

Dramaturgy of the Theater and the Film by Dr. Gottfried Mueller

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“The beginning must burst like a bomb into the exposition, the middle must be the climax and the end a release.”

Background information:

The book published in Germany in 1942 is a document of its time. The tone is pithy, terms like “brutal” are used to describe how a director should enforce their staging of a play, or, a director is recommended to take on any “degree of self-denial” in order to achieve their goal. But Gottfried Müller is not an ideologist. He gives precise definitions, structures his material well, and explains dramaturgy in theater and film step by step, along the lines of its development as a tool from Aristotle to the present day. The author has implemented in this book his own demand on film: instruction should be entertaining.

The book is noteworthy because it is the first attempt to use dramaturgical rules on movies. Mueller is concerned with examining how the laws of storytelling deal with the technical specifics of a movie and draws some interesting conclusions.

The book is divided into two parts, the structure is simple and straightforward:

The first part deals with the history and technique of drama. The historical outline is a development of the artform of drama with numerous quotations from classical authors and is therefore very informative. The genesis of the dramaturgy leads to the dramaturgical rules of Aristotle, but seen from the perspective of the 20th century..

The use of these rules in movies is explained in the second part, in which Mueller also makes a comparison between American and German approach to storytelling and draws the conclusion: "Our art suffers from the excess of the rhetorical and the receding of the sensual moment of intuition that gave the drama its name."

The outline of the evolution of drama from antiquity to modernity is also an insight into the influence of the different authors on each other. Müller explains in detail the rules created by these authors concerning the structure and design of a drama. He explains for example the influences of Sophocles, Scribe, Dumas, Hebbel and Kleist on Henrik Ibsen's drama technique in great detail and complements that with the detailed listing of the 36 dramatic situations by Geoges Polti, Aristotle's rules, Molière's comic means, and Scribe's technique.

Müller's remarks on the connection between film production and marketing are still valid today, if not forward-looking. Because of the high production costs, a film has to attract large audiences. Since audiences demand an equivalent value to the ticket price in entertainment, dramaturgical rules should be applied meticulously in movies so that suspense and contrast are generated and the audience is successfully entertained.

He calls the US American production method exemplary: "For an American, film is business. But he prepares this business like a work of art. The German likes to call the film an art. But he prepares this art like a forward deal." While the Americans dedicate a lot of time, especially to working on scripts, and work together in a collective exchange of ideas, in Germany scripts are rushed and written often by single authors in complete isolation.

Definition of the drama:

"Drama means action. Dramaturgy is the art of building a plot in such a way that its artistic rendering engages an audience with ever new suspense and surprise." The dramatic situation is a "heightened action" and is the core of the piece. Some of the dramatic situations are those 36 listed by Georges Polti in "Les 36 situations dramatiques" (Paris, 1895). Among these are: fatal imprudence, unconscious love crime, killing one of his own undetected, rivalry of unequals, adultery, erotic crime, loving the enemy, miscarriage of justice, recovery.

Structure of the drama:

"The purpose of tragedy is to create resignation, to paralyze passions. The prerequisite for tragedy is an afterlife."

The tragedy has five acts, here Müller strictly adheres to the rules of Aristotle, as adopted by Lessing and Freytag. In the first act, the characters are introduced and the conflict is built up. In the second act there is an intensification of the action and in the exchange of arguments, in which sometimes one side, sometimes the other, has the upper hand. The third act describes the climax of the conflict and the turnaround of events. In the fourth act there is a retarding moment that apparently gives the plot a different course, but is smashed again. The fifth act leads to the catastrophe. The tragedy shows individual fates and is naturalistic in its essence.

"The purpose of comedy is life-affirmation." It holds up a mirror of everyday life for the viewer and shows them its shortcomings and ridiculousness. All the resulting consequences will be carried out within the world.

The comedy usually consists of three acts. In the first act, the characters are introduced. The conclusion of the first act indicates the possibility of a favorable outcome, against which, however, resistance is spreading. In the second act, resistance takes over and the hope for a favorable ending is dashed. In the third act, the resistance is resolved and the hopes are fulfilled. The characters in a comedy are universal types; it is idealistic in nature.

Molière distinguishes six mimic, six dialogic and eight content-based "comic means" for composing a comedy, which are based on misunderstandings, repetitions or grotesque weightings (a lot of importance is attached to an unimportant thing).

Basic principles of a dramatic action:

As the three basic laws of drama, Müller describes the unity of plot, time and space called for by Aristotle: A play can only have one conflict and only one dramatic plot as its driver. The unity of plot is reflected by the fact that the final scene must be a result of all previous events. The time shown is the time of the action, the period immediately before the final act. Events that are important for the course but that have already taken place must be introduced indirectly.

The unity of space is conditioned by the connection of the action to the stage.

Modern drama differs from ancient drama in the ratio of fate to doom. In a fateful drama, deities are at work who can be named and whose control is undisputed. In doom, man is not in a relationship with a causative God. He is on his own and responsible for himself and his actions. Ancient drama displays a considerable influence of gods who determine a character's fate, modern drama deals instead almost exclusively with doom caused by the characters themselves. If a god is mentioned in a modern drama it is almost always to decry its absence and indifference.

The fable, the actual story, is considered by Müller to be the most important element in line with Aristotle's "Poetics", since, according to Aristotle, "there is no tragedy without a plot, but there could certainly be one without characters." A story has a beginning, a middle and an end, it is dramatic through the struggle it is about. The hero is an ideal and a figure to identify with for the audience. He is "a person whose character traits are of general interest, but who also unites all the weaknesses and mistakes of the audience." Because he lets the heart rule over the mind, the hero has the sympathy of the audience. The hero is either active or passive. The active hero culpably achieves his goal by exceeding his limits. After the turning point, the hero's opponents take the lead. The passive hero has character weaknesses and makes mistakes, but he is not really to blame for the tragedy. His opponents act dominantly until the turning point. Only then does the passive hero step in and become active.

The basic rules include the following: The dramatic action always depicts a conflict. Both opponents must be equally strong, only the hero can have the sympathy of the spectator.

The contrast between the two opponents must be elementary. All characters go through a transformation during the plot. Although both opponents are equal, one seems to have more power.

Tension is created by doubts and self-doubts on the part of the hero, by surprising twists and turns and the lack of information that the hero has compared with the audience. According to Lessing and Diderot, the suspense increases when the viewer anticipates the element of surprise. The technique of gradually letting the viewer know more allows him to follow the piece with active and tense participation.

Retarding moments in which the event is postponed at the expected moment in order to occur later unexpectedly also increase suspense. "The secret of the theatrical effect lies not in the surprise but in the fulfillment of the expected."

According to Aristotle, happiness and unhappiness are created by four means in the course of the drama: peripeteia (a dramatic turning point at which the plot turns into the opposite of what was intended), recognition scenes (transition from ignorance to knowledge in a person. The recognition scenes usually coincide with the peripeteia moments and can take place through external features (scar, medallion), or someone revealing themselves (their true nature, for example) or someone who recognizes a person or a certain situation), pathos (a gripping, poignant situation that has a destructive and painful effect, for example a murder) and ethos (character definition, the specific law by which a character acts).

According to Schopenhauer, misfortune can be brought about in a tragedy in three ways: through extraordinary malice of a character who becomes the author of the misfortune, through blind fate; thus coincidence or error, or through the relationship of the characters to each other. Their relationship is designed in such a way to compel them to cause each other, knowingly and seeing, the greatest harm.

Film is not a documentary tool, but reproduces an unreal time, an unreal space and an unreal atmosphere, which, however, follow the classic laws of unity of place, time and action. Since there are no film-specific actions, the film is structured according to the same pattern as a drama. The cinematic space is the space artificially created by the camera positions. Settings recorded at different locations can be combined during editing as if all recordings were made in the same location.

The cinematic time is the impression of time generated by a film, which can be stretched (e.g. in the event of an explosion) or condensed (e.g. when an action is represented elliptically, i.e. only the key moments are reproduced).

The art of film is not about documenting, but rather the production of meaningful images. For example, the shot of boots in a marching column can represent the power and violence that the military wields. Not the things themselves, but the ideas on which they are based is shown. Every take must be an abstraction of the individual phenomenon in order to emphasize the universally valid, typical and eternal. The film is not naturalistic, but supra-realistic, because it shows universally valid truths in themselves. The editing gives a process its rhythm. In the case of successive images, the following image must be the continuation in time and space of the previous one, or the transition to a new time/space object. This transition can be via word (a word describes the following picture), picture (an object / situation / character evokes another object / situation / character), sound (a sound comes from the following situation), by dissolving or contrast (an object / situation / character follows its opposite).

The message of an action can be effectively reinforced by film effects such as slow motion, turning an action backwards or the use of a dummy or a background. Film manipulates acoustics through synchronization and vision through editing.

“The sound film is a total work of art that combines words and music, gestures and rhythms into a single action.” Film became folk art because it is the only art that makes visible images

of things and people that are as “natural” as we are used to seeing nature or as we imagine nature. The sound film is folk art and everyday art.

The creation of a script:

When creating a script, the dramaturgical department of a film production consisting of editorial department, central dramaturgy, executive dramaturgy and developmental dramaturgy plays an essential role.

The editing department checks all exposés and manuscripts and prepares an expert opinion for each one. The brief reading reports (coverages) are passed on to the chief dramaturge of the central dramaturgy, who coordinates with the management of the company the decision for production. If the material is not yet a script, several authors are commissioned with an exposé, the best of whom receives the treatment contract. After the approval of the head of production and the chief dramaturge, the script assignment is given. The script production is supervised by the developmental dramaturge, who has to take into account both the production manager's budgeting plans and the creative wishes of the director.

The scriptwriter works on the material. If it is a dramatic work for the stage, it already has a structure and must now be reworked from a cinematic point of view. But the material can also be a real life event or the life story of an existing person: then the inherent dramatic conflict must first be defined. The difference between a screenwriter and a playwright is that the latter works creatively, the former works on the creation of a poet for it to become a movie. In order to be able to write appropriately for a film, the author must be able to think in pictures. The plot must never be committed to dialogue, a bad script can be recognized by long dialogues. The screenwriter has to overcome the word and translate it into action and pictures. “Since the style of our film art is naturalistic, the scriptwriter must make sure that his scenes appear realistic and natural.” He must be a connoisseur of the environment described, know how the average person reacts and expresses their feelings.

While the synopsis shows the plot and the dramaturgical framework, the treatment brings the complete plot outline in a continuous sequence of images. Dialogue should not appear in either the synopsis or the treatment, except for characterization purposes. “The synopsis is written with the head, the treatment with a sense of time, the script is composed rhythmically and written with the eyes.” Since the script is nothing more than a written definition of the film idea and not its implementation, the author does not need to worry about the implementation, this is the director's task.

Chinatown according to the rules of Gottfried Müller:

Like his predecessors, Müller defines the drama as a plot, but he sets a different accent: The function of the drama is to entertain the audience by creating suspense and well-structured storylines. This fact is fulfilled by the many surprising twists and turns in Chinatown: Gittes is

surprised when his photos, which are supposed to prove that Hollis Mulwray had an affair and which he passed on to his wife, appear in the newspaper, he is even more surprised as another woman shows up claiming to be the real Mrs. Mulwray. When he tries to contact Hollis Mulwray about this affair, he surprisingly finds his body. The course of events remains unpredictable until the end, so that Gittes, who was only supposed to prove adultery, gets on the trail of a water scandal, reveals incest and is eventually forced to witness the murder of the woman he wanted to protect.

As much as Gittes, the main character, is surprised, so is the viewer, as he follows the action from Gittes' perspective.

Another function of a tragedy is, according to Mueller that it should create resignation and paralyze passions. Towne demonstrates with *Chinatown* with the victory of evil over good, corruption over truth, he creates resignation and a pensive mood, in other words the results Müller wanted.

Müller took over Freytag's considerations of structure, the unity of action, time and place from Aristotle, so that at this point reference is made to the respective *Chinatown* analyzes for these two aspects. However, Müller distinguishes one essential aspect between ancient and modern drama: in ancient times fate was determined by the gods, in modern drama man is "godless" at the mercy of his doom. The end of *Chinatown* is fateful, but it is also doom that hits the characters here: Gittes has to admit that he himself caused his own doom. On the other hand, as the viewer recognizes in retrospect, Cross determined the fate of Gittes, Evelyn Mulwray and all the other characters over the entire course of the plot, much like an angry god. Mueller also argues that the film has to show universal truths. *Chinatown* also lives up to this demand, because the end of Gittes, his forsaken love for Evelyn and his failure to protect her and her daughter generally convey that the individual is powerless against the violence of corrupt capitalists like Noah Cross.

Like Aristotle, Müller gives the plot greater weight than the character. For Müller, one of the fundamental laws is that the conflict between the two opponents must be elementary, that their goals are mutually exclusive. Cross appears late as an antagonist. But then it immediately becomes clear that only one of the two can win this game: Gittes' struggle for justice for the weak and Cross' merciless and ruthless claim to own everything and everybody are mutually exclusive. Mueller also wants the two opponents to appear equally strong for as long as possible and that the game of forces turns out to be in favor of one and then in favor of the other. *Chinatown* also fulfills this requirement: In the entire first half of the story, Gittes' smartness seems to win the day. Cross, who pulls the strings in the background, on Escobar and of course on his daughter, shows but in the second half, about after it becomes clear that Cross had Hollis Mulwray killed, that in reality Gittes never stood a chance.

Müller's claim that "every take should represent the universally valid, typical and eternal" was long out of date in Polanski's time. Polanski's imagery even uses a pseudo-documentarist style in contrast to Mueller's demand: Polanski works with many long shots, like a documentarist, always takes the perspective that is necessary to fully show the action to be

narrated. This leads to the fact that we as viewers are inclined to give factual belief to the (completely fictional) plot.

Polanski works with contrast. The story, which will reveal a terrible and gloomy secret, is for the most part told in the glaring daylight. He completely dispenses with symbolism and only works very sparingly with metaphors: an overheated car may represent the heated mood in the city due to the lack of water. Water and barrenness are symbolically used by Polanski, but they are also, in fact, the result of Cross' nefarious moneymaking. The scarcity of water can also be seen as the scarcity of the good in the world, without this ever having to be conveyed verbally or visually.