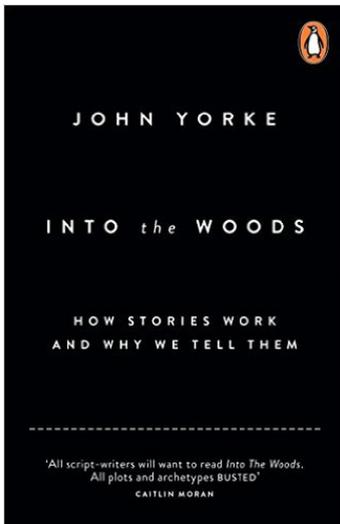


Reviews

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Into the Woods: **The Promised Land of Narrative Hybridization**

Review of: John YORKE. *Into the Woods. How stories work and why we tell them.* London, UK: Penguin Books, 2014.



In the context of the simultaneous new age of 3D cinema and the heralded golden age of twenty-first century television, John Yorke's exploration of the anatomy of story sets itself an intriguing task. Just as the first prescriptive screenwriting manual by Ralph P. Stoddard promised, back in 1911, *Into the Woods* also stands as "a book of valuable information for those who would enter the field of unlimited endeavor". The correspondence is not coincidental. More than a century later, the effacement of creative boundaries continues to be related to the search of narrative solutions for an audiovisual medium in the midst of accelerated technical and social change.

For Yorke, an experienced British screenwriter and producer, the answer stands in the alluring promise of a universal story archetype. His quest builds on the foundations laid by famous predecessors such as Vladimir Propp and his analysis of Russian folk tales, Joseph Campbell's superimposition of myths and legends originating from various corners

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of the world or the more recent examination of the meta-plot by Christopher Booker. In doing that, *Into the Wild* reconciles the guideline format following the construction of characters, acts and scenes with theoretical inserts from the field of narratology.

As in most educational screenwriting works, the basic reference remains Aristotle as architect of the three-act-structure. An endnote clarifies the fact that Syd Field was the one who later translated into film acts what the Greek philosopher only referred to as the narrative principles of a beginning, middle and end of a story. However, a close reading of the *Poetics* reveals that the concepts of “anagnorisis” (the recognition of some truth by the hero) and “peripeteia” (a change by which the action veers round to its opposite) are not imposed as compulsory, but rather as enhancing elements for a complex drama. It is an aspect which would have contributed to Yorke’s demonstration of today’s dominance in cinema and television of a structure that defined theatre prior to the twentieth century.

The five-act-structure in question goes back to Terence (190-159 BC). Revived during the Renaissance, it was discussed in 1863 by German novelist Gustav Freytag in reference to the Elisabethan drama. Known as Freytag’s Pyramid, what it operates is a placement of the climax in a cardinal point that dominates the plot. Consequently, the balanced action rises to it and falls from it. So the question that arises is how does the five-act-structure, defined by Yorke as “a detailed refinement” of the three-act-structure by “inserting two further act breaks in the second act of the traditional Hollywood paradigm” (33), succeeds in placing the midpoint “almost exactly halfway through any successful story” (37)?

The Classical Hollywood Cinema firmly prescribed anagnorisis, the equivalent of Plot Point I in the terms of Syd Field, as an inciting incident separating the first and second act. In this pattern, peripeteia or Plot Point II marks the climax placed between the second and the final act. Although Field insists that these plot points “can be quiet scenes in which a decision is made” (*Screenplay* [1979] 2005, 27), they usually stand for a crucial change in the psychology of the protagonist and the subsequent acme of obstacles placed between him and his goal. It would seem that following Yorke’s logic, the insertion of two additional acts to the classical structure made out of three would further push the climax near the end, between the fourth and the fifth act. In proving that this doesn’t actually happen, he refers to the five sections of a story as identified by Christopher Booker (Anticipation / Dream / Frustration / Nightmare / Resolution) to underline the fact that the “the action peaks in the middle of the [third a.n.] act before fortunes reverse in the second half” (40).

The fate of the classical climax remains unquestioned by Yorke. One valid explanation supplements Aristotle’s dismissal of a mandatory climax with Freytag’s more functional indication of an additional moment of suspense during the fall of the action. Its goal would be to question one last time the victory or the defeat. Only by investing this additional moment with the role of the traditional climax can the mid-

point delineate its supremacy and establish a relationship of direct dependence with the protagonist and his character arc.

By citing Constantin Stanislavski's approach on characters motivated by desire, Yorke associates the protagonist with a "tragic flaw" (21). He sees it not only as an already existing negative trait but also as an ongoing process of emotional decay. In an imperative response to this specific flaw, the protagonist sets on a journey to find the "elixir" that can cure it. Thus, the "Journey there; Journey back" (69) merges the dramatic principles of narrative composition identified by Gustav Freytag with the ones adapted for cinema by Christopher Vogler from comparative mythology.

The transfer of the monomyth in cinema was made at the end of the '70 with the protagonist of *Star Wars* following the seventeen stages of the Hero's Journey as laid out by Joseph Campbell. Later, it was made popular for screenwriters in the '90 by Vogler, who also reduced its consecution to twelve stages. But it did little to resolve the criticism surrounding this archetypal narrative structure. The temptation of constructing or reading any conflict of a movie through this paradigm was deemed reductive, if not altogether aberrant. However, it did respond to the creative challenges of scriptwriting a story with a particular type of protagonist, the hero. It is one of the reasons behind the relevance of John Yorke's structure in the current cinematic age dominated by 3D technology and the superheroes that exhibit it best, much too often with little narrative creativity.

The main reason is the similarity between the Hero's Journey and the Journey there – Journey back that revolves around the midpoint. Identified by Vogler as the "Supreme Ordeal" (*The Writer's Journey* [1998] 2007, 151), it is the moment when the protagonist enters the enemy cave and steals the object of his desire. Yorke points out that this "isn't necessarily the most dramatic moment, but it is a point of supreme significance" (58). A key link is being traced between the lack of necessary knowledge to use this elixir and the acknowledgement of its possession as a point of no return. From that moment on, the protagonist and the world around him can never be the same. The second half of the story will try to resolve his understanding of the newly acquired gift as the cure for his flaw. Examples range from different types of plots, such as *Titanic* with its midpoint moment of the ship hitting the iceberg and Jaguar Paw's escape at the moment of sacrifice in *Apocalypto*, to different types of protagonists, the two-dimensional character of James Bond who doesn't undergo significant emotional change and the multiple protagonists of *American Graffiti*. Unlike most authors of screenwriting manuals before him, Yorke brings television films into the same discussion, aware of its revival by the audience consumption habits of the Millennial generation.

In brief, the journey into the woods and back aims to identify all characters and plots, belonging to the big or small screen, with the help of five narrative stages. The first act gradually takes the protagonist from "no knowledge" through "growing knowledge" on the path to an "awakening". He then experiences "doubt" and

“overcoming reluctance” before “acceptance” of his mission. The middle act peaks by opposing before and after moments around the “key knowledge”. Once the unconscious flaw and an elixir as cure are exposed, the fourth act brings the succession of “doubt / growing reluctance / regression”. In the end, “total mastery” is achieved after moments of “re-awakening” and “re-acceptance”.

As final proof that irrespective of the number of acts all narrative structures culminate in the midpoint, a supplementary table juxtaposes thirteen such versions. When reaching the monomyth, the peak of the story is indicated as the “Atonement with the Father”. In defining it, Joseph Campbell spoke of a “self-generated double monster – the dragon thought to be God (superego) and the dragon thought to be Sin (repressed id)” (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [1949] 2008, 110). What it translates into is a traumatic relationship of the character to a false threatening father, as a consequence of emotional experiences from childhood. While this stage can represent the moment of acquiring key knowledge by auto-induced faith in the attributes and positive intentions of a male figure, it seems to be a more of a complementary stage for the previous two, the “Meeting with the Goddess” and the “Woman as the Temptress”, dealing with a universal mother figure. Instead, an alternative option for extracting the midpoint of the monomyth could be casting attention to the next stage, the “Apotheosis”. Described as a divine state in which ignorance is surpassed, that is the moment when “we no longer desire and fear; we are what was desired and feared” (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* [1949] 2008, 138). Key knowledge has been absorbed.

Following any of these two interpretations, there is no doubt that what John Yorke first and foremost operates is a break in a screenwriting tradition that saw the internal conflict as an option to the external one. Instead, he demonstrates its permanent presence by subjecting the protagonist to a psychological gaze. Thus, it becomes less important how the assault of the opposing factors unrolls, but when exactly during the self-discovery journey he embraces the existence of a cure for his flaw.

Only as a consequence does *Into the Woods* validate the dominance in film of a three-act-template fitting the five-act form of monomyth extraction. But despite the fact that it proclaims a Grail Quest structural formula as a backbone on “some level in every story” (4), ultimately it is Hollywood films that it speaks of. The third appendix dedicated to *Being John Malkovich* in response to Charlie Kaufman openly rejecting the functionality of the classic structure is just one example. Unfortunately for the inquiring readers, John Yorke dismisses European films such as Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend* as a mere “reaction against” (4) this seemingly universal narrative structure.