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## Poetics of the screenplay as drama-text

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# POETICS OF THE SCREENPLAY AS DRAMA-TEXT

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Pieter van Stapele

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in 1936

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IN MEMORY OF ALLA AND TONY WEAVER



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# Introduction

What are you reading?

A play.

Who wrote it?

Carl Foreman.

Foreman? Never heard of him.

Anyway, he did write well-known plays.

Such as?

*High Noon*.

*High Noon*? That's a film. By Zinnemann. I've seen it.

Then you did see Foreman's play, directed by Zinnemann.

Béla Balázs wrote in 1949 that the screenplay, like the theatre-play, had become an independent literary form of art, originated from the cinema like drama from the theatre.<sup>1</sup> This actually is still a theoretical idea, even in the case of screenplays by well-known writers like Raymond Chandler or famous writers who directed films themselves, like Pier Paolo Pasolini. (Märthesheimer 1991; Brunow 1991, 23-38). In the world of theatre, performances fade away, theatre-plays remain. In the world of cinema, films dominate and overshadow screenplays, which disappear from sight after the film they were written for has been produced.

In my view, screenplays are drama-texts that should be studied as seriously and thoroughly as drama-texts written for theatre, because screenplays are an art form of the same quality and value as theatre-plays. This thought on screenplays have stimulated my present study, which aims at formulating a poetics of the screenplay.

In this study the term 'screenplay' is interpreted as: drama-text for creating a feature film to be presented in a cinema. The term is used independently from actual performance recorded onto film. The term 'screenplay' is meant to be equal in meaning to the term 'theatre-play'. I prefer the term 'screenplay' to the term 'scenario', which has no clear or definite meaning regarding the medium that is concerned. It is often used in the sense of being an outline of a film etc.<sup>2</sup> Like a drama-text written for performance in theatre, a screenplay is a fictional text written for performance in a film.

My study does not deal with light or amusing plays like the comedy because the content and form of these types of plays are usually fundamentally different from serious plays.<sup>3</sup> Comedy for instance is

traditionally defined by three criteria that oppose it to its elder sister, tragedy. It has characters of humble origins and happy endings, and is intended to make the spectator laugh. (Pavis 1998, 63)

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<sup>1</sup> 'Das Drehbuch ist heute bereits zu einer selbständigen literarischen Kunstform geworden, die so aus dem Film geboren wurde wie das Drama aus dem Theater.' (in Brunow 1991, 7)

<sup>2</sup> As a script, for example, used in some stage of the production of a film or a television program. The term 'scenario' has been used in this sense since the early years of the development of film. A trade paper article in 1909, for instance, mentions the 'scenario' as a 'shot-by-shot account of the action including inter-titles and inserts' (Staiger 1985, 126).

<sup>3</sup> Presumably it has been for the same reason that Aristotle hardly discusses the comedy in his *Poetics*. About the comedy he wrote a separate poetics that has been lost.

I use the ‘elders sister’ of the comedy, the ancient Greek tragedy, as the model or design for discussing the structure of form and content of dramatic action in closed-structure drama-texts. For this reason, Aristotle’s *Poetics* (330 BC) will be used as one of the important sources of information, together with recent sources of drama theory and methodologies of analyzing texts for the present study.

Tragedy will be studied as the prototype for closed-structure drama-texts. Aristotle (384-322 BC) thoroughly discusses and describes this kind of drama-text in his *Poetics*. He discusses the chief elements of form and content of the tragedy in his time, especially the work of Sophocles (ca. 496-406 BC) and of Euripides (ca. 485-406 BC). And in the last part of his book Aristotle again discusses the dramatic principles on which the tragedy is constructed when he treats the subject of epic poetry, which is poetry in narrative form. (89-97 / XXIII-XXIV)

Screenwriters write drama-texts. In screenplays, like in other forms of drama-texts, as Aristotle writes, fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means. But they may also result from the inner structure of the drama, ‘which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet’ (49 / XIV, 1453b). Aristotle said that a drama-plot must be so constructed that, when he who only hears the tale told, e.g. through hearing the story of Oedipus, ‘will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place’. Therefore, screenwriters who employ ‘spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous’, would be in his view strangers to the purpose of the art of writing screenplays as a poetic art.

The screenplay in its general form is a work of fictional art that belongs to the genre of drama. A description of the development of a poetics of the screenplay thus can be based on an adaptation of the beginning of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, because such a development aims at inquiring into three subjects:<sup>4</sup>

1. the structure of the plot as requisite to a screenplay for a feature film;
2. the nature of the most important parts of which a screenplay is composed;
3. an inquiry into methods that are used in creating form and content in the screenplay, intended to be transformed into performance in film.<sup>5</sup>

In his work on structuralist poetics, Culler writes:

The task of a structuralist poetics, as Barthes defines it, would be to make explicit the underlying system which makes literary effects possible. It would not be a ‘science of contents’ which, in hermeneutic fashion, proposed interpretations for works (...). (Culler 1997, 118)

Culler’s view about the task of a structuralist poetics corresponds with Barthes opinion about literary theory as

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<sup>4</sup> ‘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 to 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.’ (7 / I, 1447a)

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘intended’ in the context of discussing (segments of) a drama-text in this study is about the text written for creating a performance of it. The term is aimed at discussing the text as a medium for performance. It does not refer to the relation between text and writer or actual reader. In discussing drama-texts in this study everything that will be said about ‘author’, ‘reader’ (‘actor’) or ‘spectator’ (‘audience’) is not about real but about implied persons, unless they are introduced as real.

a science of the conditions of content, that is to say of forms. What interests it will be the variations of meaning generated and, as it were, capable of being generated by works; it will not interpret symbols but describe their polyvalence. In short, its object will not be the full meaning of the work but on the contrary the empty meaning which supports them all. (*Critique et vérité*, p. 57) (Cited in Culler 1997, 118)<sup>6</sup>

Such a poetics is primarily concerned 'with identifying the essential properties or conventions of form of all texts rather than individual ones' (Wales 1991, 362). But also properties of content should be described.

Attested meanings and intended effects of drama-texts can be detected through applying a reliable and rather traditional method of analyzing and interpreting drama intended to be performed in a theatre, like the method of Beckerman (1979) for analyzing conventions that make dramatic works possible. His work and that of others will be discussed in relationship with the two main functions of a poetics of drama.

The first function is making explicit the underlying system of dramatic principles, which makes it possible to describe and analyse different elements of a drama-text, in particular intended dramatic effects. This forms the foundation of the second major function of a poetics of drama, which Elam formulates as explicating 'the general 'world creating' principles of dramatic representation' (2001, 99-100).

The view of Culler, Barthes, and Elam, adapted for the art of writing screenplays, means that the main object of the present study is: describing and discussing theory, methodology and methods for the analytic praxis of reading, describing and analyzing screenplays. I carry out this plan through discussing the dramatic principles of the closed-structure drama written for theatre that form the foundation for developing the poetics of the screenplay. And on this basis, methods for analyzing and describing drama will be discussed.

In the first part of the present study (chapters 1-3) I discuss the closed-structure drama-text. The first chapter begins with describing some basic distinctions of drama and with discussing for which reason I confine the discussion about drama for theatre mainly to the closed-structure drama-text.

I then discuss the question of the presence or the absence of signs of the working of a mediating communication system in the dramatic dialogue. In this context I also discuss whether dialogue or action is the decisive criterion to classify a fictional text as drama-text.

The work of developing a poetics of the screenplay will for an important part be based on the theory of semiotics, because it is the science of signs and of the use of signs or representations, which in particular concerns the second main function of a poetics of drama. Chapter 1, therefore, includes a short introduction to the meaning of some semiotic terms, and I discuss why indexicalization together with characterization of *dramatic personae* plays the most fundamental role in reading a drama-text and in transforming the text into a performance.

In addition, the most important features of the closed-structure drama-text are discussed in chapter 1, in particular the signification and the major functions of action

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<sup>6</sup> Ce ne pourra être une science des contenus (sur lesquels seule la science historique la plus stricte peut avoir prise), mais une science des *conditions* du contenu, c'est-à-dire des formes : ce qui l'intéressera, ce seront les variations de sens engendrées, et, si l'on peut dire, *engendrables*, par les oeuvres : elle n'interprétera pas les symboles, mais seulement leur polyvalence; en un mot, son objet ne sera plus les sens pleins de l'oeuvre, mais au contraire le sens vide qui les supporte tous. (Barthes 1966, 57)

and of plot in drama. Dramatic action and plot are the heart and soul of the dramatic communication model of the closed-structure drama. Discussing and analyzing the main vehicles of the process of creating dramatic action and of the working of the underlying system of dramatic principles in that process in the closed-structure theatre-play (chapter 2 and 3) and in the classical screenplay (chapter 4) are based on that communication model. For this reason, at the end of the first chapter, I formulate that communication model as a working-definition, illustrated by a diagram.

Chapter 2 provides concepts for the analysis of dialogue, because it is the main vehicle of dramatic action in the closed-structure theatre-play. In this discussion questions of causality and motivation play a central role, which at the same time are questions of subtext. Causality and motivation concern the whole process of action and reaction in a play and how this builds the dramatic action in a play as a whole. This discussion deals with the basic functions of the dramatic dialogue and with the use of different methods and of elements of theory of communication.

I introduce in chapter 2 a valuable, descriptive method of analysing dramatic action through the use of dialogue. Dramatic dialogue is intended for actors to create and present two kinds of acts: the acts of characters and the acts of actors, who are intended to present the acts of the characters in a performance. I discuss that explicitly and implicitly a dramatic dialogue refers to motion of the dramatic action, created by the acts of characters, intended for transformation into a performance presented by actors on a stage.

Every dramatic event as well as every other not too small-sized a segment of a drama-text is built through a sequence of acts that occur in a pattern of movement within the process of action and reaction. I discuss and analyse this movement in chapter 3 after dealing with the question in which way a drama-text conveys information about the intended performance through the use of stage-directions and above all through information within the dialogue.

Chapter 3 explains and describes for which reason and in which way the structure of movement in dialogue is the most important information about the intended staging of the text. For this reason I develop a method of analyzing deixis in the dramatic dialogue. The analysis aims at describing movement of action in the dialogue as a pattern of action and reaction, within each separate speech and between the different speeches of the dialogue. I discuss and demonstrate that the movement of the action in the dialogue runs parallel to the intended non-verbal action on stage.

The concepts and methods that are discussed in chapter 1-3 do not only concern the kind of text that belongs to the field of the closed-structure drama. In the last part of chapter 3 I demonstrate that they also go for analyzing the type of text that can be classed as open structure drama. In which way those concepts and methods can be used as tools for reading, describing and studying screenplays is discussed in chapter 4.

In this chapter I discuss and analyse the traditional Hollywood screenplay, written with the purpose to be transformed into a film for mass production. This kind of screenplay is called the 'classical screenplay'. The analysis includes examining dramatic action that is created by a certain kind of narrative in the screenplay, which is called 'dramatic narrative'.

The results of the discussions and of the analyses in sections 2-4 of chapter 4 will be used as a basis to discuss the main question in the last section of this chapter. This question is whether the dramatic principles that form the foundation of the plot of the closed-structure theatre-play also form the foundation of the plot of the classical screenplay. In the end I will compare the results of what I have discussed in the present study and in particular in the last section of chapter 4, with valuable conclusions about

the tradition of the Hollywood film. I then will draw a conclusion about the end result of my study, which aims at formulating a poetics of the screenplay.