

TROPES AND CLICHÉS IN SCREENWRITING

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Abstract: *The purpose of the current article is to explain the meaning of the terms "trope" and "cliché" in regards to screenplays and to emphasize the importance of these elements in the construct of the script. The article takes into account: the definition of both terms; classification of tropes according to genre, such as horror screenplay tropes, tropes in film noir, female screenplay tropes that depreciated into clichés, exemplifications included; classification of tropes according to their referential meaning, i.e. according to their importance in the screenplay, such as primary tropes and secondary tropes, according to the object they personify, such as person tropes, place tropes, object tropes, according to specific attributes of characters, such as secret or change based tropes; classification of clichés with exemplifications; ways to avoid tropes turning into clichés and it concludes by stressing the importance of understanding the difference between tropes and clichés in the screenwriting landscape so that the interest of the audience canal ways be kept alive.*

Keywords: *Tropes; Clichés; Recurrent ideas; Dull clichés; Increase conflict; Raise interest;*

What are screenwriting tropes?

Screenwriting tropes are commonly used storytelling devices, familiar in both conception and execution, such as recurring themes or motifs, used with figurative meanings. They can either be identified by common objects used with symbolic meanings, or by actions that have referential meaning. Screenwriting tropes cannot be avoided. They are the actual gears behind every single story employed to develop multi-dimensional characters and to increase conflict.

Tropes vs. clichés

Both tropes and clichés generally mean common, recurrent ideas, used in dissimilar ways; the former raise interest and excitement in the audience by increasing the tension, the latter, because of their uncreative overuse, do the opposite.

Let's get into detail. If a trope is done in a screenplay over and over again in an unimaginative way, it turns into a cliché. Therefore, overused tropes become dull clichés, which is why they should be avoided. And, once again, a cliché is a trope that has been used so many times that it feels worn out. It's an overused idea. An example of a cliché within the horror genre: the buxom blonde being stabbed to death.

Unlike clichés, tropes don't imply any negative connotations. Moreover, tropes can be prevented from becoming clichés if the story is approached from a different angle than the usual one. A cliché can simply be avoided with just a touch of imaginative twists. For example, in *Scream*, the blonde was killed in the opening scene in an interesting way, thus eluding the boring cliché and still embracing what audience expects in the horror genre.

Classification of tropes according to genre

Horror screenplay tropes

The most popular tropes in horror screenplays are *jump scares*. They are represented by abrupt changes in images or events, usually accompanied by a loud,

jarring sound, with the purpose to scare the audience. “Jump scares can startle the viewer by appearing at a point in the film where the soundtrack is quiet and the viewer is not expecting anything alarming to happen, or can be the sudden payoff to a long period of suspense.”¹

As regards the setting, the most frequently used tropes are: *abandoned places* and *haunted houses*. Screenwriters should always try to find deserted places that are even scarier than just old houses.

Taking into account the characters, the usual character trope encountered in horror screenplays is the *final girl* trope. It refers to the last woman standing in a slasher film, like Sidney Prescott and Laurie Strode from *Halloween*.

Tropes in film noir

Tropes exist within every genre. Noir films have their roots in detective fiction, the two masters of classic noir fiction being Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

Almost every film noir primarily deals with the trope of *private investigators* or detectives whose goal is to punish criminals, no matter the consequences. They are usually tragic figures, “chain smokers and drunkards, liars and busybodies, pessimists and cynics.”² And yet, they are highly ethical men that will always do the right thing.

Even *the voiceover technique* can be perceived as a trope, found within every genre, noir films included. It was elegantly used in *Avatar* or in *Veronica Mars*, but it was eventually removed from *Blade Runner*.

Femme fatale is another recurrent character trope in noir films. Examples of femme fatales: Brigid O’Shaughnessy from *The Maltese Falcon* or Selina Kyle from the *Batman series*.

Female screenplay tropes that depreciated into clichés

As regards female tropes in screenplays, most of them became shallow clichés, such as the *Manic Pixie Dream Girl* whose only purpose is to help the main character complete his arc. For example, Samantha in the movie *Garden State*. “In his review of *Garden State*, Roger Ebert described this kind of rather unbelievable <<movie creature>> as <<a girl who is completely available, absolutely desirable and really likes you.>>”³

As a counterexample, Clementine in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* rejects the cliché of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in a remark to the main character: “Too many guys think I’m a concept, or I complete them, or I’m gonna make them alive. But I’m just a fucked-up girl who’s lookin’ for my own peace of mind; don’t assign me yours.”

Another overused trope that became a cliché is the trope of the *psychopath women* who keep chasing men, such as Darla in *Dinner for Schmucks* or Kathy Bates in *Misery*.

Classification of tropes according to their referential meaning

Taking into account the different things that tropes refer to, there are:

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jump_scare

²<https://www.tckpublishing.com/noir-tropes/>

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manic_Pixie_Dream_Girl

- A. Primary or secondary tropes – classified according to their importance in the construct of the script;
- B. Person tropes, place tropes or object tropes – classified according to the object they personify;
- C. Secret or change based tropes – classified according to specific attributes of characters.

A 1. Primary tropes

Tropes as primary elements are the keystone of character development and conflict. They motivate the main characters and drive the main story conflict. Some primary tropes in the script *Golden Compass* are: quest, revenge, MacGuffin, and violence.

A 2. Secondary tropes

Tropes as secondary elements are meant to boost the B-story. They add details to the supporting stories and keep the audience engaged. What places them in the secondary position is the fact that the main characters have other more important things going on in their lives than these tropes. An example of a secondary trope is the secret baby trope in the screenplay *Golden Compass* since this trope is not of a major significance as regards the trials of the main character in the A-story.

B 1. Person tropes

Several examples of person tropes include: protector, billionaire, orphan, loner or antagonist. In order to develop a complex character, a screenwriter can blend several person tropes.

B 2. Place tropes

When talking about place tropes, one can list the following tropes: small town, quest, stranded and on the road. Settings like Mars in *The Martian* or the high school in *Glee* are important elements whose role is to ground the story.

B 3. Object tropes

Examples of object tropes: a scar or a MacGuffin. An example of a MacGuffin is the search for the ark in the screenplay *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. This is a much smaller group of tropes, but it helps the screenwriter create more story conflict.

C 1. Secret tropes

These types of tropes refer to the fact that characters have secrets. For example, in *Golden Compass*, there are the following tropes: secret baby trope, disguise trope, and secret heir trope.

C 2. Change-based tropes

These tropes refer to characters' arcs as characters need to change so as to accomplish their goals. In this category fall the following tropes: enemies to lovers, friends to lovers, ugly duckling, and tortured hero/heroines.

Examples of Cliches

1. Aliens wanting to invade Earth– every time aliens show up, they always want to invade Earth and by Earth we should understand America.
2. Undead – The antagonist survives the main character's bullet only to magically wake up and make him pay for it.
3. Villain's Throne – The main character walks into a dark room, turns on the lights and notices the antagonist quietly waiting in a huge chair, sometimes petting a cat.

4. High-Heeled Woman – In horror screenplays, a woman in high heels runs from a killer, trips and lays there until the murderer kills her.
5. Walking From an Explosion – Most of the times, the main character silently walks away from a giant explosion with a macho bravado.
6. Damsel in Distress – A damsel in distress is always supposed to be saved by the main character. The screenplay *Tangled* has an interesting twist here, thus turning the cliché into a trope.
7. My Hero – Whenever the main character saves the girl’s life, she miraculously falls into his arms.
8. Misguided Dad – A father more preoccupied with his career than his family will always complete his arc and turn to his family, like in *The Change-Up* or *Hook*.
9. Dumb Dads – Homer Simpson or Seth Rogen in the screenplay *Knocked Up*.
10. Whoops, Didn’t See You There – People literally bump into each other. This does happen in real life, but it isn’t so often the meet-cute moment described in screenplays.
11. Age Old Wisdom – The wisest characters are usually the oldest. They’re usually long-bearded men with glasses, like Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* series.
12. “A Wise Person Once Told Me” – Characters repeat knowledge shared to them an hour ago in screen time.
13. The Trophy Wife – The young and beautiful trophy wife, often blonde and ludicrous.
14. Hello? – When the characters return home and find the front door ajar, they always enter and ask the clichéic “Hello?” only to end up murdered.
15. “He’s Right Behind Me, Isn’t He?” – Trash-talking while the person talked about is right behind the trash-talkers.
16. Well That’s a Cliffhanger – When someone is dangling off the edge of a cliff, the main character pulls and saves them, no matter how heavy they are or how strong the main character is.
17. Geek to Chic – A geek turns into the hottest person around only by getting rid of his glasses as if by magic he gained a more extroverted and attractive personality, like in *Clueless* and *She’s All That*.
18. “Psycho” Ex-Girlfriend – When the main character breaks up with his girlfriend, she turns into a crazy person, either an eerie stalker, or murderess, like in *Gone Girl*.
19. Cut the Red Wire – When bombs with color-coded wires are to be defused, the main character will cut the wire, usually the red one, at the last moment.
20. The Chosen One – Everyone knows the Chosen One is the real savior except for himself because he is always too humble or too focused on others’ needs.
21. That Fat Friend – The fat friend is generally used as a comic relief.
22. Get This Bread – Whenever characters go to the grocery store, they’ll always come out with baguettes and green vegetables poking out of their shopping bags.
23. Kissus Interruptus – After almost an hour of build up, the kiss is about to happen, but it’s interrupted by a friend or family member and simply postponed.
24. Will they, won’t they? – Will they be together or not? An example: Diane and Sam in the TV series *Cheers*.
25. “Gimme a Beer” – Whenever characters ask for a beer, the bartender gives it to them without asking any questions about the specific brand they require.

26. Terrible Henchman – Henchmen are generally used as fillers for the main character to strike off on his way to the villain.
27. Youthful Awareness – The kid is frequently more aware than the adults and thus, he takes the matter into his own hands.
28. Off the Case – Characters get fired off the case, but they still try to solve it, like in *Rush Hour* or *Breaking Bad*.
29. Love Triangle – Nothing can be more clichéd than the old-fashioned love triangle.
30. Get the Gun Already! – The main character, pinned down, a few inches near his revolver, gropes at it for several minutes while getting choked until he eventually grabs it just in time.
31. Cut It Out– The main character’s trauma is symbolized by the woman cutting her own hair. But the question remains open – how can she magically give herself the perfect bob?
32. Zoom, Zoom – When looking at a photo, a character abruptly decides to zoom and bingo, there is something odd hidden from view.
33. Mirror Scare –If a character in a horror script opens a medicine cabinet, something terrifying will often reflect in the mirror upon closing it.
34. Raining at funerals – It always rains at funerals, even though they take place in Los Angeles. The obvious reason for which this happens is the dramatic effect that is emphasized through the poor weather conditions.
35. Idiot best friend – Joey from the series *Friends* is amusing, but this type of character has been replicated too many times already so that it has lost its savor.

Ways to avoid tropes turning into dull clichés

1. In as regards characterization

Clichés can be avoided by means of thorough characterization.

- Vagueness and generalities must be avoided– Characters must be clearly defined. They need motivations, flaws, conflict and agency. They should feel real and real people have conflicting attitudes, good and bad traits and a reason for every little thing they do;
- Characters should be relatable, but still they must have a defined identity. No defined identity means that no nuance is implied which is a cliché;
- Dialogue always characterizes a person so that it must be concise and meaningful;
- Characters must have space to grow so that they can complete their arcs, exactly like in real life. If they are super competent from the very beginning, they’ll feel flat and uninteresting and the audience won’t root for them as they won’t be able to identify themselves with them.

2. In as regards plots and themes

Obviously, characterization isn’t the only thing that can be full of clichés. Plots and themes can also be embedded with tropes and clichés. That’s why uncertainty should be embraced in screenwriting, in the following ways:

- Characters should not always know what other characters are thinking;
- Space must be allowed for miscommunication and for hidden motivations so that tension can be increased;
- Uncertainties should be allowed in the plot. It’s okay if not everything wraps up at the end and it’s okay for the audience to walk away with questions;

- Importance of research. If the screenwriter relies just on common knowledge and avoids a thorough research, he or she can easily embrace the cliché. Depth must be given to the plot, elements, settings and characters;
- The screenwriter should resist conformity. He or she shouldn't conform to a particular narrative arc or screenplay structure, thinking it is safer.
- Common themes should be avoided. Theme tropes such as love triangle, power of friendship or lost love are difficult not to be turned into clichés. Dealing with unexpected themes can free the screenwriter from these restraints.
- Characters must be thrown into the worst-case scenario. "Overused character types and plots often give the hero the easy way out. Allow them to experience pain, guilt, and loss. Allow evil to conquer good for once. Let your hero embrace darker emotions and embrace actions that aren't squeaky clean. Let them gain a few scars and allow their morality not to be so black and white."⁴

The importance of understanding the difference between tropes and clichés. Conclusions

If a trope turns into a cliché through the ignorance of the screenwriter, the plot, the characters or the theme, even the script itself will feel flat since there'll be no tension involved and the script will raise no interest whatsoever in the audience. This can be put as simple as that – not understanding the difference between tropes and clichés is what can set apart in the end a good script from a bad script, an optioned or sold script from a passed down one.

Common knowledge about tropes can help screenwriters find their inspiration as well as it can add to the complexity of their writing, helping them achieve a many-layered characterization, plotline or story structure.

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