# Writing Action-Adventure Screenplays

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**Great action sequences read like an obstacle course devised by a highly intelligent madman**.

- Scribemeetsworld.com

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AjcveuylyA

# Expectations
# of the Action Genre

- <u>Narrative Trajectory (Story or Plot)</u> – The main character knowingly undertakes an impossible mission to save a society from a state of siege, and willingly faces death to defend a personal code of honor that the society shares as a value.

- <u>Character Ethos</u> – Characters, who are willing to die for an idea, code, society or value, battle equally motivated antagonists who are *morally different* in a showdown moment of truth.

# The good action Protagonist

- The good guy always wins in the end, even if he or she dies.

	- Larger than life character
	- Possesses martial arts skills and strategic resources
	- Has authority to carry out the mission
	- Has moral responsibility to act
	- Has a personal code of honor
	- Has a full grasp of the required actions
	- Remains free of emotional entanglements
	- Is willing to die for a cause

# The good action Antagonist

- The bad guy drives the action film because his goal is to thwart the hero.
  - A personified individual
  - Fully dimensional
  - Is not stupid
  - Forces the Protagonist to act
  - Has a morally different POV – Thanos, Darth Vader,  Hans Gruber

# Action plot types

- **Military/Pseudo-Military** - "Saving Private Ryan" "Full Metal Jacket" "

- **Transformation of Protagonist from Beta to Alpha** - "Fight Club" "Breaking Bad" "Star Wars: New Hope" "The Matrix"

- **Spy or Superhero saving Society** - James Bond movies

- **Terrorist or Espionage threatening Society** - "Mission Impossible;" "Die Hard"

- **Martial Arts expert saving society** - "Equilibrium" "Hero" "John Wick"

- **Law vs. Crime** - "Batman" "Minority Report" "Oceans"

- **Man vs. Nature** - "Jaws" "Jurassic Park" "Twister"

- **Escape-Pursuit (not criminal)** - "No Country for Old Men" "Shawshank Redemption" "Poseidon Adventure"

# What is a Set Piece?

*A SET PIECE is a sequence that is big and memorable, and pivotal to the plot. This is considered a "water cooler moment" and often used as the focus of the trailer. It can be used in all genres, but especially in action films.*

- Action set sequences are pivotal to the story. If not, take it out.

- There should be at least EIGHT action set pieces in a feature-length action movie.

- There are a variety of types of set pieces. Exs. A bar fight, a chase, hand-to-hand fight, a shoot-out, explosions, kidnapping, murders, exotic locations and any variation or combination of these.

- Ask yourself what the environment will bring out in your hero and use that.

- https://youtu.be/tsFeIVJfKsA – Battle of the Bastards

# Tips about Action Writing

- Use your biggest and best set piece for the climax; use your 2$^{nd}$ biggest set piece for the opener.

- Build up your action slowly so that there are ebbs and flows in sequences and story.

- Use sudden impact by creating chaos where it is not expected.

- Use humor to show hero's personality under pressure.

- Subjective action is when you follow the action through one character's eyes.

- Create awkward situations to show absurd things happen in violent situations.

- Reversal of fortune can make action sequences more interesting.

- Use set-ups and pay-offs effectively in sequences.

- Violence should have consequences.

- Action lines should be no longer than three lines.

- Write visually

- Don't use camera skills.

# Actions Beats

- Act One
  - <u>1. Intro. Ordinary World</u> – Hero's world before the journey. Ex. Neo is low-level computer programmer and hacker.
    - **Set Piece No. 1** – Show hero in his or her "action best" and reveal character in his or her choices; sets tone for film. Ex. Opening scene: Trinity escapes from cops and agents.
  - <u>2. The Set-up</u> – what is happening in the world that challenges or haunts the main character? Antagonist and other sub characters intro. Ex. Neo follows "white rabbit" and communicates with Morpheus.
    - **Set Piece No. 2** – Show hero's early attempt to address the challenge; maybe he's not ready yet. Ex. Neo tries to escape office, agents but can't do what Morpheus tells him.

    <u>3. Inciting Incident</u> – this is the thing that changes everything; Ex. Neo meets Morpheus and chooses the red pill to know about the Matrix.

# Actions Beats (cont.)

- Act Two
    - 4. <u>New world</u> – The hero decides to take on the challenge and learns what his decision means. Ex. Neo is "born" into reality.
        - **Set Piece No. 3** – What this world will require of him or her. Ex. Neo's "birth" and journey through the Matrix with Morpheus.
    - 5. <u>Meet the team</u> – Team intros, takes rise due to set-back. B-story begins. Ex. Morpheus' team helps Neo train, meets Oracle who says he's "not the one," Trinity hints at love connection.
        - **Set Piece No. 4** – Exploration of new skills, or set-backs. Ex. Team is betrayed by crew member, Morpheus captured

        6. <u>Midpoint</u>– hero thinks he's got it with his flaws intact; Ex. Neo still doesn't believe he's the one but he knows that he has to help Morpheus.

# Actions Beats (cont.)

- Act Two
  - 7. Bad guys move in – The bad guys come back full force. Ex. Morpheus is interrogated by agents; they're invincible
    - **Set Piece No. 5** – Hero fights back the best he can, but still no defeat in sight. Ex. Neo and Trinity rescue Morpheus, roof bullets and sub fight
  - 8. Time is ticking – The hero's quest must be completed soon. Ex. Neo has to escape by chasing down a phone before sentinels can to the team.
    - **Set Piece No. 6** – Neo being chased through street and building to find phone.

    9. Dark night of the soul– Hero experiences defeat but must dig deep and address his flaws before he can overcome the challenge. Ex. Neo is shot and killed.

# Actions Beats (cont.)

- Act Two (cont.)
  - <u>10. Resurrection</u> – The hero comes back bigger and better, having addressed his flaws with the help of the B-story. Ex. Neo comes back to life after Trinity tells him that she's in love with him.
    - **Set Piece No. 8** – Neo comes back to life and he has new powers in the Matrix that make him undefeatable to agents.
  - <u>11. Showdown</u> – The hero confronts and defeats the antagonist. Ex. Neo enters Agent Smith and destroys him from within.

- Act Three

  - <u>12. Wiser for It</u> – The hero comes back to his world and shares the wisdom he has learned during this journey. Ex. Neo is now the voice of the rebellion and he is ready to make everyone wake up.

# "The Matrix" roof scene

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VM4f1H-TLNQ

103.

156    CONTINUED:                                    156

AGENT SMITH
Find them and destroy them!

Agent Jones nods and touches his earpiece.

157    EXT. ROOF - DAY                              157

The roof-access tower is now engulfed in flames as Neo
and Trinity stand amongst a pile of their fallen enemies.

Across the roof, the PILOT inside the army helicopter
watches the last of their ferocious onslaught.

PILOT
I repeat, we are under attack!

Suddenly his face, his whole body dissolves, consumed by
spreading locust-like swarm of static as Agent Jones
emerges.

Just as she drops the final Marine, Trinity sees what's
coming. Neo sees her, the fear in her face, and he knows
what is behind him.

Screaming, he whirls, guns filling his hands with
thought-speed.

Fingers pumping, shells ejecting, dancing up and away, we
look THROUGH the sights and gun smoke AT the Agent
blurred with motion --

Until the hammers click against the empty metal.

NEO
Trinity!

Agent Jones charges.

NEO
... Help.

His GUN BOOMS as we ENTER the liquid space of --

-- BULLET-TIME.

The AIR SIZZLES with wads of lead like angry flies as Neo
twists, bends, ducks just between them.

Agent Jones, still running, narrows the gap, the bullets
coming faster until Neo, bent impossibly back, one hand
on the ground as a spiraling gray ball shears open his
shoulder.

(CONTINUED)

THE MATRIX - Rev. 3/9/98                           104.

157    CONTINUED:                                    157

He starts to scream as another digs a red groove across
his thigh. He has only time to look up, to see Agent
Jones standing over him, raising his gun a final time.

AGENT JONES
Only human...

Suddenly Agent Jones stops. He hears a sharp metal
click.

Immediately, he whirls around and turns straight into the
muzzle of Trinity's .45 --

-- jammed tight to his head.

TRINITY
Dodge this!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! The body flies back with a flash of
mercurial light and when it hits the ground, it is the
pilot.

Trinity helps Neo up.

TRINITY
Neo, how did you do that?

NEO
Do what?

TRINITY
You moved like they moved. I've
never seen anyone move that fast.

NEO
It wasn't fast enough.

He checks his shoulder wound.

TRINITY
Are you all right?

NEO
I'm fine. Come on, we have to
keep moving.

Neo sees the helicopter.

NEO
Can you fly that thing?

TRINITY
Not yet.

She pulls out the cellular phone.

# The Showdown
# or Moment of Truth Examples

In action films, the Showdown or the Moment of Truth is the climax. It shows the main character is willing to die for what he or she believes in.

- Last of the Mohicans – Heroes confront bad Natives.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yB1--SnpvSo

- Star Wars – Darth Vader tells Luke he's his father.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1OT2p_FCvA

- The Matrix–Neo's the One
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy7RaQUmOzE

# Action-Adventure sources

- "Writing the Action-Adventure Film: The Moment of Truth" By Neill D. Hicks
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- 2011 Austin Film Festival workshop Writing Action! with screenwriters Rhett Reese "Zombieland," "Deadpool" "Monsters Inc."; Scott Rosenberg, "Beautiful Girls" "ConAir" "Gone in 60 Seconds";  John Turman, "Hulk" "Fantastic Four 2: Rise of the Silver Surfer"; Ric Roman Waugh "Felon"; moderated by Alvaro Rodriguez "Machete"
- https://www.filmbug.com/dictionary/action-movies.php
- "Screenwriting Secrets in Genre Films" by Sally J. Walker
- https://www.scriptmag.com/features/the-magic-bullet-action-lines