Turning Storytelling in Daily Life and Human Life Crisis in a Compelling Short Screenplay

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Bachelor of Applied Arts with Honours
(Cinematography)
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DEVELOPMENT AND UTILIZATION OF DYNAMIC GRAPHS AS A VISUALIZATION TOOL IN A COMPETING SHORT STORYDRAMA

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TURNING STORYTELLING IN DAILY LIFE AND HUMAN LIFE CRISIS INTO A
COMPELLING SHORT SCREENPLAY

AWGKU KHAIRUDDIN BIN AWANG KASIM

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirement for the degree of
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Dedicated to my beloved family members, lecturers, and friends who always bestow me sustainable supports and encouragements. First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my final year project supervisor, Dr Abdul Riezal Dim for the professional help as well as giving valuable advices and recommendations throughout this research. Sincere appreciation to all lecturers, staffs, coursemates and alumni from Cinematography Programme for their willingness to share their knowledge and experiences towards the completing of this research. Last but not least, special gratitude is dedicated to all family members and fellow friends for their continuously help, support, and contribution.
The aim of this research is to develop an applicable screenwriting approach for film student or any new filmmaker that still have for issues with the most fundamental part of filmmaking, writing a good and meaningful story. The focus is placed on applying concept of storytelling in daily life as the story structure in screenplay and applying human life crisis as the main theme story. While a zigzagging diagram, a representation of emotional shift in characters, is applied into a scene. Through these combinations, the result obtained is a short screenplay that contains simple yet surprising plot. This allows the viewers hooked throughout the story.
ABSTRAK

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRAK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

<p>| 1.1 Background of Study | 1 |
| 1.2 Problem Statement | 2 |
| 1.3 Research Objectives | 3 |
| 1.4 Research Questions | 3 |
| 1.5 Purpose of the Research | 4 |
| 1.6 Limitation | 4 |
| 1.7 Audiences | 4 |
| 1.8 Summary | 5 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 2</th>
<th>LITERATURE REVIEW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Common Issues with Film Student's Short Screenplay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1</td>
<td>Passive Protagonist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2</td>
<td>Over Plotted in Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Characteristic of Compelling Short Screenplay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1</td>
<td>Emotion and Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2</td>
<td>Simple and Strong Story Line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>The Importance of Conflict in a Story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1</td>
<td>Reaction and Effect of Conflict on Character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.2</td>
<td>Zigzagging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.3</td>
<td>Comedic Moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Conflict and Human Life Crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.1</td>
<td>Human Life Crisis from Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.2</td>
<td>The 5 Stages of Death and Dying Model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Developing Story Through Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.1</td>
<td>Reach Out with Experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.2</td>
<td>Get The True Sense by Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Summary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 3</th>
<th>RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Preparatory Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Research Design</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4

3.2.1 Content Analysis 22
3.2.2 Narrative Approach 22

3.3 Data Acquisition 22

3.3.1 Data Acquisition of Content Analysis 23
3.3.2 Data Acquisition of Narrative Approach 23

3.4 Data Implementation 24
3.5 Data Evaluation 24
3.6 Summary 25

CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Data Analysis 26

4.1.1 Interview Session 26
4.1.2 Zigzagging Story Structure 28
4.1.3 Relationship between Human Life Crisis and Conflict in Short Screenplay 31

4.2 Data Implementation 32

4.2.1 Application of Zigzagging Story Structure in The Peculiar Three Short Screenplay 32
4.2.2 Application of Death Theme in the Story 33

4.3 Data Evaluation 34
4.4 Summary 36
CHAPTER 5  CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion 37
5.2 Result Summary 38
5.3 Recommendation 39

REFERENCES 40
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Respondent’s Storytelling</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Respondent’s Reaction</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figures</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Zigzagging Diagram</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Stage 1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Stage 2</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Stage 3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Stage 4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Zigzagging Diagram</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Linear story structure</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Combination of Linear Story</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structure with Element of Story Distraction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Zigzagging Story Structure</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Zigzagging Story Structure</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Opening scene of The Peculiar Three</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Zigzagging Story Structure</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Filmmaking is a collaborative process where numbers of talents worked together for a common goal, telling a story in the form of film. In any work, there must be a starting point and the starting point for filmmaking is screenplay (Brotter, 2010, para. 10). The base for any film project is the screenplay and to anyone who works on film, screenplay can be considered as the blueprints, a medium of reference throughout the filmmaking process (Jefferson, 2014).

There are many forms of screenplay out there such as feature film screenplay or short film screenplay. However, in this research, short film screenplay is the focus since the main target for this research is film student. While the average length for feature film screenplay is 90-120 pages, short film screenplay is only 1-30 pages, which means the maximum duration for a short film is 30 minutes.

Any writer would prefer writing a short film screenplay rather than feature film screenplay. But in the matter of storytelling, short screenplay is actually more difficult to be written. This is because in limited pages, a screenwriter must produce a highly visual based storytelling, memorable story, and fully developed character in the screenplay. The short story must able to attract viewer’s attention within a short period of time.
In this research scope, this is what most film student always struggle with in their film project, writing a screenplay that have a good story and meant something. The issue of film student's short screenplay weaknesses and characteristic of compelling short screenplay will be further explained in other section of the research.

This research will also be focusing on the importance of conflict and the story structure in short screenplay because these topics kept on coming up during the entire content analysis stages of the research. Also, through in depth study of conflict and story structure, we will be able to relate its relationship with human life crisis and daily life activity since the whole point of the research is to turn a storytelling in daily life and human life crisis into a compelling short screenplay.

1.2 Problem Statement

"The said curse was most evident in the films of those who had not studied film or in how to tell stories visually (in fact, this could also include some of those who had!)... Some films either had no story to speak of or were very ambiguous in what they wanted to say. They were said to be (aargghh!), plotless! And all this was all done in the name of – art and self-expression!" (Muthalib, 2015)

The problem the writer trying to refer to in his article is the common issue with indie filmmaker or film student's short film. The common issue is story. The story is either too ambiguous or don't mean anything. If the story is too ambiguous or don't mean anything, the viewer find it very difficult to relate or connect to the story. This is the reason why the story unable to attract viewer's attention from the beginning to the end of the story. And viewer's
connection to the story is vital to determine whether the short film has a compelling short screenplay. This statement will be further discussed in next chapter.

Film student need to go back to the vital part of film, the screenplay, to solve this issue because according to Brotter, "It is almost impossible to envision a good film with a bad screenplay," (Brotter, 2010). That is why in this research, factor of bad short screenplay written by film student, characteristic of compelling short screenplay, and applicable screenwriting approach for film student must be explored.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of the research are:

i. To study characteristics of compelling short screenplay

ii. To analyze relationship between conflict in screenplay, storytelling in daily life as the story structure concept, and human life crisis as the main theme story

iii. To develop an applicable screenwriting approach for film student

1.4 Research Questions

The question of the research are:

i. In what condition a short screenplay can be considered effective and compelling?

ii. How storytelling in daily life relates to the story structure in short screenplay?

iii. What is the most applicable screenwriting approach for film students in their film project?
1.5 Purpose Of The Research

The aim of this research is to understand what makes a short screenplay compelling. The focus will be placed on the importance of conflict and story structure in short screenplay.

Since film students (even professional filmmaker) always struggling with the first stage of filmmaking, screenwriting, it is highly recommended in this research that they used storytelling in daily life as reference for story structure in short screenplay. The idea for this type of story can be gathered through interview, personal life experience, or surrounding observation.

1.6 Limitation

There are so many rules in screenplay that can be studied in screenwriting research topic. However, in this research, it is only limited to conflict and story structure because the research tend to focus more on the relationship between conflict and human life crisis and relationship between storytelling in daily life and story structure. Only through this relationship, the best approach by using human life issue as the main source of idea and applying storytelling in daily life concept for film student in screenwriting can be proven.

1.7 Audiences

The target audiences for this research are film student and indie filmmaker. Although, screenwriting is a very subjective issue because different screenwriter has a different approach in storytelling, this research may at least be considered to be part of references in other upcoming research done by any film student or indie filmmaker.
1.8 Summary

The hardest thing about screenwriting is not how to come up with great idea but it is actually about how screenwriter tells a simple story in a compelling way. Without a good screenplay, there will be no good film project. Film student always struggle in this key part of filmmaking.

In the next chapter, the common issue with most film student's screenplay, characteristic of compelling short screenplay, and the relationship between conflict and human life crisis will be discussed. As for Chapter 3, this chapter covers the research design and methodology that were applied in the research. In Chapter 4, the result was discussed while Chapter 5 summarized how the problem stated in the research was solved and shown.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

In my literature review, one of the important aspects that require an in-depth understanding is to study the characteristics of compelling short screenplay. Apart from that, I also had to understand the concept of storytelling in daily life and its relationship with story structure's concept. By studying the relevant literature, it will help me to understand more thoroughly on how these knowledge and information relates to each other.

2.1 Common Issues with Film Student's Short Screenplay

As mentioned before in previous chapter, film student (including indie filmmaker) usually have issues with the most fundamental part of filmmaking, the story. The story is either too ambiguous or there is no story at all. Based on my understanding as film student and according to Muthalib, "even worse, the story issue is being address as for the sake of art and self-expression instead," (Muthalib, 2015).

This issue leads to another issue, the viewer unable to connect with the story and the story turns out meaningless. By studying a few relevant literatures, we can identify part of the reason the issue that being addressed happened.
2.1.1 Passive Protagonist

"A studio reader once told me that the most common problem rejected scripts have is a passive protagonist. This protagonist just doesn't want anything and so he doesn't act. Or if he does want something, his desire is too abstract to drive a plot. I understand the attraction of the antihero, the character who is affected by life. But for him to be dramatically productive – to create a compelling story – he must be active," (Cowgill, 2008, p.163)

This is one of the factors that causes meaningless story problem. In the screenplay, the main character has no desire or the desire is too vague. When this happened, the sense of character’s urgency to achieve his or her goal in the story will be lost, including the viewer’s attention.

2.1.2 Over Plotted in Action

“One of the most common problems many scripts have is that they are overplotted in terms of the action. This means they’ve so filled with incident that the reader never gets a sense of the characters or what the story means beyond the plot problem,” (Cowgill, 2008, p.148)

Basically, it means that too many things happened within a short period of time. The plot continued from a situation into another without any relevance. When there are too many things happened, there is no enough time to show character’s reaction to conflict and character’s development. This statement is again supported by another literature.
“There’s so much going on that nothing seems to matter. Important moments can’t breathe. The result is suffocating. In short screenplays, smaller is better,” (Johnson, 2005, p. 32).

2.2 Characteristic of Compelling Short Screenplay

Based on the previous section (2.1), it is best to conclude that what is actually lacking with film student’s short screenplay is the emotional core in general.

“During my extensive career, hands down the most common problem I see in screenplays and films is that they lack an emotional core, or what I call: Heart,” (Tim Long, 2016, para.2)

Due to the meaningless and ambiguous story causes by over plotted action and passive protagonist, the emotional core in screenplay is affected. This is a huge mistake to any screenwriters if they left out emotional core in the screenplay because according to Tim Long, “Research has shown that people consciously and unconsciously go to the movies to feel something. That’s what makes screenplays and films so powerful – their ability to move an audience. Whether it’s to laugh, or cry, or be afraid, they want... the experience of emotion,” (Tim, 2016).

Hence, it is clear that part of the characteristic of compelling short screenplay is strong emotional core and the ability to connect with viewers.

2.2.1 Emotion And Connection

Before we go through the importance of emotion and connection in a compelling short screenplay, we must first understand the definition of plot in screenplay.
“Plot refers to how events are arranged to achieve an intended effect. (One of Webster’s definitions of plot is “a plan or scheme to accomplish a purpose.”)" (Cowgill, 2008, p.9)

Therefore, based on the literature, plot is simply an arrangement of events that have meaning. These events are presented in 3 different yet related situations (Cowgill, 2008);

i. Desire of character

ii. Character takes action to achieve the desire

iii. Conflict stands in the way and character’s reaction is shown

Only through these 3 different situations, a plot has direction and meaning. And through the (iii) situation, the strongest emotional state from character is visible. The stronger the emotional reaction, the better the screenplay. This is because the heart of a drama in screenplay is the character’s emotional reaction to conflict. (Cowgill, 2008).

Then, this enables us to have a better understanding on the importance of emotion and connection in a compelling short screenplay. Because according to Cowgill (2008), “The reason most of us go the movies is because films arouse our emotions,” (p.12).

Apart from that, the viewers want to feel what the character felt in the story world. The viewers want to connect and emotion is the source of our connection with other people. (Cowgill, 2008). A compelling screenplay, either feature or short, able to connect its story to the screenwriters themselves and the viewers. (Johnson, 2005).
2.2.2 Simple And Strong Story Line

It is true that a strong emotion and connection made a screenplay compelling. But how all of these can be achieve within a short period of time in a short screenplay? Therefore, another characteristic of a compelling short screenplay is a simple yet a strong story line because according to Cowgill (2008), “The professionals’ scripts are based on strong simple story lines that are well developed in terms of action, conflict, and character and the effect of the conflict on the characters,” (p.17).

Through this characteristic, the short screenplay felt more complex and genuine because all important elements in the screenplay are well developed. That is why most of the compelling short screenplay presents its storyline in a single flow of incidents. Only through this way, the main dramatic action and conflict can be set up early and viewer’s immersed immediately into the story. (Cooper & Doncyger, 2004).

2.3 The Importance Of Conflict In A Story

“The history and mood of the viewer determine the reception of the story,” (Johnson, 1994, p. 101). If we notice from the previous section, it is clear that the viewer’s point of view determine the quality of a screenplay. This is why conflict has a huge impact to ensure the viewer’s attention during the entire story. If the story has no conflict, it will be dull (Johnson, 1994) and boring

Conflict can be defines as obstacles or crisis that the main character must face before a goal or desire is achieved or in some cases failed (Cowgill, 2008). To create and show the conflict in the story, it may come from many sources. The conflict may exist from;