what* dramas are and what *meanings* they have or may have for both the author and the audience.

This invites to revisit Aristotle's *Poetics* considering the contribution that it involves not only for the creative process, which is what manuals usually do, but also for the reception and valuation of the completed work. In other words, this article seeks to repropose a new reading of the Aristotelian text –more humanistic than technical– which has at its core the idea that writing scripts is not just a technical issue, but, as noted in *Poetics*, an activity which when “recreating human life”<sup>138</sup> involves those who write the stories and those who watch them at a personal level<sup>139</sup>.

This second reading or “navigation” of Aristotle's *Poetics*, focused on the poetic *mythos* as the assumption that gives life to the characters and accounts for the unity of all the parts of the work, calls for a development that exceeds the limits of this article, and will be the subject of a forthcoming study.

<sup>138</sup> Cfr. RODMAN, Howard, “What a Screenplay Isn't”, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 45, n° 2, 2006, p. 88.

<sup>139</sup> Cfr. GARCÍA-NOBLEJAS, Juan José, *Poética del texto audiovisual*, *op. cit.*, p. 472.

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