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Cinematic Storytelling: The 100 Most Powerful Film Conventions Every Filmmaker Must Know



Synopsis

What the industry's most successful writers and directors have in common is that they have mastered the cinematic conventions specific to the medium.

Book Information

Paperback: 257 pages

Publisher: Michael Wiese Productions; 2nd Edition edition (August 1, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 193290705X

ISBN-13: 978-1932907056

Product Dimensions: 10.8 x 0.5 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.8 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (115 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Having taught screenwriting for UCLA's Writing Program as well as being a working screenwriter for the past 20 years I've always been asked what separates a professional screenplay from the thousands of amateur screenplays out there. One of the things aspiring writers lack is what we call "getting your chops", a term borrowed from musicians. Meaning real, live experience that simply can't be taught. And usually, the only way to get it is by having your material produced. Jennifer Van Sijll's book CINEMATIC STORYTELLING, is the first book I've read to take an intensive look at what takes years and lots of produced credits to learn. By using written scenes from movies, coupled with actual film scenes printed alongside, Jennifer teaches visual storytelling in a way few books have done. What I learned early on in this business is that there are several drafts after the one you sell. Many of us refer to them as the producer's draft, the director's draft, the actor's draft and the crew's draft. And you will make changes in all of those areas for reasons of character development, budget, schedule, location and ego. Do writers really need to know about how films are shot and edited, even how sound can enhance a screenplay? The answer is yes and Jennifer's book, very appropriately titled provides invaluable information, something all writers whether aspiring ones or seasoned pros like myself need to consider. What she illustrates are the various parts of a movie and how they relate to the screenplay. The book is divided into chapters with topics like framing,

locations, sound effects, transitions, camera motion and lenses, lighting, props and many more.

I recently reviewed a great debut film called 'Ascension' from a new microcinema director. The story and shooting style were fairly direct and straightforward; but--as this movie showed--just because the script didn't call for Michael Bay-style camera moves, it didn't mean that the shots had to be boring! A lot of beginning filmmakers (and even some that have more experience) can feel that they have to have lots of swooping crane or dramatic steadicam shots in order to have a great-looking movie. This isn't true. In reality, if you don't know how to effectively use the camera in the first place (visually speaking, not technically), you have no business putting it on a crane or steadicam; these devices cannot fix a visually uninteresting or inappropriate shot. Enter *Cinematic Storytelling*. Using some of the most iconic and well-known films as examples, Jennifer Van Sijll explains how to use visual composition, lenses, editing, sound effects, transitions, camera position, and much more to give emphasis and convey information and emotion in your movie. One of (the many) cool things about this book is that you don't have to have had any prior experience working with cameras to be able to understand the material. If you can read English and can look at the picture examples given (still photos from various films), then you can understand the concepts conveyed in the book. Concepts and techniques (such as montages, intercutting, visual foreshadowing, etc.) are defined and clarified; even very subtle techniques that are almost unnoticeable in movies are pointed out and their effect explained. (For example, in describing the X-axis in screen direction, Van Sijll notes: "As Westerners we read left-to-right.

What a fascinating book for a scriptwriter to read! At first, you think "This isn't meant for me--it has chapters on camera lenses and camera positions, and wardrobe and sound effects! That's stuff directors and cinematographers and other people work with." From understanding the medium you're working in, comes better work. Jennifer Van Sijll's *Cinematic Storytelling* provides 100 film conventions (as mentioned in the full title) in concise, two-page examples. The pages are index card-like in their brevity, but are so well-done there is no need for extra words. First, she lists the filmmaking element, such as "Motion," and gives an explanation. Next, she gives a film example, such as *E.T.*, and explains the scene pictured in stills and how the particular scene conveys the element. If needed, she lists a script note or two and then explains what the dramatic value is of the element. Lastly, she lists a few other films that can serve as examples. The page with movie stills also contains the scene's script passage to show how the element was written. A writer will find the pieces of script excellent examples from which to learn. Van Sijll's layout and logical progression

through the different elements of film, from frame composition to locations and lighting, are easy to follow and almost Zen-like in their simplicity. Despite that simplicity, they do make an impact and stay with you long after you've put the book down. You'll find that when you sit down to write, you'll try and put those elements into your script with just a few well-chosen words (so not to look as if you're trying to direct). There are no exercises or homework and there is no general format information or advice on what the latest trick is to get your script seen.

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