Classical Storytelling and Contemporary Screenwriting

Aristotle and the Modern Scriptwriter

Brian Price

A Focal Press Book

Routledge

CLASSICAL STORYTELLING AND CONTEMPORARY SCREENWRITING

Since we first arrived on the planet, we've been telling each other stories, whether of that morning's great saber-toothed tiger hunt or the latest installment of the *Star Wars* saga. And throughout our history, despite differences of geography or culture, we've been telling those stories in essentially the same way. Why?

Because there is a RIGHT way to tell a story, one built into our very DNA.

In his seminal work *Poetics*, Aristotle identified the patterns and recurring elements that existed in the successful dramas of his time as he explored precisely why we tell stories, what makes a good one, and how to best tell them.

In *Classical Storytelling and Contemporary Screenwriting*, Brian Price examines Aristotle's conclusions in an entertaining and accessible way and then applies those guiding principles to the most modern of storytelling mediums, going from idea to story to structure to outline to final pages and beyond, covering every relevant screenwriting topic along the way.

The result is a fresh new approach to the craft of screenwriting—one that's only been around a scant 2,500 years or so—ideal for students and aspiring screenwriters who want a comprehensive step-by-step guide to writing a successful screenplay the way the pros do it.

Brian Price is an award-winning screenwriter who has worked with major studios, television networks, and independent film producers from around the world. As an instructor, he has taught screenwriting at Yale University, Johns Hopkins University, and the Brooks Institute, among others, and is a proud member of the prestigious UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television screenwriting faculty.

"The insights in this volume could be provided only by an author like Brian Price, himself an experienced creator of narratives and a respected writing educator. In accessible language he explains why, millennia after his death, for contemporary dramatic writers Aristotle is more relevant than ever. Here is no pie-in-the-sky philosophical preaching but a hands-on guide to buttress storytelling craft for writers both new and experienced."

—Professor Richard Walter, Associate Dean;
Screenwriting Area Head, UCLA School
of Theater, Film and Television

"Brian Price delivers a masterful book on the essential precepts of classical storytelling, and their importance in crafting a successful screenplay—a wonderfully fresh take on the craft that both aspiring screenwriters and professionals alike will prosper from."

—Cornelius Uliano, Writer/Producer,
The Peanuts Movie (2015)

"When inspiration, craft, and chocolate have done all they can, one returns to first principles as Brian Price masterfully lays them out. I've watched Brian guide new voices for decades, and there's nobody better at identifying the heart of your story and what it needs from you next."

—Brian Nelson, Screenwriter, *Hard Candy* (2005),
30 Days of Night (2007), *Devil* (2010)

CLASSICAL STORYTELLING AND CONTEMPORARY SCREENWRITING

Aristotle and the Modern Scriptwriter

Brian Price

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Price, Brian, 1970– author.
Title: Classical storytelling and contemporary screenwriting : Aristotle and the modern scriptwriter / Brian Price.
Description: New York : Routledge, 2018. | Includes index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017036300 (print) | LCCN 2017043762 (ebook) | ISBN 9781315148526 (E-book) | ISBN 9781138553330 (hardback) | ISBN 9781138553408 (pbk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Motion picture authorship.
Classification: LCC PN1996 (ebook) | LCC PN1996 .P83 2018 (print) | DDC 808.2/3—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2017036300

ISBN: 978-1-138-55333-0 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-138-55340-8 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-14852-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

For Celia, Maddox, and Levi,
co-authors of my favorite story

"Screenwriting is the art of telling lies skillfully."

—Aristotle
Poetics, Part XXIV

"Okay, Aristotle never actually wrote anything about screenwriting, per se. But if he had, it might look something like the book you're reading."

—Brian Price
Classical Storytelling and Contemporary Screenwriting, this page

Contents

Acknowledgments

This book is based upon a college seminar I teach at Yale University entitled *Classical Storytelling and Modern Screenwriting*. So I am indebted to the students, faculty, and administrators there who keep filling the seats and inviting me back.

Thanks also to screenwriter extraordinaire Brian Nelson who, upon hearing the subject of my class, exclaimed "Duh, THAT'S your book!"

And special thanks to my instructors and colleagues at UCLA, still the best screenwriting program in the world. I must single out Richard Walter, Hal Ackerman, Lew Hunter, and Howard Suber, who along with Aristotle taught me everything I know about screenwriting.

And of course, thanks to Mom and Dad who taught me everything else, including the importance of following one's dreams regardless of where they might lead.

And MOST special thanks to my beautiful wife Celia and two amazing boys Maddox and Levi for their steadfast love, support, and patience while I wrestled my thoughts into words.

And finally, I want to acknowledge and thank all my students over the years. I've had the pleasure of teaching at a wide range of schools and gotten to meet and work with a huge collection of wonderfully talented students from around the world, all with unique and compelling backgrounds, experiences, and stories to tell. I've learned more from them than I have ever been able to teach. This book is a result of the education that they have given me.

So you all have my endless gratitude (in lieu of a sales percentage).

Preface

Some Obligatory Backstory

Several years ago, while developing a new MFA screenwriting program for a film school at which I was teaching, I was approached by a publisher asking if I had any desire to write a book about filmmaking. Sure, I thought. After all, I'd been making a living writing for film and television for years and teaching the craft for almost as long. So I pitched her a book on screenwriting that was based on the graduate level courses I was currently teaching.

Her reply: *Screenwriting? Good God, no. Anything but screenwriting. We're swamped with them already. Really, is there anything left to say?*

Not surprisingly, I didn't get the gig.

But the experience *did* inspire me to try to devise some new and unique way to discuss the process of crafting a successful screenplay, one that maybe hadn't been attempted before—an approach *worthy* of publication, for both its utility and novelty.

Then I discovered, much to my surprise, that my screenwriter colleagues all around me were doing the same thing—trying to create a new paradigm, a fresh way to look at structure or character to inspire a new generation of writers, or at least fill the time between writing gigs.

The Story-Generating Trapezoid™. The Seven Neon Hues of Character™. The Inverted Double Helix of Successful Cinema Structure™. And the race was on to uncover MY new approach as well, my neat, nifty way of reducing screenwriting to a simple shape or color swatch.

But on my journey to discover this spanking new paradigm, something quite unexpected happened. I rediscovered an old one. Something downright spanking ancient.

For it turns out the secret to writing a good screenplay is not held within some pithy new diagram or metaphor, but within the teachings of one of the greatest thinkers of all time, the man who, for all intents and purposes, wrote the very first book on screenwriting, and whose observations and instructions on the craft have remained relevant for the thousands of years since he first set them down on papyrus.

Of course, one might argue that Aristotle wasn't actually writing about SCREENWRITING in his *Poetics*, simply about the tragic plays of his time.

But then one would be very wrong. He was writing about "imaginative narrative fiction." And within that broader category, screenplays not only apply, but are arguably the current dominant form. His treatise is really an investigation into *why* we tell stories, and from that function, an analysis of what makes a good one and how to tell it the best way possible.

Truth is, Aristotle's observations and insights are timeless, just as valid today for the writers of the next *Star Wars* movie as they were in his time for the writers of the next *Oedipus Rex*.

So what follows is not a shiny new paradigm for how to write a successful screenplay, but rather, a shiny *old* paradigm. The right paradigm. For all those dodecagons and rainbows will come and go, just to be replaced by the next new-fangled diagram or terminology, but the classics survive for a reason.

They are classic.

SECTION I

A PROLOGUE

(Wherein we discuss what this book is and how to get the most out of it)

ONE

Introduction

What You Hold in Your Hand

"Following, then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principles which come first."

(Poetics, Part I)

First, let's get straight what this book is *not*. It is not a new translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Instead, it treats that indispensible treatise as a jumping off point, utilizing its enduring insights into classical storytelling to help contemporary writers turn their ideas into successful screenplays.

For that reason, while it certainly wouldn't kill you to take a gander at *Poetics*, as I always advise my students to do as their first assignment, it is not necessary in order to get the most out of this book. When appropriate, I will be quoting pertinent passages and citing Aristotle's relevant observations in order to make my own points, so reading the original source is not essential to understanding and making use of its invaluable wisdom.

Furthermore, this book is not merely intended to be about how to write a successful screenplay the way the pros do it, though that is certainly one of its primary purposes. Rather, it is about placing screenwriting within the broader context of storytelling, going all the way back to when our ancestors sat around the fire to tell the tale of that morning's Great Saber-Toothed Tiger Hunt, and seeing how the principles that apply to telling a good story well have remained consistent since we first began telling them.

For the truth is that telling stories has been part of every culture, throughout the world, throughout history. It is in fact one of the things, if not the primary thing, that separates us from every other animal on the planet. Despite what you may have learned in grade school, it's not opposable thumbs, or having language, or using tools, that sets us apart. It's that we, as a species, tell each other stories.

So the question arises: WHY?

Does it fulfill some kind of function, perhaps a biological imperative or evolutionary need for us as a species, beyond simple entertainment? And if so, what might that function be?

Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in the fact that if you survey all the stories we tell, in every medium—the epic poems, the oral histories, plays, movies, novels, short stories, commercials, jokes—you discover, as Aristotle did, that the same observable patterns emerge. That in all successful stories, the ones that have stood the test of time, we see the same key elements and principles—what I'll be referring to as ARISTOTLE'S GUIDING PRECEPTS (AGPs)—of structure, theme, character, plot, etc., recurring over and over, and yes, over again, regardless of culture or history or geography.

And what these patterns reveal is that there must indeed be something built into our very DNA that requires us as a species not just to tell stories, but to tell them in a *very particular way*, with those same key principles and components.

So in the chapters that follow, we will explore the function of storytelling and identify those AGPs of story, structure, character, plot, theme, etc., that are essential to make a story work. And once we understand those principles, we can then utilize them in our own creative endeavors, specifically in our screenplays, to help make them deeper, more universal, and ultimately, more successful.

Therefore, in lieu of discussing Aristotle's observations and concepts in the order in which they appear in his *Poetics*, I've organized them according to their order in the actual professional screenwriting process. So each section of this book is structured in the following manner: Aristotelian concept, its contemporary significance to screenwriting, and finally, its practical application for the reader's own work.

For that reason, most chapters begin with a relevant quote from Aristotle (I'll be utilizing the S.H. Butcher translation of *Poetics*, first published in 1895 and now in the public domain), and many will end, when appropriate, with an actual ASSIGNMENT that will take the reader through the steps of writing their own original screenplay, using Aristotle's principles as a guide.

So before we start to break down how to craft a screenplay, and how we can utilize Aristotle's teachings to do so, let's first take a quick look at that essential source material.

Shall we?

TWO

Aristotle's *Poetics*

It's All Greek to Me

"I propose to treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each, to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same inquiry."

(Poetics, Part I)

Aristotle's *Poetics* may be a short read, but it's also often quite dense and complex, as the above quote handily illustrates. The truth is, it's not really a unified work itself, but has been compiled over the centuries from various extant works, with many explanations missing, and even some things downright contradictory. Don't worry about it; we'll get through all the important parts together.

But first some background.

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher, actually Macedonian if we're splitting hairs, who lived from 384–322 BCE. He was a pupil of Plato and a teacher of Alexander the Great, and he wrote treatises on just about every subject under the sun, from physics to ethics to linguistics.

In his *Poetics*, he wrote what is essentially the earliest surviving work of dramatic or literary theory. The title comes from the Greek word *poiesis*, literally translated as "creation" or "the making," and he uses the term *poetry* to encompass every form of imaginative fiction—drama, comedy, tragedy, lyric poetry, epics, satyr plays, and dithyrambs (don't ask, but I'm sure they're due for a comeback any day).

And what he does is examine the narrative works that were popular in his time and prior and ask what the successful ones have in common. What are the recurring elements that can be observed from one to the next, as dramatic forms have changed and evolved, that have contributed to their success?

So if we acknowledge the reality that screenwriting is simply the most contemporary and ubiquitous medium of that narrative evolution, then we must accept that not only are his observations and discoveries valuable, they are INDISPENSIBLE to our understanding of what makes a good screenplay story, and even more importantly, to how to tell a good screenplay story well.

In other words, the elements that *Oedipus Rex*, *Iphigenia*, *The Odyssey*, and every other classical narrative that's stood the test of time have in common—and which are absent in the countless more dramas that have since vanished from our collective history—are the SAME elements that exist in *Star Wars*, *Some Like It Hot*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Wonder Woman*, and every other drama of OUR time that we deem worthwhile, artistically or commercially.

Truth is, if you were to read *Poetics*, and simply substitute the word SCREENPLAY every time Aristotle mentions drama, narrative, tragedy, comedy, or poetry, you would have the first and finest book on screenwriting.

And for all intents and purposes, that's what we will be doing within these pages, taking Aristotle's observations and wisdom about the dominant narrative forms of his time and applying them to our own. So while Aristotle never got to enjoy hot buttered popcorn sprinkled with melting Goobers at his local multiplex nor have the chance to apply his guiding precepts to the latest cinematic blockbuster or art house darling, if he had, it might look something like the book you hold in your hands.

As Emerson said, "All my best thoughts were stolen by the ancients."

So given that Aristotle never actually said anything about screenwriting, let's have a look at what he has to say about it.

THREE

Motivating Factors

Why We Tell Stories

"The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons . . . [and] to learn gives the liveliest pleasure. . . . Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'"
(Poetics, Part IV)

As I said, when Aristotle wrote *Poetics*, he surveyed the canon of dramatic works written up to that time, particularly the tragedies (many of which have since been lost to antiquity, so we have to take his word for what they were about), and set out to discern the common elements among them, to draw conclusions about how we tell stories, and, just as significantly, the reasons for doing so.

It's worth noting, just to give the work some historical context, that Aristotle was also responding to his teacher Plato's critical attacks on tragedy, and was actually trying to defend the relevance of the art form. This was not merely to rationalize elevating the subject to a level worthy of discourse, but also to make a case for the importance of storytelling from a societal perspective.

So he starts by acknowledging that telling stories is something that has existed among human societies since we first showed up on the planet. And like any good philosopher he asks:

Why?

What *need*, of the individual, of society, of the SPECIES, is being satisfied by this shared desire to sit around the campfire or Theatre of Dionysus or Cinerama Dome and listen to a tale, whether of the aforementioned Great Saber-Toothed Tiger Hunt, the downfall of King Oedipus, the madness of Lear, the death of Willy Loman, or the talking butt cheeks of Ace Ventura?

He comes up with two explanations that, together, form the basis of his understanding of our need to tell stories, and thus, of everything that is subsequently required to do so.

In Greek, they are *MIMESIS* and *CATHARSIS*.

Let's take these two vital concepts in order.

First *mimesis*, defined, depending upon your translation, as "imitation" or "representation."

As the quote that begins this chapter indicates, Aristotle believed that the fundamental quality that separates us from the other animals on the planet is that we want to learn. We have questions. *Who are we? Why are we here? What is our place in the universe?* And we derive PLEASURE from seeking answers.

And the primary way we get those answers is to experience ourselves and our world reflected back to us, imitated, represented.

So *mimesis* concerns the pleasure of LEARNING, of looking at something and saying, "Ah, I recognize that," or "I get that," which occurs whenever we experience a representation, whether gazing at a painting or watching a play.

Consider the fact that even in English, that word "play" has a dual meaning. As adults we go see *plays*, the plays that Aristotle is deconstructing, imitations of life represented on stage. Similarly, when we are kids, we *play* cops and robbers, *play* house, *play* Elsa and Ironman. Our PLAY as kids is all about representation too.

As Aristotle observes, our earliest lessons are through imitation, and that continues throughout our entire lives. Why? Because it's through imitation that we best learn about the world and our place in it. And exploring those universal, existential questions gives us pleasure, scratches that desire for answers that is built into our DNA, that allows us to recognize not just "Ah, that is he," but "Ah, that is *me*."

So we have an instinctual desire to learn. Still, the question remains, *why* must that pleasure from learning come through representation and not simply through direct experience?

Perhaps it's because the distance between the observer and what is being represented allows us to be *objective* in our analysis, something that would be more difficult if the experience were actually happening directly to us. Maybe we learn most effectively by adopting a more circumspect vantage point.

Additionally, maybe the answer has something to do with Aristotle's assertion that we get the same pleasure from watching something joyous and beautiful as we do from watching something terrible and horrifying, that perhaps the distance afforded by imitation allows the experience to be *safer*.

And finally, maybe it has something to do with the *communal* nature of the experience of observing a representation. When something is happening to us alone, we might imagine the experience is unique to us. But when we are looking at that painting or sitting in the theatre, surrounded by a group of people experiencing the same representation, we can remark not only "Ah, that is me," but also take pleasure and comfort in knowing "Ah, that is US."

Which isn't a bad segue into the second reason we tell stories.

Catharsis, defined as "a purge, specifically of emotions."

This concept is a bit more problematic to nail down, mainly owing to the fact that Aristotle mentions it only once and never elaborates on it. As a result, it has engendered a lot of debate over the centuries.

So what exactly does he mean by a "purging" of emotions?

The most common idea is that the phrase refers to an emotional cleansing of the audience. This idea is based upon the observation that while we may have entered into a civilized society, we are still basically animals, with the same primal urges and emotions of our fellow creatures.

Experiencing a drama then is a chance to purge those emotions, to laugh or cry or scream, to have an appropriate outlet for our strong but bottled-up feelings, that would then allow us to continue living in that civilized society. In other words, *catharsis* is a way to have a safe, communal forum for expressing and releasing otherwise troublesome and detrimental emotions.

Though a fairly common explanation for *catharsis*, the problem with this interpretation is that there is no evidence whatsoever that Aristotle found emotions the least bit troubling. It is Plato who thought that emotions were bad. As a result, Plato thought that TRAGEDIES were bad because they caused those emotions to be felt.

Aristotle, on the other hand, thought emotions were good, vital even. But he believed in moderation. Not too much, not too little emotion. His idea was that you NEED fear. Not so much fear that you shrink away from the slightest challenge. But not too little that you stupidly plow right into any dangerous situation. It was all a matter of balance.

So the second reading of *catharsis* is that it is a way to RECALIBRATE one's emotions. This school of thought says that Aristotle's sense of *catharsis* is all about telling stories in order to let off some excess emotional steam, to be able to restore a healthy and proper harmony of emotion. So there is something therapeutic about seeing a play or going to a movie since the emotional experience they provide resets us to an emotional equilibrium.

A problem with this interpretation is that it implies those with a greater imbalance of emotion would derive a greater benefit from the experience. Yet that doesn't seem to be the case in reality. Having a disproportionate amount of emotion is hardly a prerequisite for enjoying a drama, and unstable people don't necessarily get more out of a play than the rest of us.

So still a third approach to this question is that Aristotle is talking about the purging of emotions in a way that is similar to his more defined description of *mimesis*—that *catharsis* is also rooted in the pleasure we feel at representation, not simply in the way things *appear*, but in the way we *respond* to them.

In other words, the emotion we experience while watching a movie is an IMITATION of that emotion in real life.

Think about it. When we watch *Alien*, we are terrified as Ripley walks through that long, dark tunnel. Something is lurking in the shadows. Something is going to jump out. We are going to scream. And then we are going to laugh with relief that such an emotion was provoked, yet we are in fact still safe and sound.

Now imagine feeling that *same* fear in real life. You walk down a dark alley, knowing that someone is following behind you, knowing that something horrible is in the shadows up ahead. Are you feeling that same chill? That same giddy dread? Not at all. Because it's *real*. Because that alley has the potential for actual danger and pain.

And if those feelings provide you pleasure or any positive benefit at all, then put this book down immediately and call your therapist, you've got bigger concerns than how to write a screenplay.

The threat of actual peril does not exist in the movie theatre, so the emotion cannot possibly be the same. Instead, we experience a facsimile, an approximation of fear. The same holds true with sorrow. With joy. With the whole gamut of emotions.

But why would we want to experience an *imitation* of an emotion?

For the same reason Aristotle says we desire to experience an imitation of an object.

We derive pleasure from learning—and we accomplish that through FEELING just as much as, if not more than, by OBSERVING. But, as with *mimesis*, that experience requires a safe environment, with that same objective distance only afforded by experiencing the *representation* of those powerful emotions.

Make sense? I hope so, since this is where our understanding of the purpose of storytelling starts.

According to Aristotle, we have an innate, instinctual desire to better understand ourselves and our world. And we most effectively do that by both SEEING and FEELING representations of ourselves and our experiences reflected back to us. So *mimesis* and *catharsis*, imitations of objects and emotions, together, allow us to experience the world, and life in general, while maintaining a safe, objective, and *communal* vantage point.

And because STORIES provide that experience, we find them not only pleasurable, but *necessary*.

Aristotle may have not known the term, but he is in fact describing an evolutionary imperative. We need to learn about ourselves in order to grow and develop, as individuals, as a society, and as a species. Therefore Nature, in her infinite wisdom, has blessed us with pleasure in learning, along with a built-in mechanism to accomplish that end, the desire to tell stories.

So storytelling has a purpose, an important one. And that purpose provides us with **Aristotle's Guiding Precept #1**:

> **TO TELL A GOOD STORY EFFECTIVELY, WE MUST a) SHOW OUR AUDIENCE SOMETHING UNIVERSAL OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR WORLD REFLECTED BACK TO THEM, AND b) THROUGH THAT IDENTIFICATION, GIVE THEM AN EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE.**

We might not all have owned a bar in a war-torn way station like Rick Blaine, risen to the top of an underworld empire like Michael Corleone, or rescued a space princess like Luke Skywalker, but we certainly know what

it's like to be jilted, to deal with family conflict, to dream of a more exciting and fulfilling future. These movies, like all good ones, make us cry and cringe and curse and laugh and scream as we see aspects of our own experience reflected back to us, allowing us to recognize important truths about ourselves through the experience of another.

So everything about the craft of screenwriting, from idea to story to structure to character to theme to the choice of the very words on the page, must help provide that experience.

In other words, we must fulfill the dual purpose of storytelling—*mimesis* and *catharsis*—to provide the joy of LEARNING through the experience of FEELING.

And now that we know a little more about *why* we tell stories, let's begin exploring *how* we tell them. And for that, we should start by defining just what makes a good one.