

Scenes and Sequences

From a structuralist point of view, scenes and sequences are the basic elements of each screenplay. Scenes have two determinant components, time and place. Sequences interconnect the scenes by using an idea like wedding, party, or murder. But every scene, every sequence, and even every act and screenplay have their own structure of, let us say, three or five acts. That makes the whole story a bit more complicated.

These structures are, like Russian Matreshkas, relative to each other. Language is another example for such a structure. Words make a sentence, and some sentences build up, for instance, a letter. The letter can be part of a book, and, at the same time, the used words can be divided into syllables, letters, or phonemes. The theoretical creativity has no frontiers and can cope with contradictions.

Not so the practitioner's. He needs to be able to act and needs an uncomplicated concept of the things he is doing. He cannot stop at the idea that every scene is a potential sequence and every sequence a hidden script. Surprisingly, the structure-idea is functional in manifold ways, not only on a theoretical level but also for almost all sorts of participants in the production and perception of films.

Scenes and sequences are functional structures or structuring elements in at least five pragmatic senses:

First of all, our perception is also structured into scenes and sequences that you can view upon from many angles. The first day of school is still present, as a scene, for many people. The years before can be perceived of as one sequence. Smell, colours, or paths of actions interconnect memory sequences and scenes. Similarly, the final scene and some others of *Fight Club* as well as the unity of action stay in mind, by far not everything of the film.

Retrospectively, the missing parts will be added by your everyday knowledge, which is also involved in the understanding of scenes. Every scene has its beginning and its end, while the audience does not get to see every part of these elements in the film but has to deduce it by itself; it depends on its knowledge of everyday life in doing so. Film scenes and sequences facilitate the perceptual adaptation to this and, thus, are remembered more precisely than the whole film.

The next person interested in the division of scenes and sequences is the screenwriter himself, at least if he does not stick to the scene-by-scene approach but makes himself a detailed structural scheme of every sequence and scene. This way, he can easily write on an easier scene when he lacks the concentration for a more complicated one. A well-structured script helps the writer to understand and, as a consequence, sell his ideas. It provides him with orientation all over the way.

Next to the writer stands the director with his crew. They all have to communicate about the script in order to coordinate their actions. Well-structured scenes and sequences are not only the base for understanding and realizing the script but as well for drawing up a work plan. Writing a script, the writer gives guidelines to communicate his ideas.

The last pragmatically functional structure of scenes and sequences is, indeed, best understood in a rather scientific way. As Wittgenstein states, every utterance gets its sense through its context, and so do scenes and sequences. Imagine *Memento* being told in the chronological order of its actions, starting with the beginning of Leonard's amnesia. Even a newspaper article that begins with the course of the story, not with the 'plot', would be more interesting to receive.

Scenes and sequences are the basic semantic moments of a script. In the same manner that the utterance 'I am cold' can be understood as a demanding 'close the window', depending on the nonverbal and extra communicational contexts it is placed in, scenes get their signification from other scenes and the sequences they are organized to. And even a scene's elements can come to change the meaning of the whole scene by interchanging their positions. To visualize that, try out interchanging the words of the following simple sentence and look for a change of meaning:

Bill kills Amy.