INTRODUCTION

The Action-Idea

Orestes is made to say himself what the poet rather than the story demands.

"Say what the story demands" is a concept that should be pasted on every screenwriter’s wall. It’s probably agenda seep into the story rather than having every plot incident come together to create a tight unified structure. In fact, the ability to plot well or create strong story structures is not a minor talent, and according to Aristotle it comes with maturity:

... beginners succeed earlier with the Diction and Characters than with the construction of a story.

According to Aristotle, the ability to plot, or to create a powerful structure, is the most important aspect of writing. Good writers serve their stories; bad writers serve their own agendas. By the end of this book, you’ll understand why it’s important to say what the story demands. You’ll be able to judge
if you’re doing so, and if not, how to fix it! And to help you in this quest, I want to introduce you to a tool that I call the ACTION-IDEA.

I’m going to refer to this ACTION-IDEA throughout the rest of the book because it represents the essence of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Screenwriters (and directors) must instill their story’s ACTION-IDEA, or “mission statement,” into an audience to create emotions in them. The ACTION-IDEA is really the foundation of the entire screenplay. A good movie expands an ACTION-IDEA into a full-length story, without which many of your ideas may not have much impact by ACTION-IDEA. Aristotle teaches us to think of ACTION as the IDEA of a story. In fact, he says that action is more important than people; that is, characters. Aristotle is fanatical about the need for our stories to be about action, about action that is larger than life itself and greater than the persons who partake in it. Think about all the people who say they’re going to do a million things, but in the end, you judge them by what they actually accomplish. That’s why we screenwriters build a dramatic story on a single action. The hero in a dramatic story is whoever takes the lead in that action. For example, *Jaws* is an idea about a man trying to stop a killer shark. Chief Brody takes the lead in the action of trying to stop the killer shark. But notice that the IDEA
for *Jaws* is an ACTION upon which the entire story is built. We could reduce the ACTION even further to read, “stopping a killer shark,” an ACTION that is greater than any of the characters in the story, even Chief Brody.

Your ACTION-IDEA should be able to move listeners who merely hear it just as they would be moved if they saw an entire movie made from your screenplay. It takes a full-fledged, simple summary of a story, strong enough so that when it’s expanded into a complete screenplay, it will hold and move an audience. Let’s now give the ACTION-IDEA a try.

Say we want to write about someone who likes cars. That’s not an ACTION-IDEA. Okay, how about someone who not only likes cars but who likes them so much that he *steals* them. “Steals” is better than “likes” because “steals” refers to an action, whereas “likes” refers to a state of mind. But the idea of a hero who merely *steals* cars isn’t *in and of itself* capable of moving an audience to a catharsis. It needs something. So, a better example of an ACTION-IDEA would read something like:

---

**THE JOE SCHMO STORY—JOE SCHMO**

steals cars to help kids in his neighborhood go to college, but he eventually decides he’s setting a bad example, so he goes to college himself so that someday he
can get a real job and earn the money to put his kids through school. At college he struggles to transcend his 50 I.Q., but instead of bribing teachers to pass his classes, he decides to pass on his own merits, setting the ultimate example for his kids.

Bravo! We did it. We created an ACTION-IDEA suitable for building into a full-length film. And notice that the finishing touch was adding the fact that Joe Schmo, the agent of the action, got to make a moral choice, two important Aristotelian concepts. Admit it, with Joe’s decision to pass and Joe’s decision to refuse on one of only a young melodramatic work on an audience, why make them sit through a two-hour movie?” The answer could be, “What else are we going to do on Saturday nights?” The real answer is that undergoing catharsis through a full-length story is a richer experience than listening to the mere summation of a story in a few sentences.

According to Aristotle, catharsis (which literally translates to “emotional purging”) is the whole point of dramatic storytelling, and it’s what every single story event is working to achieve in the audience. Your movie should take the audience on an emotional and psychological journey—that is
what they pay for. A good movie reveals poignant truths of
the human experience in either a small or big way, depend-
ing on the kind of movie it is.

Just hearing a good ACTION-IDEA can impart a small
feeling of catharsis, but the bigger drawn-out one experi-
enced during a complete movie is more cleansing for the
human psyche, and even therapeutic. Bear in mind, a secret

A well-crafted story is needed to make an ACTION-
IDEA cathartic. Our task is to take our simple ACTION-
IDEA and develop it into a full-length screenplay, without
abandoning the essence of the original idea. So now, all
that's left is for me to lead you to the master who can point
the way. The task is easier than you think.