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# The plot point, the darkest moment, and the answered question: three ways of modelling the three-quarter-point

## **ABSTRACT**

*Many contemporary screenplay manuals, following Syd Field, encourage writers to place an act break approximately three-quarters of the way through the story. Although this would appear to be an area of widespread agreement, this essay argues that the manuals do not always define the 3/4-point in the same way. One common approach is to define the 3/4-point as a causally significant plot point; another approach is to regard it as an extreme point on an emotional curve, typically the 'darkest moment'; and a third approach is to conceive of the 3/4-point as the answer to a previously introduced question. Taking a closer look at these three competing models of the 3/4-point can help us uncover the manuals' competing assumptions about narrative structure, showing how they conceptualize causality, emotion and comprehension.*

## **KEYWORDS**

three-act structure  
screenplay manuals  
causality  
emotion  
interest

1. For instance, Andrew Horton encourages readers to adopt a more character-centred approach to screenwriting, but he acknowledges that Syd Field's three-act paradigm has influenced film-making. See Horton (1999: 95). William Froug steers readers away from Field's model by pointing out that any formula 'tends to wear itself out with repeated use' (Froug 1992: 62), thereby acknowledging that the formula has been used repeatedly, albeit in uninspired films.

In Part One of *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, David Bordwell recounts some of the major changes in screenwriting practices in Hollywood during the last few decades, pointing to the rising prominence of the screenplay manual. Although screenwriting manuals have been published since the 1910s, they have enjoyed a popular resurgence since the 1970s, when the decades-long decline of the studio system opened a larger market for original screenplays. Unlike the earlier handbooks (such as Frances Marion's 1937 *How to Write and Sell Film Stories*), many contemporary screenplay manuals place a great deal of emphasis on the three-act structure, encouraging the aspiring writer to break the story down into three large-scale parts (Bordwell 2006: 28). Significantly, Bordwell's account of changing trends in screenwriting is set against a familiar background of continuity: rather than offering a radical shift from previous writing practices, the new three-act models often systematized certain practices that were already commonplace to writers working in the classical Hollywood cinema, such as goal-orientation and rising tension.

Not all writers have embraced the ubiquity of the three-act model. Some offer alternative models, such as the four-part model proposed by Kristin Thompson and adopted by Bordwell (see Thompson 1999); others reject the idea of a model altogether, on the grounds that such models tend to be overly formulaic (see Froug 1992: 62). Still, a closer examination of the different ways that the three-act model has been configured should be valuable, for several reasons. A better understanding of the three-act model can help us explain certain features of contemporary Hollywood films, since even the strongest critics of the three-act model would concede that it has had some impact on narrative structure<sup>1</sup>. Examining the different ways the various manuals compose finer details of the three-act model can also enrich our understanding of contemporary Hollywood cinema's relationship with the classical Hollywood tradition, thereby building on the lineage proposed in Bordwell's historical account. Most importantly, a closer look at the screenplay manuals will reveal a complex interaction between competing conceptions of narrative. Despite their similarities, the set of books that agree on the basic idea of a three-act structure do not offer a single model of Hollywood narrative; rather, they offer overlapping models, placing different degrees of emphasis on certain functions and conventions. Without endorsing any one version of the three-act model as the most accurate, helpful or commercially promising, we can usefully examine how these manuals engage in complex debates about the nature of narrative structure. Uncovering the distinctions at the heart of these debates can sharpen our understanding of the multifunctional and perhaps even hybrid nature of the Hollywood narrative.

Most screenwriting manuals agree that a feature script should amount to around 120 pages in length, on the assumption that one page of a screenplay is equal to roughly one minute of screen time. In his influential book *Screenplay*, Syd Field proposed that a major plot point should occur on around page 85, roughly three-quarters of the way through the story (Field 1982: 8). This turning point marks the end of the second act in Field's model. Many subsequent books adopted Field's proportions, and there is widespread agreement among manual authors that something important happens at the 3/4-point that ends the second act. And yet, there is little consensus about what that important event should be. For this reason, the 3/4-point provides us with an excellent basis of comparison.

This essay's argument is based on a close examination of approximately twenty screenplay manuals that offer a three-act model as a template for plot construction. Field's work provides a useful starting point, but most of the

other examples are drawn from books that appeared in the last twenty years, after the three-act structure had consolidated its influence. However, I hope to show that this appearance of unanimity is largely illusory. Even when it comes to the seemingly simple problem of defining the 3/4-point, we confront competing definitions and conflicting assumptions. Some theorists treat the 3/4-point as a plot point, as a particular kind of link in the causal chain of action. A second group of theorists regard the 3/4-point as an extreme position in an emotional curve – sometimes, an emotional high point, but more commonly as the emotional low point of the script. Third, there are theorists who conceive of the 3/4-point as an answer to a question – a question that was posed at some earlier time in the script (typically, in the first act). As this three-part distinction suggests, looking at the ways theorists define the 3/4-point can be a revealing strategy for uncovering imbedded assumptions about narrative structure in general, by showing how they prioritize and conceptualize important issues like causality, emotion and comprehension.

## THE PLOT POINT

Several theorists define the 3/4-point using a ‘plot-point’ approach – though their presentations differ in some subtle and significant ways. Field, the author of what is still perhaps the most famous and influential screenwriting manual, defines the plot point as ‘an incident, or event, that hooks into the story and spins it around into another direction’ (Field 1982: 9). One of the striking things about Field’s definition of this plot point is that it is the same whether he is describing the plot point on page 85 or the plot point on page 25. For that matter, there is no clear difference between these two plot points and the midpoint that occurs around page 60. This may explain why some scholars, including Thompson, have criticized him for being overly vague (Thompson 1999: 23). Although his theory lacks a rigorous philosophical definition, Field’s model is memorable because his ideas are paired with evocative, and easy to remember, visual images. For instance, he characterizes the plot point as the story spinning around and heading in a different direction. This metaphor of spinning around complements and complicates one of the other visual motifs he uses throughout his book – the straight line. According to Field, story is ‘a linear progression of related incidents, episodes, and events leading to a dramatic resolution’ (Field 1982: 10). In a later book, he enhances this straight-line image, writing, ‘Each plot point moves the story forward, toward the resolution’ (Field 1984: 30). This image of the straight line is itself modified by Field’s most famous image: the picture of a line broken into four neat segments by the two act breaks and the midpoint. Field has offered three memorable pictorial models here – the line that has two significant changes in direction, the line that is relentlessly straight, and the line that is segmented into carefully balanced parts. As we will see, other theorists will adopt and revise all three of these images.

Field does not simply impose his plot point rules by fiat. In addition to offering *Chinatown* and other films as supporting examples, he offers functional justifications for the convention. The rule concerning the 3/4-point exists, he argues, because it produces tangible benefits for the writer. For instance, knowing that something important is supposed to happen at the 3/4-point gives the screenwriter something to aim for, a temporary finishing line before the real one. Field’s plot point advice also provides internal unity to the script. He writes, ‘The plot points at the end of each act are the anchoring

pins of dramatic action; they hold everything together' (Field 1982: 127). Just as the plot point at the end of Act I points the way for the development of Act II, the plot point at the end of Act II points the way for the development of Act III.

Other theorists define this unifying function more explicitly by emphasizing the plot point's position as a major link within a larger causal chain. Michael Hauge revises Field's model in the following way: 'Each change in the hero's outer motivation signals the arrival of the next act' (Hauge 1991: 86). Compared to Field's more generalized account, Hauge specifies that the plot points at the 1/4-point and the 3/4-point should involve very specific kinds of causal links – namely, changes in the protagonist's goals. Similarly, Christopher Keane argues that the 3/4-point should 'focus the character on his [her] objective' (Keane 1998: 84). The plot point is not simply something that happens to the protagonist; the plot point is the result of a change in the protagonist's approach to the primary goal.

Linda Seger adds another layer to the concept of turning points. 'Why turning points?' she asks.

A good story always remains interesting. It retains interest because of the unpredictable and intriguing twists and turns in the action along the way to the climax. If the story were completely linear and developed totally from the first push of the catalyst to the climax, our interest would lag, and the focus would be unclear.

(Seger 1994: 15–6)

Whereas Field's advice performed both heuristic and unifying functions, Seger adds an additional purpose: put plainly, a writer needs plot points to make the story more interesting. Note that there is a potential for tension between the function of increasing the story's unity and the function of maximizing the audience's interest. A writer secures unity by increasing the linearity, but the best way to secure interest is by strategically departing from the linear ideal. As in Field, we confront the metaphor of the straight line versus the metaphor of the line that occasionally veers in a different direction. For Seger, a spectator's interest hinges on unpredictability. An overly linear script, where the links between causes and effects are too strongly determined, runs the risk of being predictable and boring. Paradoxically, the quality of unpredictability may make the story easier to follow. The story that loses interest loses focus. Precisely by making the story a little more erratic, with the introduction of a blind turn, the writer keeps the audience on task, thereby ensuring that they maintain their rapt attention.

This emphasis on goal-orientation, causality and linearity supports one of Bordwell's major points. Most of the screenplay manuals endorse ideals that have a long tradition in the classical Hollywood cinema. For instance, in her 1937 manual, Frances Marion had little to say about act structure, but she was quite explicit about the importance of using cause-and-effect logic to stitch the pieces of a narrative together (Marion 1937: 72–3). More broadly, we can situate these discussions within the context of longstanding inquiry concerning the ideal of unified action in the dramatic arts – debates that stretch back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. However, this emphasis on tradition should not imply a sense of complete uniformity. Clearly, even theorists who have as much in common as Field, Hauge, Keane and Seger do not offer identical models. It is not simply that they offer slightly different recommendations about page counts; the more

important point is that they make subtle distinctions regarding the functional benefits of the rules they propose, placing different degrees of emphasis on functions like unity and interest.

## THE DARKEST MOMENT

Other experts have different recommendations about what should happen at the 3/4-point, and those recommendations carry their own distinct functional benefits. A second commonly used approach to understanding the 3/4-point draws on the idea that each narrative has a kind of emotional curve. Here, the favoured metaphor is narrative as roller coaster, taking the spectator on a ride where his or her emotions are constantly swinging up and down (see, for instance, Vogler 1998: 22). These models often combine the Fieldian Three-Act model with an emotion-oriented set of recommendations. Robert McKee, who occasionally borrows Fieldian ideas about proportion, argues that an act is a series of sequences that peaks in a major reversal of values (McKee 1997: 41). The story events are constantly changing from positive to negative, but a major shift should occur at the end of an act (Act II ending at around page 100 in McKee's scheme). The definition is left deliberately open, allowing the possibility that the change could be from positive to negative, or negative to positive.

Some models are much more specific, recommending that the writer place the lowest point of the emotional curve in the area around the 3/4-point. This point can be called the darkest moment. According to Paul Lucey, 'Most stories contain a darkest moment that occurs at the end of the second act, when the hero seems defeated by the problem' (Lucey 1994: 63). For Kate Wright, 'Between pages 72 and 85, the protagonist is nearly defeated and willing to abandon his mission' (Wright 2004: 47). Hal Ackerman borrows a term from Richard Walter: 'The Big Gloom' (Ackerman 2003: 103; Walter 1988: 57). We can compare the darkest moment to the Fieldian plot point in several ways. Field's plot point is an event that turns the story in a new direction. This definition applies to an early plot point, just as well as it applies to a late one. Indeed, there is no reason why a script could not have three such plot points, or four, or even twenty. By contrast, the darkest moment is defined in such a way that there can only be one. It is not called a generically dark moment; it is called 'the darkest moment'. We might disagree about which moment is the darkest moment, and a writer might stick it in an unexpected place, but in theory there can only be one per script. This means that the event at the 3/4-point – whatever it is – is fundamentally different from the event at the 1/4-point. In the passages quoted above, Lucey defines that difference in relation to character goals. The darkest moment is when the protagonist seems to be defeated. Wright offers an even more specific recommendation. Right before the 3/4-point, the protagonist should give up – the protagonist should abandon the goal. *School of Rock* (2003), *Independence Day* (1996) and *Chicken Run* (2000) all provide examples of films with a darkest moment. These are very different films, but all three contain a moment when a despairing protagonist is forced to reject a goal that has been a driving force for most of the film. *The Hangover* (2009) offers a variation on this formula. The darkest moment occurs when the protagonists abandon all hope of finding their lost friend. We are given a brief glimpse of this moment at the beginning of the film, but the full significance of the scene is not provided until around three-quarters of the way through the film.

2. As a teacher, Paul Lucey was fond of asking his students a blunt question: 'Is it going to make them laugh, is it going to make them cry, or is it going to scare them?' This information is drawn from my personal experiences with Lucey, one of my instructors in graduate school.
3. Compare this analysis with Kristin Thompson's discussion of her four-act model, in which the midpoint is often a reversal of the situation at the end of the first act (Thompson 1999: 28).

What are the functional advantages of this approach? One clear advantage is that this model encourages the writer to treat the story as a vehicle for emotional engagement. Paul Lucey writes, 'A successful plot makes audiences feel sad, makes them feel worried, or makes them laugh' (Lucey 1994: 11).<sup>2</sup> The darkest moment would seem to be an ideal spot to evoke strong emotions. In a drama, we might cry when the protagonist appears to fail; in a suspense film, we might feel dread; in a comedy, the darkest moment might generate sympathy for the luckless protagonist. There are other advantages, as well – advantages that this approach shares with the plot-point approach. For instance, there is a heuristic advantage: once a writer knows that the 3/4-point is the darkest moment, it is clear that he or she can work backwards to mount a series of ever-increasing obstacles to ensnare the protagonist into that terrible position. In addition, there are several kinds of unity that can be achieved with this approach. On a somewhat abstract level, we might say that the 1/4-point and the 3/4-point mirror each other. The 1/4-point is a page of absolute determination, with the hero locked into the conflict; the 3/4-point is the reverse – absolute determination reduced to absolute desperation.<sup>3</sup> Wright takes this concern for symmetrical unity even further, suggesting that the tension between the protagonist's goals (which dominate the end of the first act) and the antagonist's goals (which dominate the end of the second act) is like a Hegelian synthesis of opposites.

More concretely, Lucey argues that there should be a causal connection between the 1/4-point and the 3/4-point. Around page 30, the protagonist should tackle a problem, and around page 90, that same problem should trigger the darkest moment. Indeed, Lucey sketches a simple model of the three-act structure, entirely in problem-solution terms. In the first act, the protagonist tackles the problem. In the second act, the protagonist is gradually defeated by the problem. In the third act, the protagonist solves the problem (Lucey 1994: 45).

Other theorists explain the darkest moment by comparing it to the script's midpoint. In the middle of the story, the protagonist should enjoy an illusory moment of success; then the protagonist must suffer a series of failures before finally succeeding in the climax of the third act. For Richard Krevolin, the midpoint is 'usually a high note that can only lead to a low note by the end of the second act' (Krevolin 2003: 28). For Stephen Duncan, the first half of the second act (roughly, pages 30–60) shows the protagonist 'gaining ground', while the second half (roughly, pages 60–90) shifts the emotions into another direction by showing the protagonist 'losing ground' (Duncan 2006: 56–7). If the second act is a roller coaster, then the midpoint should be the highest point in the structure, and the 3/4-point should be the lowest dip.

To be sure, there is some overlap between the darkest moment and the Fieldian plot point. Like the 3/4-point plot point, the darkest moment is an effect of the causes contained in the preceding 60 pages. The protagonist has been struggling with the problem for 60 pages (or roughly an hour of screen time), and this series of escalating challenges has produced the sense of hopeless defeat that characterizes the darkest moment. However, the darkest moment often differs from the plot point as defined above because it is not necessarily a cause that will produce the following 30 pages of effects. Linda Seger makes this idea explicit. She writes, 'Sometimes, the second turning point comes in two beats. These beats are often a dark moment, followed by a new stimulus' (Seger 1994: 19). The new stimulus is often called the third act twist. Fitting this distinction into the problem-solution model, the writer

needs the darkest moment to complete the second act, which is an act about struggle, but the writer also needs a third act twist to initiate the third act, pulling the protagonist away from the paralysis of defeat and setting him or her on the road to the solution. Other theorists shift the darkest moment back a few beats, arguing that the low point occurs just before the second act ends, placing the twist itself in the 3/4 position (see, for instance, Duncan 2006: 58–9).

*E.T.* (1982) and *The Princess Bride* (1987) are both good examples of films that use this two-part strategy of having the darkest moment paired with a twist. In fact, both films use the exact same technique. Around three-quarters of the way through the story, a major character seems to die: about as dark a moment as you could image. Then, a few minutes later, the twist is that the character is not really dead. In romantic comedies, the darkest moment will usually show the couple being separated, apparently permanently.<sup>4</sup> This happens, around three-quarters of the way through the movie, in films like *The Truth About Cats & Dogs* (1996) and *Jerry Maguire* (1996).

In other words, the darkest moment is not a Fieldian plot point. By itself, it does not turn the story in a new direction. Instead, it seems temporarily like the story is over; the action pauses, since the protagonist has given up the struggle. It is the ensuing twist that is the analogue to the plot point, because that does turn the story in a new direction – emotionally, in an upward direction, away from the low point signified by the darkest moment.

Some of the theorists who emphasize the importance of the darkest moment, such as Linda Aronson and Kate Wright, locate themselves within the myth-oriented tradition most commonly associated with Christopher Vogler. The darkest moment is seen as a test that the hero must pass before the final battle. However, even the critics who do not draw on the mythical tradition can draw on a proximate tradition: the tradition of classical Hollywood storytelling, which had always valued emotional ups and downs. To give one example, back in 1920, Emerson and Loos (1920: 90–1) had advised aspiring screenwriters to bring the hero to the lowest possible point before revealing the twist that resolves the story. They do not offer specific recommendations about act breakdowns, but it certainly plausible to see the 3/4-point-as-darkest-moment technique as the systematization of a well-established Hollywood technique of emotional manipulation.

## THE ANSWERED QUESTION

A third approach to screenplay structure can be called the ‘question-and-answer approach’. Paul Joseph Gulino offers a particularly thorough explanation of this approach:

‘When a character wants something, a question is implied: will the character get it or not? This is known as the dramatic question, and a question of necessity has three parts: the posing of the question, the deliberation on it, and the answer to it. [...] So, the first act poses the question: will so-and-so get what he or she wants? The second act sees the playing out of the question, its “deliberation,” as the character works against difficulties to get it, and the third act provides the answer. Dramatic tension thus thrusts audience attention into the future with the expectation of the answer to the question’.

(Gulino 2004: 10–1)

4. In *Writing the Romantic Comedy*, Billy Mernit defines the darkest moment as a scene when the relationship seems ‘lost forever’. However, Mernit (2000: 115) locates this scene early in the third act, and not at the end of the second act.

5. Frank Daniel helped develop the screenwriting programmes at Columbia University and the University of South California. I took a course with Daniel in the latter programme.

Before examining how this approach might be applied to the problem of the 3/4-point, it is useful to make some preliminary observations about the question-and-answer structure as it impacts the narrative as a whole. First, there are some affinities between this model and Noël Carroll's model of erotetic narration (Carroll 1996: 95–100). Carroll draws a useful distinction between micro-questions – little questions that link one scene with the next – and macro-questions – major questions that are established early on, and then sustained and intensified through the bulk of the story until the answers are provided at the end. Second, the question-and-answer model is capable of fulfilling most of the major functions I have mentioned so far, such as interest, unity and emotional engagement. Interest would appear to be the dominant function: ideally, the question should rivet the spectator's attention, prompting the spectator to eagerly look for clues that will lead to the question's answer. In terms of unity, we can say that each question should produce a definite answer. When all the major questions are answered, the script can end, having arrived at a state of closure. This revelation of the answer can also provide an emotional pay-off: perhaps we will experience self-congratulating delight if we have guessed the answer correctly, or amused surprise if we have not. Indeed, it is easy to see how the question-and-answer approach might be combined with the emotional curve approach. By withholding answers, the writer might create an emotional low point; by giving answers, the writer could produce a high point.

Notice that the question-and-answer model does not necessarily appeal to the concept of sympathy. We do not need to care about the character at all; we just want to know the answer to the question. But this experience of unsympathetic curiosity is not the only kind of emotion that the question-and-answer model can provide. For some models, the question-and-answer approach is merely an intermediate step in a larger strategy of producing other kinds of emotions – namely, hope and fear. An emphasis on hope and fear is common for theorists who were influenced by the thinking of the teacher Frank Daniel, such as Gulino and David Howard.<sup>5</sup> In Howard's *The Tools of Screenwriting* (an updated version of a book on playwriting by Edward Mabley), there is an extended discussion of the links among questions and answers and hopes and fears:

So what is the trick behind keeping the audience participating in the story and creating in itself the emotional response that drama depends upon? In a word, uncertainty. [...] Another way of stating this idea is hope versus fear. [...] How is this sense of uncertainty, this hope versus fear, created in the audience? First and foremost, the audience must sympathize, to at least some small degree, with one or more pivotal characters. The next most important element in creating hope versus fear is letting the audience know what potentially might happen, but not what will happen.

(Howard and Mabley 1995: 37–8)

Here again, the model has some affinities with Noël Carroll's model of suspense. The narrative encourages us to develop some positive feelings for a character, and then works on our emotions by prompting us to ask questions about future events.

With this general theory in mind, we can see how Gulino and Howard work to fit the question-and-answer/hope-and-fear model of structure into the standard three-act paradigm. Put simply, the second act is held together by



a macro-question. That question gets introduced at the 1/4-point, and it gets answered around the 3/4-point. The final act deals with the consequences of that answer. Now, this is actually a more curious proposal than it might appear to be at first glance. One might expect the theorists to say that the question will get answered at the end of the film.<sup>6</sup> But there is at least one important question that works to define the second act: that question gets answered about three-quarters of the way through the movie, and that answer motivates the climactic scenes. This model actually does explain certain scripts quite well. For instance, in the kidnapping thriller *Ransom* (1996), a major question is, 'Will Tom (Mel Gibson) get his son back?' One might expect this question to get answered in the climax of the film, but we actually get a decisive answer to this question with about 20 min of story left in the movie. Tom's reunion with his son introduces a new question about an additional confrontation with the villain. Howard and Mabley call this type of pre-resolution answering scene a culmination (see Howard and Mabley 1995: 52–3; see also Gulino 2004: 12). Here, the kidnapping plot reaches a culmination before the film's last-act climax, when the villain is finally killed.

Here again, it is tempting to just say, 'What's new here?' Is a culmination not just the same thing as a Fieldian plot point? They are certainly similar. In *The Tools of Screenwriting*, Howard is taking a model (Mabley's) that was originally designed for plays, and attempting to make it work for films. In the process, Howard has clearly used Field's proportions as a point of departure for their model. Indeed, some plot point theorists often explain the significance of the plot point by noting that it produces a question in the mind of the audience (see Hauge 1991: 90–1). Still, the question-and-answer model and the plot point model are ultimately two different ways of thinking about story structure, and that difference becomes clearer when we consider two concepts: the concept of the episodic story, and the concept of the obstacle.

Occasionally, Hollywood releases a film that seems episodic, such as *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004). What makes it episodic? One way to answer this question might be to say that the film is missing several causal connections. There are just too many coincidences. But another way to answer this question would be to say that there is no high-stakes question holding the episodes together. Notice that Harold and Kumar have a goal – they want to go to White Castle – and this goal does provide a causal link between most of the scenes. The issue is not that there is no goal; it is that we are not asked to care about that goal. The joke is, precisely, that these hapless protagonists have a goal that is much more trivial than the typical movie goal. A screenwriter who wanted to polish this script, to make it more like a conventional script, could add some more causal connections, but another option would be to give us more reasons to ask sympathetic questions about their progress towards the goal. 'Will they get to White Castle? I hope they make it. I fear they will not'. Here, the point is not to say that anyone could possibly improve upon *Harold & Kumar*; rather, the point is that the film seems so unusual because it departs from screenwriting norms in at least two different ways: by withholding some causal connections and by refusing to amplify its question-and-answer structure by making those questions the vehicles for strong hopes and fears.

Another way to compare models is by considering the role of obstacles. Here is plot-point theorist Linda Seger on this topic: 'When scenes are connected in a cause-effect relationship, every scene advances the action, bringing us closer to the climax. [...] The actions that move the story forward

6. In fact, Gulino suggests as much in the passage quoted above, before clarifying the proposal a few pages later.

are called action points' (Seger 1994: 47–8). Here, she is writing about minor plot points that happen throughout a script. Later, she continues:

'The barrier is an action point because it forces a character to make a new decision, to take a new action, or to continue on in a new direction. They stop the action for a moment, and then the character goes around the barrier and continues. The story doesn't develop out of the barrier, it develops out of the decision to try another action.

(Seger 1994: 49)

Every scene advances the action, but that does not mean that the script is constantly moving forward at the same speed. Instead, the story moves forward, and then stops, and then moves forward again, and then stops, and so on. The barriers represent the temporary stopping points, but the characters' decisions represent the forward steps. Even though they do not literally advance the plot, the hurdles are integrated into the story by causality; they cause the protagonist to make the decisions that advance the story.

Obstacles play a different and more significant role in the question-and-answer model. In the original book on playwriting that Howard has revised, Mabley wrote, 'The protagonist's progress toward his goal is traced in a series of scenes, each of which, even though he may not be present in the scene at all, moves him toward or away from his objective' (Mabley 1972: 21). Here, the image involves forward and backward motion – but notice that forward motion is not given any kind of priority. A scene that takes the protagonist away from the goal is just as important as a scene that takes the protagonist closer. Why? Because both scenes can work on our hopes and fears, which is a dominant function for this model. In other words, by shifting the emphasis towards emotional engagement, this approach elevates the obstacle in importance. A scene where a character encounters an insurmountable obstacle is just as important as a scene where a character overcomes an obstacle, because they both perform the function of providing a partial or complete answer to the macro-question, thereby impacting our hopes and fears. Howard and Mabley explicitly state that the obstacle is a necessary component of narrative:

If the protagonist and his objective constitute the first two important elements in the construction of a story, the various obstacles collectively constitute the third. Without impediments to the attainment of the protagonist's desire there would be no conflict and no story.

(Howard and Mabley 1995: 47)

Adding an obstacle is not just a matter of adding filler to make the story longer. It is a matter of adding an essential component to make the story exist.

We have already seen that this approach draws on ideas developed in dramatic criticism. Previous screenplay manuals had also offered similar advice. Eugene Vale's *The Technique of Screen Writing*, which first appeared in 1944 and was revised several times over the next few decades, contains a fascinating chapter about the relationship of emotions, knowledge and time: 'The anticipation of a horrible event arouses fear in us; when we actually see it, it fills us with terror; and when it has happened, our only emotion is sorrow. Similarly, a good thing which is expected fills us with hope; when it actually happens, it gives us joy and afterwards satisfaction' (Vale 1986: 121).

Not knowing what will happen produces a response that changes when we know more. Similarly, a question can generate an emotion that shifts when the answer arrives.

7. Kirkpatrick attended the screenwriting programme at the University of Southern California, where he undoubtedly learned the teachings of David Howard and Frank Daniel.

## HYBRID STRUCTURES

Of course, it would be an overstatement to suggest that these three models – the plot-point model, the darkest-moment model and the answered-question model – are radically different from each other. There is no reason why a carefully motivated obstacle cannot also fulfil some of the functions prized by all three models: perhaps continuing an ongoing causal chain, perhaps answering a macro-question, perhaps providing the screenplay's darkest moment. One of the purposes of making these distinctions is to highlight the fact that most scripts are multifunctional, with a complexity that is hard to capture with a single model. In fact, many screenwriting experts actually borrow elements from all three of the models. For instance, Linda Seger writes that the end of the second act should have a darkest moment and a turning point, but she also writes that it should 'raise the central question again, and make us wonder about the answer' (Seger 1994: 16). Gilles describes the three-act structure with a clever trio of observations: 'The first act should end with a question. The second act should end with an exclamation point. And the third act should end with a period' (Gilles 2000: 3–4). In other words, he describes the first act, and probably the third, in terms of the question-and-answer model, but he defines the 3/4-point in terms of the plot point model, though the metaphor of the exclamation point suggests the influence of the emotional curve model as well.

Rather than suppose that every script will fall cleanly into one of these three categories, it seems likely that many scripts are hybrid constructions, drawing various ideas from multiple models. A typical script might contain some Fieldian plot points, a darkest moment, and several macro-questions producing various scenes of culmination. Sometimes, these components can be tightly unified, as in the script for *Chicken Run*, written by Karey Kirkpatrick.<sup>7</sup> The story concerns a chicken, Ginger, who tries to help her friends escape from an evil farm with the help of a rooster, Rocky, who supposedly knows how to fly. The middle portion of the film is governed by several macro-questions: Will the chickens escape? Will Ginger and Rocky fall in love? Will Ginger learn Rocky's secret? Around three-quarters of the way through the (relatively short) film, one macro-question is answered decisively when Ginger learns Rocky's secret. This event prompts Ginger to abandon her goal of escaping, while temporarily eliminating any possibility for romantic connection. In other words, the answer to one macro-question (Will Ginger learn the secret?) produces the darkest moment of the film, linking together the question-and-answer structure with the emotional curve. After a few moments of sadness, a Fieldian plot point arrives to revive the two dangling macro-questions, shifting the emotional curve in an upward direction as the heroine Ginger develops a new plan for escape. However, not all scripts combine all the elements so efficiently in a single scene, in the manner of *Chicken Run*. In *Minority Report* (2002), the long middle portion of the film is structured by at least two major macro-questions: Will John (Tom Cruise) murder Leo, the man he is apparently pre-destined to kill? And will John escape from the authorities? Earlier, I suggested that a film can have only one 'darkest moment', but a film like *Minority Report* complicates this proposal. With two distinct macro-questions, the film can offer two darkest moments, one for each question. In the murder

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plot, the worst thing that could happen is for John to kill Leo – which he does, though not in the way we expected it to happen. In the escape plot, the worst thing that could happen is for John to get placed in the high-tech prison – which also happens, several minutes later. Both of these scenes are separate from the plot point that turns the story in a new direction – the revelation that John’s boss Burgess is guilty of murder and conspiracy. Whereas the efficient, 84-min *Chicken Run* produced tremendous unity by placing the culmination, the darkest moment and the ‘third act twist’ plot point in the same scene, the more expansive, 145-min *Minority Report* spreads the moments out in a more sequential fashion. Instead of insisting that one of these scenes is the undoubted act break, it seems more useful to suppose that the screenwriters (Scott Frank and Jon Cohen) are combining different practices: the rule of thumb that calls for a darkest moment, the rule of thumb that calls for a macro-question to be answered, and the rule of thumb calling for the script to turn in a new direction – all happening roughly 3/4 of the way through the movie, though not necessarily at the same exact time.

In conclusion, to say that many Hollywood films are hybrid constructions does not mean that they are disorganized or unclassical. It simply means that they are designed to serve a variety of functions. Most screenwriters do not want to choose between unity and emotional engagement, or between understandability and interest. Writers typically want to achieve several different goals, so it makes sense to suppose that they have developed a wide range of craft practices to accomplish those goals. Screenwriting manuals try to summarize some of the most popular craft practices in Hollywood. Whether the writers have read the screenplay manuals or not, all writers in Hollywood have access to this larger pool of ideas. When it comes to structure, most writers know the routine advice that says a character should lock the conflict by page 30; they have heard that one should have some sort of midpoint around page 60; and they are familiar with the idea of the darkest moment. Writers know about questions and answers and hopes and fears. To be sure, there are some Field-inspired scripts, and some McKee-inspired scripts, but we should also be aware that many scripts will mix together a range of ideas, in different combinations, and in different degrees, to accomplish a multiplicity of goals. Drawing distinctions among the plot point model, the emotional curve model and the question-and-answer model should not lead us to classify all scripts into one of three categories; quite the contrary, it can sharpen our awareness that any given script might draw resources from multiple models.<sup>8</sup>

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