

Don't Believe in Drama

The “three-act structure” model of screenwriting widely adopted by Hollywood and the rest of the world’s film industry is rooted in the dramatic theory devised by Aristotle in his work *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), which structuralizes a film into three parts: beginning, middle, and end (Aristotle, however, did not “invent” the three-act structure, as he only directed his theory towards that formula). But the dramatic theory in *Poetics* only refers to theater arts, Aristotle never saw a frame of photography in his time of life, and thus we cannot simply dump the three-act structure dramaturgy on top of cinema. We have to keep in mind that *theatre and cinema are completely different forms of art*.

Theatre and cinema are utterly different. To put in a sentence: *theatre cannot leave behind its artifact*. I’ll leave it up to the readers to critically approach themselves why the nature of “leaving behind its artifact” is so important in cinema (in art in general). We must not be tricked by our ideas that the theatre and cinema are similar and should at once abandon our feeble attempts to combine those two utterly different arts.

It would be fine if the three-act structure is a way of approaching cinema and that other ways are equally respected. The current situation, however, is that any other ways of approaching cinema are neglected and persecuted by the Hollywood film industry that relies on the three-act structure model of filmmaking to generate profit. We so blindly buy into the Hollywood scheme that the “other ways” are also persecuted even by the young audience and filmmakers; film festivals too (e.g. Cannes, Berlinale, etc.) have ceased to support films without a structural narrative. The greatest filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky has once said it dead right regarding the birth and the fate of cinema:

“For the first time in the history of the arts, in the history of culture, man found the means to *take an impression of time*...That is the sense in which the Lumiere brothers were the first to contain the seed of a new aesthetic principle. But immediately afterwards, cinema turned aside from art, forced down the path that was the safest from the point of view of philistine interest and profit”

To add a point, to teach the three-act structure model to the young artists, not as an option of method but as the only method, has already placed cinema to its critical point of downfall. In the context of power, such ridiculous one-way “creative” education by the industry to the non-Western filmmakers only proves the existence of ongoing Western soft power. In such contexts, cinema as art has long been dead.

But why is the three-act structure model applied to cinema? Because it works in dramatic Theatre, and we are illusioned that theatre and cinema are similar and “combinable”. Then why does the three-act structure model work in dramatic theatre? Because drama is utterly human and relies on the psychological acts of building and breaking of emotions that are its dramatic effects. The three-act structure renders filmmakers and actors into psychoanalysts. Leave psychoanalysis to the actual psychoanalysts – don’t believe in drama.

Alexander Kang
2016/03/26
Shanghai, China