

ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS* IN RELATION TO THE
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE SCREENPLAY

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Abstract

This study is dedicated to the analysis of the narrative structure of the screenplay in relation to Aristotle's *Poetics*. This analysis begins with a general discussion of the various misconceptions of Aristotelian *topoi* which were gradually created in the course of centuries of applying the *Poetics* to drama and literature.

One of the principal concerns of this study has been to trace specific misconceptions of screenwriting theorists that discuss the *Poetics* in relation to screenwriting narrative techniques. The discussion of these misconceptions has a double aim: firstly, to disengage the Aristotelian narrative system from the classical narrative system and secondly, to highlight the potential of the *Poetics* for the specific needs of a screenplay's narrative. The two misconceptions analysed in great detail in this study are *mimesis* and *katharsis* and there is also a thorough examination of the basic elements of the Aristotelian theory on plot structure.

Chapter I of this study is dedicated to a discussion of *mimesis* as it has been viewed by Aristotelian scholars as well as screenwriting theorists. In Chapter I, I have tried to prove that the Aristotelian *mimesis* is not related to *idealistic realism* but to *verisimilitude*. I have analysed what the implication of this conclusion is in terms of Aristotelian, classical and counter-Aristotelian screenplay narrative structures.

In Chapter II, I have tried to describe the accurate function of *katharsis* as opposed to the one that Augusto Boal – one of Aristotle's strongest opponents – has attributed to it. I have shown that *katharsis* is not a means to repress the spectator but a means to reach to an emotional relief derived from the intellectual clarification of the hero's *hamartia*.

The third chapter of this study is dedicated to the clarification of misconceptions regarding central plot structure elements, such as *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis* and *hamartia*.

By discussing a number of inaccuracies of the *Poetics* in screenwriting texts, by clarifying the meaning of *katharsis* and *mimesis* and by analysing

key Aristotelian plot structure elements I hope to have contributed with this study to a deeper understanding of the potential *Poetics* has for the dramatic needs of the screenplay.

Acknowledgements

The idea for this study was born after reading several screenwriting manuals that referred to the *Poetics* in relation to the art of screenwriting. I have realised that in many cases there were misconceptions of central Aristotelian concepts from screenwriting theorists, a fact that was partly due to the various inconsistent translations of the *Poetics*. Also, the authors of these manuals were adopting already existing misconceptions of the *Poetics* and in many cases, have decided to oversimplify highly problematic, complicated and controversial Aristotelian notions.

The process of applying the *Poetics* to screenwriting has created very interesting bibliography and opened up new paths to explore the art of screenwriting. But, unless some of the most common inaccuracies regarding the bibliography on *Poetics* are addressed, the potential of Aristotle's narrative technique cannot be studied, understood and applied in screenwriting. My goal during this research was to trace as many as those inaccuracies as possible in order to contribute to a more accurate and effective application of Aristotle's narrative theory to screenwriting.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Georgina Lock and Stan Smith for believing in me and in this research, for the countless times they read and commented on my writings, for their valuable advice and endless patience.

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Introduction

It might not be far-fetched to say that Aristotle's *Poetics* functioned as a guide to the ancient Greece tragedians; a guide that still serves as the basis of the construction of drama and literary criticism, even though it was written almost 2,300 years ago. Despite its wide recognition and reception, the *Poetics* is a treatise notoriously difficult to understand partly because of Aristotle's elliptical thought and loose terminology, but primarily because Aristotle's influence on subsequent drama and criticism makes it difficult to isolate his original thought from subsequent attempts of implementation or interpretation.

Various misconceptions and debates on the 'real' meaning of the Aristotelian *topoi* were gradually created in the course of centuries of applying the *Poetics* to drama and literature. Around the 1950s, the *Poetics* was discovered by screenwriting theorists and screenwriters, who set out to apply central Aristotelian concepts to the needs of screenwriting. It was almost inevitable that the application of the *Poetics* to film would not only adopt the pre-existing misinterpretations, but also create new ones.

The most common misconception with respect to the Aristotelian narrative structure is that it is associated directly with the classical or restorative narrative structure of the American screenplay; that is, the film form widely acknowledged today as the dominant or mainstream cinema. This is a false assumption, since the classical Hollywood cinema and – to a lesser extent – post-classical Hollywood cinema, drew their plots and narrative from the nineteenth century novel and play. Nineteenth century novels and plays have been influenced by the *Poetics* but mainly by partially erroneous interpretations of the *Poetics*. Equally 'responsible' for the restorative three act form that became dominant for mainstream films seems to be the *Well-Made Play* written by the French playwright Eugene Scribe in the 1820s.

The *Poetics* was used as a tool to decipher the secret language of successful screenwriting in the following way: isolated, relatively comprehensible Aristotelian concepts such as *unity of action*, *complex plot*, *climax and resolution*, *reversal of fortune*, *recognition* have been analysed out of context and immediately adopted for the development of hybrid screenwriting formulae. Highly controversial, problematic and complicated concepts such as *katharsis*, *hamartia* and *peripeteia* were oversimplified, excessively popularised and thus tragically deprived from their unique potential in screenwriting.

Various screenwriting scholars rewrote the *Poetics*, consciously or not, to construct the perfect screenplay formula and in doing so, placed the Aristotelian model in the heart of classical narrative design. And, while the rediscovery of the *Poetics* for the needs of screenwriting did contribute to the understanding of the key plot construction ‘secrets’ of the classical narrative, it was also used as a scapegoat for all the shortcomings of the classical narrative (predictability, simplicity, spectator manipulation and so on). Also, associating the *Poetics* with mainstream cinema automatically entailed that art or counter-cinema became, consciously or not, counter-Aristotelian.

Neo-Aristotelian screenwriting theorists like Syd Field (*Screenplay*, 1979) and Robert McKee (*Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, 1999) formed narrative systems based on Aristotelian concepts that were changed and reshaped to fit the new screenwriting narrative schemata. Other screenwriting texts, such as *Aristotle in Hollywood: The Anatomy of Successful Storytelling* (Ari Hiltunen, 2002) or *Aristotle’s Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization* (Michael Tierno, 2002), borrowed specific Aristotelian elements to explain the success of the classical narrative but failed to show the fundamental differences of the Aristotelian model with the classical film narrative. These differences are exactly what differentiates the *Poetics* from other narrative systems and makes it a unique method, the potential of which is far from exhausted in screenwriting. A key objective of this study is not only to trace the inaccuracies in the above texts but also to illuminate the hidden potential of Aristotle’s system for the art of screenwriting.

Robert McKee's book, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, and Syd Field's *Screenplay* are directly influenced by the *Poetics*. Nevertheless, both McKee and Field do not claim to have found what Aristotle 'really' meant and do not attempt to give answers to the most controversial issues found in the *Poetics* (*mimesis*, *katharsis* and *hamartia*). Despite the few misconceptions of Aristotelian concepts found in both texts, they do not distort Aristotle's concepts, primarily because they only deal with parts of it. This however, is not the case with screenwriting books totally dedicated to the analysis and application of the *Poetics* to the needs of a screenplay.

Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization was written in 2002 by Michael Tierno, a story analyst with Miramax, who observes in the introduction of his book that 'the criteria Hollywood executives use to evaluate screenplays are exactly those the legendary philosopher Aristotle thought were the nuts and bolts of ancient drama more than 2,000 years ago'.¹

Tierno believes that the *Poetics* is rightfully considered the 'Bible of screenwriting' and it is useful to screenwriters primarily because Aristotle explained why well-structured dramatic works affected audiences the way they did.

The book is addressing the novice writer, and one who has not read the *Poetics*. It aspires to teach the fundamentals of plot structure in screenwriting based on the selected parts of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The author focuses on the concept of imitation, the unity of the dramatic story, the plot in relation to character and the kinds of plots.

Tierno attempts to summarize in the thirty-three chapters of his book the most basic Aristotelian concepts of narrative structure and gives movies examples to clarify the connection of the Aristotelian ideas to screenwriting techniques.

Although Tierno clarifies in his introduction that this book is not an academic study, but an introduction to the *Poetics* aimed specifically at screenwriters, he flies past all basic Aristotelian controversies by giving the explanations that best fit his paradigm. He asserts that *katharsis* has an undisputed meaning of emotional purge, he conflates *reversal of fortune*

(*metabasis*) with *peripeteia* and fails to bring out the importance of key Aristotelian concepts, such as *anagnorisis*. Nevertheless, his analysis of *simple* versus *complex* plot and of the proper hero brings a balance to the overall simplifications and generalisations in the book.

The book is an attempt to popularize the Aristotelian theories of tragedy. It seems, though, that the popularisation of a theory has to be carefully carried out, so that it won't reach the point of distorting the theory itself. Although the author mentions that his book is only a starting point, it is hard to believe that when, throughout the book, he says that everything is very simple and the reader is one step away from winning an Oscar. In this study, I will analyse specific misconceptions found in *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization* (action, *katharsis* in relation to imitation, *hamartia*).

Ari Hiltunen's book, *Aristotle in Hollywood: The Anatomy of Successful Storytelling* (2002), is a serious attempt to analyse the key concepts and logic of the *Poetics* in relation to contemporary drama, film, television and multimedia. The author begins with an analysis of what Aristotle means by the 'proper pleasure' and tries to demonstrate how Aristotle's ideas have been and can be applied to create powerful narrative structures for a variety of narratives such as the novels, movies, TV series and videogames. In the end of the book, the author discerns an anatomy – the anatomy of the 'proper pleasure' – that can be found in all effective storytelling.

Hiltunen presents a detailed and overall accurate analysis of key Aristotelian plot structure elements. His analysis starts to be confusing when he tries to put other theorists' work in the equation in an attempt to find the 'magic formula' of successful storytelling. Joseph Campbell, Christopher Vogler, Syd Field and Aristotle create a synthesis where it becomes difficult to distinguish Aristotle's methodological approach from the rest. The author comes to the conclusion that 'the global success of Hollywood might be even more patterned on Aristotle's principles than has previously been understood'², but he fails to show what differentiates the *Poetics* from the classical narrative structure of Hollywood films.

While the classical narrative structure of the mainstream film (Archplot film³) has been influenced by the Aristotelian narrative system, it –

nevertheless – exhibits multileveled differences from it, which the above screenwriting books fail to observe. In extreme cases, the Aristotelian system is completely equated to the conventional three act structure of the classical narrative found in mainstream films.

One of these cases is Ken Dancyger's and Jeff Rush's *Alternative Screenwriting: Going beyond the Rules* (2002). Going beyond the conventional three-act structure and exploring more inventive approaches, *Alternative Scriptwriting* challenges readers to be creative with working against genre, experimenting with passive rather than active characters, focusing on secondary characters and stretching the limits of character identification. It deals with mainstream and experimental narrative forms, analysing both American and international films. The authors directly attack the function of *katharsis*, which would be acceptable only if *katharsis* was not used favourably throughout the rest of the book. The auspicious intention of the authors to decrease contemporary Hollywood monarchy in the film world derails and includes the whole tradition of the classical narrative technique, most of which is sadly confused with the Aristotelian narrative system.

A key objective of this study is to trace and analyse basic misconceptions found in screenwriting texts that attempt to apply the *Poetics* to the narrative structure of the screenplay. Through this analysis I aim not only to show the differences of the Aristotelian system with the classical narrative system, but also to explore the potentialities of this system for the specific needs of the screenplay's narrative.

To point out briefly the differences between the Aristotelian and classical narratives, I will outline Roberto Benigni's film *Life is Beautiful* (1997), which is written according to the basic classical design elements, in order to discuss its similarities and differences with the Aristotelian narrative system.

a) *Clear beginning that sets up the story and the characters.*

In Act I, Guido falls in love with Dora, decides to elope with her at her engagement party, they get married and have a son, Joshua.

b) *Central active protagonist that instantly gains the spectator's sympathy and maintains it throughout the film.*

Guido is a lovable character who puts up a fight and goes after what he wants. He is optimistic, determined and extraordinary.

c) *Inciting incident (First Act Climax) or Point of No Return.*

At the outbreak of World War II, Guido is caught by the Nazis because he is Jewish. Even though she is not Jewish, Dora insists on going with Guido and Joshua to the concentration camp.

d) *False Solution.*

Guido convinces Joshua that they are not in a real concentration camp and that it is all a game with a tank as its prize.

Momentarily, the problem is solved.

e) *Second Act Climax.*

Joshua escapes the gas chamber.

f) *Third Act Climax.*

Guido sacrifices his life to save Joshua (catastrophe averted).

g) *Resolution, restoration, closed ending.*

Guido becomes a hero and reunites Dora and Joshua just when the American tanks break into the camp (All threads of story are resolved).

The main similarities of this narrative with the Aristotelian narrative pertain to the concept of *complication* and *unravelling* (in non Aristotelian terminology: inciting incident, false resolution, second act climax, third act climax). But Guido is not an Aristotelian character, because he lacks the most fundamental element of the Aristotelian character construction: he has not committed an *hamartia*, a tragic mistake due to the protagonist's false reasoning. Guido is not fighting against himself, as it is the case with *Oedipus Rex*. The antagonist in *Life is Beautiful* is a social (external) turbulence caused by World War II. This is a fundamental difference between the two systems, because the forces of antagonism are directly related to the kind of *katharsis* experienced by the spectator (A more detailed analysis of *katharsis* will follow in Chapter II of this study). Therefore, the film *Life is Beautiful* is based on a classical narrative design and cannot be classified as an Aristotelian film, despite the fact that it is influenced by it.

The filmic techniques employed in *Life is Beautiful*, such as the distance of framing, camera angles, lighting, editing and so forth, do not

contradict, but augment and support the screenplay. This is not the case in counter-classical films, which can be based on a classical design narrative, but shot with filmic techniques contradicting the linearity of the narrative.

Counter-cinema aspires to challenge and fragment the classical narrative *archplot* associated with mainstream cinema. Counter-cinema films can fall into two categories; the first involves films that contain many elements of the classical narrative design, but reduce them and compress them so as to deviate from it (*miniplot* film). Daren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) exemplifies a narrative that follows a classical pattern, while at the same time deviating from it to some degree. What differentiates this film from a classical narrative is that there is not a single central protagonist, but several people whose lives change dramatically because of their particular addictions. The film progresses in the classical narrative design format in most of its aspects except the filmic techniques. Aronofsky uses non-conventional signifiers that are not associated with mainstream film, such as montage of extreme short shots (hip hop montage), split screen, close-ups, which compose an antithesis to the linearity of the screenplay. *Requiem for a Dream* is a classic case of a classical narrative design directed in a non-classical manner.

Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) or Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), fall into the second category of counter-cinema, which comprises films that completely reverse and sometimes ridicule the classical narrative (*antiplot* film). However, as it will be shown in this study, in many cases non-conventional narratives necessarily include at least two basic Aristotelian elements (empathy and/or *anagnorisis* [recognition]) so as to ensure the spectator's desired level of involvement. By doing so, these ostensibly counter-Aristotelian narratives depend on the very system they wish to negate.

In this study I will be using three narrative classifications:

- Classical Narrative (*Archplot*)
- Aristotelian Narrative (Aristotelian plot)
- Counter-Aristotelian Narrative (*Miniplot* and *Antiplot*)

These three categories are analysed in detail on pages 11-14, which will be used, implemented and commented upon throughout this study.

I will now briefly discuss the element of the spectator's *identification* with the protagonist/s in a narrative, so as to exemplify the differences among classical, Aristotelian and counter-Aristotelian narrative structure in the manner they will be analysed in this study.

In a classical narrative, there is identification with a single protagonist. The spectator shares the protagonist's experiences and – in most cases – he is not omniscient, but has the same knowledge of story events with the protagonist. The protagonist is an active character, with good intentions, who faces primarily exterior and secondarily interior conflict. The protagonist sets out to resolve the conflict and after at least one failure (false resolution), he overcomes all obstacles and resolves the problem in a climatic succession that necessarily leads to a positive, closed ending. The protagonist manages to become a hero or to re-establish his heroism after it has been challenged by the problem.

In the Aristotelian narrative structure, there is identification (in Aristotelian terms: *empathy* arising from *pity* and *fear*) with a *rather* good character who, regardless of his good intentions, commits a tragic mistake (*hamartia*) in trying to overcome the obstacles hindering him from achieving happiness. *Hamartia* is an intellectual mistake that leads him to the accomplishment of the exact opposite of his intentions (*peripeteia*). The spectator is at a higher level of knowledge than the protagonist, since he is omniscient and at all times experiences the *tragic irony* of the hero's vain efforts to solve the problem. The audience watches the hero taking the path to his own downfall and thus experiences a unique feeling of empathy. The identification of the spectator with the hero in the Aristotelian structure differs significantly from the one in the classical narrative, since in an Aristotelian narrative the spectator continues to sympathise with the hero regardless of the hideous act he has committed in ignorance. The hero finally resolves the problem, but in doing so ceases to be a hero. After realising that the true enemy was none other than himself and sees clearly his *hamartia*, the protagonist becomes someone else having gained a truer understanding of who he really is.

Aristotle had an ideal protagonist in mind, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, who committed the *hamartia* of killing his father exactly at the moment when he was changing his whole life to avoid this dreadful act. Early in his life, Oedipus finds out through an oracle that if he stays in the city of Corinth he will kill his father, Polybus, and marry his mother. To avoid the fulfilment of this terrible oracle, Oedipus instantly leaves Corinth. In his journey, he meets an arrogant old man who sweeps him off his road and beats him over the head. This tyrant is his real father, but Oedipus unaware of that, he acts impulsively, loses his temper and murders Laius and his whole party. Oedipus arrives at the city of Thebes, solves the riddle of the Sphinx and gets married to Laius' s wife, his own mother, Jocasta. Oedipus becomes the new king and the oracle is fulfilled.

Under his rule Thebes becomes the 'City of Light'. But, after fifteen years of peace and prosperity, the Gods decide to curse the city of Thebes because of a terrible pollution brought about by the killer of the former king Laius (Oedipus's *hamartia*). Crops fail, animals die in the fields and pestilence rages. The people plead with their king to help them by finding and killing Laius's murderer, since this is the only way to appease the Gods.

Determined to track down the murderer of King Laius, Oedipus slowly brings his own destruction. Under pressure, he easily loses his temper and he refuses to see the truth by the Rule of Three; firstly, by ignoring the wise old oracle, Teiresias, who proclaims to him three times that the killer he seeks is none other than himself; secondly by accusing Jocasta's brother, Creon, of setting up Teiresias to attack him; and finally by ignoring Jocasta's warnings when she realises the horrible truth and tries to protect him. Oedipus becomes ecstatic when a shepherd from Corinth announces that his father, Polybus, has died a natural death. No longer does he need to worry about the oracle's prediction. Soon he finds out, from the same shepherd, that he is adopted and that his real father was indeed Laius. He now knows who he really is, the truth is revealed and the curse is broken. Oedipus rushes into the palace to confront Jocasta only to find her swinging from a rope. Oedipus takes one of the gold brooches on her dress and drives its points into his eyeballs, self-inflicting his blindness.

The spectators are aware of Oedipus's *hamartia* from the very beginning and watch every move he makes, experiencing fear for the upcoming revelation of his hideous acts and pity for his vain efforts. The spectators watch a man, confronted with a shocking crime, having to go through every step of an extremely painful realisation process. They witness 'the supreme story in the world of a man having to face up to his own guilt, on a cosmic scale. Not only did Oedipus kill his own father, he then married his own mother and had four children with her, who are not only his daughters and sons, but also his sisters and brothers to whom he has brought a lifelong curse. He has caused the death of his mother and wife. His offence against the laws of nature could not be more complete'.⁴

Sophocles created a protagonist so extraordinary, complex and yet so universal that the spectator, any spectator, regardless of his/her socio-cultural background, feels a deep kinship with him, and experiences a *katharsis* of such intensity rarely attained in other tragedies. Aristotle's choice of *Oedipus Rex* as his case study in the *Poetics* was not accidental.

Several screenwriters have grasped the meaning of *hamartia* and given birth to characters that committed a tragic mistake repeatedly, achieving the exact opposite of their intentions, with irreversible consequences. Citizen Kane's domineering personality (*Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles, 1941), Michael's determination to become his father (*The Godfather*, Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), Edward's desire to be human (*Edward Scissorhands*, Tim Burton, 1990), Blanch's obsession with the past (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, Elia Kazan, 1951) and Toni Montana's ruthless ambition (*Scarface*, Brian De Palma, 1983) approximate the essence of the Aristotelian *hamartia*.

In counter-cinema the spectator is distanced from the leading protagonist, who is most of the time an anti-hero. In the beginning, the leading character/s is/are presented as an essentially less than sympathetic individual but then manages to win our empathy. Stereotyped characters of the classical narrative are avoided and the process of *identification* is decelerated. A few screenwriters intentionally hinder any level of involvement and identification with the protagonist and aim at the effect of estrangement, such as Theo Angelopoulos and his protagonist 'A' in *Ulysses Gaze* (1995).

Through the analysis of counter-Aristotelian films I intend to show that, while they appear to be opposing the Aristotelian method, they borrow very powerful Aristotelian techniques to support their narrative dynamics. For example, the film *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) is an ostensibly counter-Aristotelian film because a very vital Aristotelian element is missing: instead of one single protagonist, the film *Blair Witch Project* has a multiple character narrative structure. Nevertheless, all the characters have committed an *hamartia*, a tragic error of judgement. The spectator is witnessing every step of the slow and painful process that the characters go through when they realise their terrible mistake. This film exemplifies a narrative that appears to be anti-classical because of the use of multiple protagonists and unconventional filmic techniques (digital camera footage, shock montage and so on), while at the same time it uses one of the most powerful techniques in the Aristotelian character delineation, *hamartia*.

Classical Narrative	Aristotelian Narrative	Counter-Aristotelian Narrative
The structured story	The structured story	The found story
Screenplay plays the primary role	Screenplay plays the primary role	Screenplay can play a primary or a minimum role
Causality	Causality directed to <i>one action</i>	Coincidence Palimpsest
Simplicity	Complexity	Complexity/Ambiguity
Linear time	Linear time	Non-linear time
Plot-oriented narrative	Plot <u>and</u> character-oriented narrative	Plot <u>or</u> character-oriented narrative
Character elements a) One leading protagonist b) Active, larger than life c) Good d) Has a weakness/ flaw that can be overcome e) Faces a challenge/problem/	Character elements a) One leading protagonist b) Active, larger than life c) Rather good d) Commits an <i>hamartia</i> that leads him/her to a hideous action e) Faces a challenge/problem/	Character elements a) Single or multiple protagonists b) Passive or active protagonist/s c) Protagonist as an anti-hero d) Protagonist has at least one character element that will eventually earn the spectator's empathy e) Experiences a

<p>obstacle of a primarily external nature</p> <p>f) Tries to become a hero-Manages to become a hero</p> <p>g) Identification with and empathy towards the protagonist</p> <p>h) Lack of spectator's omniscience</p> <p>i) Interpellation</p>	<p>obstacle of an internal nature</p> <p>f) Faces a challenge that cannot be overcome without him/her becoming an anti-hero</p> <p>g) Identification, empathy-profound kinship with the protagonist. Emotions of pity and fear.</p> <p>h) Spectator is omniscient- Tragic irony effect</p> <p>i) Interpellation</p>	<p>challenge/problem/obstacle of a primarily internal nature</p> <p>f) Estrangement with the spectator or initial estrangement and subsequent identification and empathy</p>
<p>Narrative transitivity</p> <p>The flow of action follows a clear pattern of cause and effect development. <i>Verisimilitude</i> is often compromised for the production of a happy ending.</p>	<p>Narrative transitivity</p> <p>The flow of action follows a strict pattern of cause and effect unbreakable till the end. <i>Verisimilitude</i> is not compromised.</p>	<p>Narrative intransitivity</p> <p>The flow of action is fragmented. Lack of <i>verisimilitude</i>.</p>
<p>Plot elements</p> <p>Three Acts</p> <p>Key elements</p> <p>Beginning usually not <i>in medias res</i> but easily deduced from the subsequent scenes.</p> <p>Inciting incident Rising Action Reversal of Fortune False Resolution Crisis First, Second and Third Act climax Resolution</p>	<p>Plot elements</p> <p>Two divisions</p> <p>a)Complication b)D�enouement or Unravelling</p> <p>Key elements</p> <p>Beginning <i>in medias res</i> but easily deduced from the subsequent scenes.</p> <p>Tragic mistake (<i>hamartia</i>) Reversal of Fortune Complication Unravelling Climax leading to <i>peripeteia</i> and thereafter to <i>anagnorisis</i></p>	<p>Plot elements</p> <p>Low key Complication, Minimum/no d�enouement</p> <p>Key elements</p> <p>Beginning <i>in medias res</i> not easily deduced from the following scenes</p> <p>Reversed (but present) classical and/or Aristotelian narrative structure elements</p> <p>Inciting incident Reversal of fortune Climax</p>

<p>Ending</p> <p>The highest degree of closure (all story threads resolved), closed ending.</p> <p>Catastrophe is averted resulting in a happy ending with the protagonist in a better status than the beginning (<i>Deus ex machina</i> plot development at the end).</p>	<p>Ending</p> <p>High degree of closure (the <i>one action</i> is resolved, the hero's destiny is unknown), closed ending.</p> <p>Catastrophe is averted resulting in an unhappy ending with the protagonist in a worse status than the beginning, but with a better understanding of him/herself.</p>	<p>Ending</p> <p>Low degree of closure (most story threads are left unresolved, the hero's destiny is unknown), primarily open ending.</p> <p>Catastrophe absent. If present usually not averted.</p>
<p>Idealistic Realism</p> <p><i>Mimesis</i> of ideal events. The object of representation: reality as it <i>should</i> be.</p> <p>The narrative portrays an illusion of reality in terms primarily of what should happen, not only of what could happen. <i>Verisimilitude</i> is compromised.</p>	<p>Logical/Probable Realism</p> <p><i>Mimesis</i> of probable events. <i>Mimesis</i> as Plot. The object of representation: reality as it <i>could</i> be</p> <p>The narrative portrays an illusion of reality in terms of what could happen. Probability and necessity create <i>verisimilitude</i> that is maintained throughout the plot structure.</p>	<p>Absence of the rule of probability and necessity. Presence of <i>verisimilitude</i> elements that will at some level compensate for the lack of cause and effect in the narrative structure.</p>
<p>Genre specific narrative elements</p> <p>Style uniformity</p>	<p>Genre specific narrative elements</p> <p>Style Uniformity</p>	<p>Cross genre references</p> <p>Bricolage</p> <p>Recombinacy</p>
<p>Simple Diegesis</p> <p>Non diegetic elements (mise-en-scène, montage, sound) in coherence with narrative structure of the screenplay.</p>	<p>Simple Diegesis</p> <p>Non diegetic elements (mise-en-scène, montage, sound) in coherence with narrative structure of the screenplay. Film technique in harmony with narrative.</p>	<p>Multiple Diegesis</p> <p>Non diegetic elements (mise-en-scène, montage, sound) contrasting /annihilating/ juxtaposing the narrative structure of the screenplay. Film technique surpassing narrative.</p>

Presence of spectacle/special effects	Minimum spectacle	Absence/presence of spectacle
<i>Katharsis</i> as an emotional relief	<i>Katharsis</i> as an emotional and intellectual relief	Presence/Absence of the element of <i>katharsis</i>

In this study I intend to:

1) Discuss two basic misconceptions related to the *Poetics* in order to clarify the differences between the Aristotelian narrative and the classical narrative structure.

The first concept analysed will be *mimesis* (imitation) in relation to the represented story of a screenplay narrative. The understanding of the accurate meaning of *mimesis* will demonstrate the non-validity of one main argument against the Aristotelian method; namely, that it promotes an illusionistic representation of reality.

To arrive at an accurate meaning of the Aristotelian *mimesis* it is essential that I trace the origin of this misconception so as to base my argument on facts and not allegations. This might be a brief diversion from an immediate discussion about film, since, as I have mentioned earlier, most of the misconceptions regarding the *Poetics* originated from the application of the Aristotelian method to literature and drama. I will also look at how *mimesis* has been interpreted by screenwriting theorists that have attempted to apply the *Poetics* to screenwriting.

The second concept analysed will be *katharsis* (tragic pleasure). The function of the Aristotelian *katharsis* has been the foundation of the most fierce Aristotelian criticism by Augusto Boal. Boal, a playwright, the founder of the *People's Theatre* and author of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* attacks the Aristotelian method on the grounds that it encourages the spectator to use the emotional rather than the rational part of his reasoning with *katharsis* repressing the spectator's ability or need to exhibit anti-constitutional behaviour outside theatre.

I intend to show that Boal's argument is false by,

- a) analysing the misconceptions surrounding the true function of the Aristotelian *katharsis*;
- b) showing that a precondition for the effect of *katharsis* is an intellectual involvement of the spectator;
- c) showing how these misconceptions lead to Boal's non-valid argument on the repressive function of *katharsis*;
- d) using Boal's narrative techniques to point out the striking similarities of his proposed system to Aristotle's narrative system as well as to the classical narrative structure;

2) Analyse the key elements of the Aristotelian method of plot construction and the dynamics between plot and character in a screenplay in order to clarify misconceptions regarding the Aristotelian plot construction in contemporary texts that attempt to apply the *Poetics* in screenwriting.

Specifically, I will use examples for the books: *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilisation*, *Aristotle in Hollywood: The Anatomy of Successful Storytelling*, *Alternative Screenwriting: Going beyond the Rules*, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, *Screenplay* and so on.

3) Analyse films that appear to be counter-Aristotelian with the intent to trace the degree upon which they deviate or depend upon the *Poetics*. I will demonstrate that the effect produced by ostensibly counter-Aristotelian films is in fact dependent upon the narrative structure they wish to negate.

I aim to show that the application of the Aristotelian method cannot be a criterion for limiting the possibilities inherent in the method and that its potential cannot be exhausted or determined by the way it has been applied so far.

The intention of this study is not to favour the Aristotelian method over other narrative techniques. It is my belief that each technique has its own value. I do, nevertheless, intend to clarify that the process of applying the *Poetics* in screenwriting has not been always conducted appropriately. This misapplication deprives the method from its potential.

Finally, it should be noted that many interpreters of the *Poetics* have thought necessary to refer to the concepts analysed in other Aristotelian treatises, such as the *Rhetoric*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but also the *Politics*, the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*. It is true that there are central terms in the *Poetics* that are illuminated by reference specifically to the *Ethics* (*praxis*, *hamartia*). I have tried, for the most part, to avoid associating the meaning of central concepts of the Aristotelian poetic method with references to other works of the philosopher. Selective explanatory analogies do take place in this thesis, specifically regarding the clarification of the concepts of *praxis* (action) in an attempt to disengage our contemporary understanding of those terms from their accurate meaning in the *Poetics*. Special care has been taken not to deviate from the text itself, since it is my strong belief that, regarding at least the focus of the specific study, the philosopher provides more than enough information in the *Poetics*.

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CHAPTER I

MIMESIS

MIMESIS

Mimesis, Aristotle says, is a kind of instinct, which when satisfied produces the pleasure of learning. The film is a kind of *mimesis* as is theatre, poetry, dancing or painting. This statement – that all arts are sorts of *mimesis* – seems to be a common, indeed the only common, ground amongst the various literary and film theories, since they differ with respect to the objects an art should imitate as well as the manner of imitation. Because *mimesis* involves the existence of something ‘original’ that is then represented or imitated by means of a ‘copy’, it has been primarily associated with realism. The value of the copy is estimated according to its resemblance to the original. In other words, the more real the copy is, the more merit is attached to it.

Mimesis as a means of representation has been the apple of discord between various schools of narrative film. Neo-realism, Nouvelle Vague, Free Cinema, the New German Cinema (Junger Deutscher Film) and even the more recent Danish Dogma cinema (Dogma 95) have invoked Platonic ideas and later Brechtian argumentation to directly accuse classical cinema of being misleading, manipulative and producing an unrealistic and thus idealistic view of reality, proclaiming at the same time that they intended to represent the raw reality unmasked.

An idealistic view of reality means that reality is not represented as it *is* or as it *could* be, but as it *should* be. This distorted representation creates, in turn, an illusion of reality and not a true understanding of it. The basis of this argument is that narrative films that promote an illusionistic view of reality are harmful to the spectator’s ability to understand reality, since they promote an ideal thus beguiling and misleading view of the world. The origin of this argument is traced back to Plato’s disqualification of poetry as an art imitating not reality, but an imitation of reality thus being nothing else than a copy of a copy.

With the majority of film and screenwriting theorists associating classical narrative with the Aristotelian narrative structure, the accusation of producing an idealistic and illusionistic view of reality has also been attributed to the *Poetics*.

To say that the Aristotelian *mimesis* proposes a representation of life as it *should* be would mean that the Aristotelian system is a narrative poetic method with the primary intent to manipulate the spectator into adopting a specific set of ideas or morals. As it will be shown in this chapter, Aristotelian *mimesis* pertains to what *could* happen, to probability and necessity, and not to what *should* happen as it is the case with the classical narrative structure. The *Poetics* was also invoked in the neoclassic period to justify a tendency to measure the value of art according to its resemblance to the original. Neoclassicists demanded that a work of art should demonstrate a strict resemblance to the original. But, *mimesis* for Aristotle moves away from a representation of life *as it is* and focuses on life as it *could* be, again, according to the rules of probability and necessity.

To understand the precise meaning of the Aristotelian *mimesis* is very important for the process of applying the *Poetics* to screenwriting for two reasons. First, it will clarify existing misconceptions and open new ways of applying the *Poetics* to screenwriting. Second, the object of representation (character and story) and the means of representation (plot [screenplay] and filmic technique) are the elements that determine the kind of film one wishes to create. *Mimesis* and *katharsis* are the basic tools in the hands of screenwriters who wish to develop an Aristotelian narrative structure. At the same time, without a clear delineation of *mimesis* and *katharsis* the process of categorizing a film as counter-Aristotelian or Aristotelian would be impossible.

In this Chapter I intend to demonstrate that the *Poetics* is related not to the classical narrative's *idealistic mimesis*, but to a *logical mimesis*, that is an imitation produced and developed by following logical patterns. I will show that the object of the Aristotelian narrative is a *mimesis* of what *could* happen according to the rules of probability and necessity and not of what *should* happen. I will also explain why the Aristotelian *mimesis* is not related to a photographic realism.

To reach to this conclusion, I intend to discuss briefly the way major literary and film theories have viewed *mimesis* in relation to reality. This is important because it will show the inaccuracies that have been created through centuries of misconceiving and misinterpreting the Aristotelian term *mimesis* and its relation to realism. I will also address the problem of the absence of any detailed reference to *mimesis* in screenwriting texts that discuss the *Poetics*.

In this chapter I will try to determine what can be Aristotelian and counter-Aristotelian in terms of both the objects represented (story and character) and the means of representation (plot [screenplay] and film technique). In this study the *means of representation* fall into two categories, a) the primary means of representation or the screenplay, and the secondary means of representation or the filmic techniques (editing, mise-en-scène and so on).

Mimesis presents us with one of the most elusive aspects of the *Poetics* in terms of translation and meaning. Paul Woodruff in *Aristotle on Mimesis* puts it quite accurately:

Mimesis and its Greek cognates defy translation. Besides 'imitation' we find in English such renderings as 'image-making', 'imitation', 'representation', 'reproduction', 'expression', 'fiction', 'emulation', 'make-believe', and so forth. As any of these would beg important questions of interpretation, we shall have to be content with transliteration.¹

Even at the time that the *Poetics* was written, there was controversy over the true purpose of poetic *mimesis*. Aristophanes (456 BC-386 BC), the comic dramatist, thought that along with pleasing, the dramatist should be a teacher of morality and a political adviser. Strabo (63/64 BC), the Greek historian and philosopher, agreed with the idea that poetry is the first lesson that the state must teach a child and exclaimed the superiority of poetry to philosophy on the grounds that the latter addressed a few, whereas the former addressed the many. This is completely opposed to the Greek poet Eratosthenes (276 BC-194 BC) who asserted that the function of the poem is

to charm the spirit of its listeners, never to instruct them. More radical than all, Plato thought that there was no place for poets in his perfect Republic because the poets imitate the world and the world imitates the Ideas. The poets, therefore, become the imitators of imitation. According to Plato 'since that which is real does not change and since the mutable sensible world around us is not real, but a representation of the real, then the artist who imitates (whether poet, painter, musician) represents not the forms, but the imitation of the forms, the sensible'.² Poetry, for Plato, is twice removed from the Idea of the things in nature and, being an imitation twice removed from the Idea of things, poetry is false.

Aristotle's deviation from the Platonic idea of poetry's function proves that what he was talking about was not a photographic realism within the poetic work. Aristotle's 'version' of *mimesis* is a form of signification, but not one which posits a relation of 'copy' to the 'original'.

In the essay *Mimesis and Diegesis: Foundations of Aesthetic Theory in Plato and Aristotle*, John T. Kirby gives us a very important analysis of the basic differences between Aristotle's and Plato's theories of poetics. According to Plato's analysis of *diegesis* (the narrative) and *mimesis*:

Diegesis can be of two kinds

- 1) *diegesis* with *mimesis*
- 2) *diegesis* without *mimesis*

Diegesis with *mimesis* (1) is subdivided in:

- a) *diegesis* that is pure *mimesis* (tragedy, comedy) and
- b) *diegesis* that includes some *mimesis* (epic)³

Diegesis without *mimesis* is pure *diegesis*, something that can be said to be the case for the Dithyramb. Aristotle deviates from Plato's theory in that he did actually approach the issue of *mimesis* from a totally different point of view. Leaving aside the reality of imitation, Aristotle begins *Poetics* with a defence of poetry on the grounds that 'the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him/her and other animals being that he/she is the most imitative of living creatures and through imitation learns his/her earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in

things imitated'.⁴ Aristotle thus 'shifts out of the original realm of enquiry entirely. He reverses the genus/differentiae distinction originally posited by Plato in the *Republic*. There, *diegesis* was the genus and the presence and absence of *mimesis* were its differentiae. In the *Poetics*, *mimesis* becomes the genus, the topic of *diairesis* (division). Nor is this all Aristotle does to controvert the Platonic *diairesis*: he supplies entirely new differentiae, namely the *medium*, *object* and *mode* of imitation'.⁵

Below there is an outline of *mimesis* as presented in Aristotle's *Poetics* that has been composed with the help of Kirby's essay as well as F.L. Lucas's summary of the *Poetics* in the book *Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics*. This outline gives a clearer account of Aristotle's reasoning regarding *mimesis* and it also demonstrates the type of characters that should be imitated as well as the manner in which they are imitated. For example, in the Objects of Imitation part of the outline, one can easily see that a tragedy should imitate a man 'larger than life'. On the other hand, characters of a comedy have to appear worse than ordinary people.

These arts are distinguished according to

a) The **Medium** of Imitation: rhythm, melody, language

In Poetry the medium is rhythm + language

In Dance the medium is rhythm

In Choral Lyric is rhythm + melody + language

In Music the medium is rhythm + melody

b) The **Objects** of Imitation

Higher or lower types of objects imitated (Basic distinction between Tragedy and Comedy).

Tragedy: men finer than they are (*βελτίωνας*)

Comedy: men meaner than they are (*χείρονας*)

men as they are (*ομοίους καθ'ἑμάς*)

c) The **Manner** of Imitation

Poetry can have the form of

- Narrative - dramatic narrative (pure narrative [including lyric poetry])

- Acting (pure drama)

Throughout the vast history of art criticism, when the Aristotelian term *mimesis* was taken into account as the primary orientation of a literary work, it has been used to refer to a very wide range of notions from the most uncompromising realism to the most remote idealism (The *Poetics*, ironically, was invoked to justify two opposite conceptions of poetry – high idealist allegory and naturalistic fable). The different ways of using *verisimilitude* shows that realism or the desire to be referential to reality is always present and is endlessly renewed and rediscovered.

It has been said that the popularity of the *Poetics* among scholars and poets in the 16th and 17th centuries was chiefly due to an accident. They happened to discover it when they were feeling the need to have a coherent tradition to work with so as to interpret the great Greek poets, but also to have a high standard by which to judge themselves and each other and to have a way to emulate or even surpass the great literature of antiquity. It seems that the same thing must have happened with screenwriting. Although screenwriting had largely inherited the *Poetics* from playwriting, the rediscovery of Aristotle by screenwriting scholars and writers reflected a strong need to find formulas for successful screenwriting and/or to understand the reasons why some films were successful while others were not.

Along with other central concepts of the *Poetics*, the interpretation of *mimesis* has been ventured by the Renaissance scholars of the classics (humanists) who contributed to the new learning by discovering and disseminating a great number of Greek manuscripts. But the rediscovery of the *Poetics* during the Renaissance also involved the obscuring of some central concepts, which is due to the altering of the orientations in examining Aristotle's poetic method so as to fit in one or another critic's theoretical frame. It is interesting to see that this is a phenomenon repeated in modern times as well. In most screenwriting texts that draw on the *Poetics*, the concept of *mimesis* is barely mentioned, regardless of the fact that it is the cornerstone of the Aristotelian theory. On the contrary, such texts easily adopt more comprehensible Aristotelian concepts that fit in their theoretic frame, such as *reversal of fortune*, *empathy*, *pathos*, *complication* and *denouement*.

Early in the 16th century Italian scholars followed Aristotle's guidance in writing tragedies and produced a large body of theoretical work, which –

misinterpreted and based on unverified beliefs as to the real meaning of Aristotle's theory – were subsequently taken over wholesale by English writers. One of the examples of misinterpretation was the three unities of time, place and action, upon which later on Shakespeare's plays were regarded 'not true to life'. Aristotle only insisted on the unity of action. Nowhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle advise the poet to adhere to a rule of the unity of place and time.

In *Apologie for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney speaks of poetry as 'an arte of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*, that is to say a representing, counterfetting, or figuring foorth-to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight.'⁶

Aristotle's probable *could*, becomes in Sydney *should*. The object of *mimesis* assumes a moral purpose, that which will please in order to teach. As Meyer Howard Abrams points out:

This pragmatic point of view of poetry and its genres looks at the work of art as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done, and tends to judge its value according to its success in achieving that aim, to ground the classification and anatomy of poems in large part on the special effects each kind and component is most competent to achieve; to derive the norms of the poetic art and canons of critical appraisal from the needs and legitimate demands of the audience to whom is addressed.⁷

Such a point of view is reminiscent of Horace's *Ars Poetica* which spoke of the poets' task to teach (*prodesse*), to please (*delectare*) but also to move (*movere*). Nowhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle mention that the object of *mimesis* has a moral purpose. In fact, the only basic rule Aristotle insists on is the rule of probability and the necessity of the incidents composing a plot, since only by maintaining this rule can *verisimilitude* be achieved.

Neoclassical traditionalism dictated an idea of poetry as an imitation of human life. Poetry was to be the 'mirror held up to nature'. The interpretations varied. One tendency was to value the mimetic level of the arts according to

their medium. Thomas Twining in translating and interpreting the *Poetics* came to the conclusion that:

Only works in which the resemblance between copy and object is both immediate and obvious can be described as imitative in a strict sense. Dramatic poetry therefore in which we mimic speech by speech is the only kind of poetry which is properly imitation; music must be struck from the list of imitative arts.⁸

This, however, does not agree with one of Aristotle's key assumptions, that 'Epic poetry and tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conceptions modes of imitation'.⁹ Photographic realism was not in the realm of Aristotle's poetic method. As I will show later on, the idea that the only imitative works are the ones in which the resemblance between copy and object is both immediate and obvious is reminiscent of Siegfried Kracauer's realist film theory and is totally opposed to the Aristotelian theory.

Post renaissance and neoclassical critics viewed *mimesis* as an important poetic element, also one that is oriented more to the effects produced on the audience. The focus in these eras, nevertheless, was shifting more towards the direction of *pleasure itself* rather than pleasure as a means of teaching. The imitation of nature was the general means of achieving this end and it is something that could be accomplished with the guidance of critically established rules. The main approach to *mimesis* during the neoclassic period is reflected in John Dryden's words:

Having thus shewn that imitation pleases, and why it pleases in both these arts, it follows that some rules of imitation are necessary to obtain the end; for without rules there can be no art, any more that there can be a house without a door to conduct you into it.¹⁰

This point of view approaches more the general Aristotelian method since it says that literary works can provide a source of rules for *poetics*. A

fundamental deviation from Aristotle, though, is the view of pleasure as an end and not as a means. The *telos* (goal) of the Aristotelian tragedy is *katharsis*, the intellectual clarification and emotional relief of the characters and the spectators. One of the functions of *katharsis* is pleasure, but it is not the aim of poetry to please.

Richard Hurd, who interpreted *Ars Poetica* as well as other Horace's works, spoke of universal poetry 'as an art whose end is the maximum possible pleasure'.¹¹ Hurd writes that 'for the name of poem will belong to every composition, whose primary end is to please, provided it will be so constructed as to afford all the pleasure, which is kind or sort will permit'.¹²

Again, we are getting closer to the Aristotelian notion of dramatic qualities particular to the specific kinds of poetry. Hurd's *kind or sort* is closely allied to the distinction Aristotle made referring to the poems differing from one another in terms of *medium*, *object* and *manner* of imitation. Up to this point, the connection between *mimesis* and plot eluded the interpreters of *Poetics*.

The focus on the literary effects on audience led to the focus on the creator of these effects. Samuel Johnson in his *Preface to Shakespeare* praises Shakespeare's artistic excellence and his ability to combine the demands of his contemporary audience with the demands of a general audience, the common readers of all times. It is therefore, 'not the *belle nature*, but the general nature that he turns the mirror to'.¹³ However, 'the creator's artistic genius', explains Johnson, 'does not compensate for the shortcomings in writing without any moral purpose'.¹⁴

Around 1800, the mimetic orientation shifts to the poet's genius and creative imagination. And although the *Poetics* enters a second phase of popularity, especially after Coleridge's re-interpretation of some Aristotelian terms in *Biographia Literaria*, during the Romantic period poetry is not primarily a mirror of men in action, but a mirror of the poet's own feelings. The rules of *poesis* belong to the realm of the creator's imagination. The cause of poetry is effective; poetic imitation takes the form of the poet's expression of his/her internal experiences. Poetry is not a *mimesis* of human actions and does not aim at a moral lesson. Poetry is the imitation or internal representation of the creator's internal motion. Neither does it aim at

producing effects on the audience, as it was held at the neoclassic period. The process of eliciting effects on the audience is now viewed as a criterion not of the value of art but of its disqualification as being 'rhetoric'. As Shelley has said, 'the Poet is nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds'.¹⁵ The audience is one; the poet him/herself. The previous idea of poetry as imitating something external, such as nature, is viewed as simplistic. Instead, symbolic representation of what exists in the poet's life is what constitutes true art. The shift of focus to the creator is reminiscent of *auteurism* as it emerged from the pages of *Cahiers du Cinema* around the 1950s.

Modern literary theory has explored the idea that literature cannot in any way be 'true to life' or imitate reality, since the idea of the existence of a single objective reality has been called into question. From the structuralists' view, for example, a literary work is a mode of writing (*écriture*) structured by a play of various purely literary codes and conventions that generate a literary effect. This literary effect, though, has no truth-value or any reference to reality outside the text itself. In 1921, Roman Jakobson wrote in his essay *Realism in Art* that 'while in painting and in other visual arts the illusion of an objective and absolute faithfulness to reality is conceivable, 'natural' (in Plato's terminology), *verisimilitude* in a verbal expression or in a literary description obviously makes no sense whatever'.¹⁶

Literary realism is a tissue of conventions and therefore has nothing to do with reality. Modern literary theory avoided any reference to reality, but somehow depended on it as it is the case for many narrative films that avoid, for example, the linear narrative structure, but somehow depend on it in order to be comprehended by the spectator.

The philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, in his introduction to the 11th issue of *Communications*, describes a story that happened in Sicily in 500 BC. In a courtroom, the judges had to decide on a case where it was impossible to know what really happened so they decided according to the story that gave the bigger impression of truth. Upon that, Todorov comments that in this case, the laws of persuasiveness became dominant over the laws of truth, but the persuasive or the *vraisemblance*, has no relation to reality.¹⁷

For Todorov, 'verisimilitude is the mask in which the laws of the text are dressed up, a mask which we are supposed to take for a relation with reality. Poets are liars, wearing masks to deceive us'.¹⁸ This kind of thinking ignores the possibility that the relation to the real can be direct (factual truth) or indirect (what is probable or likely - *verisimilitude*). It also sounds peculiarly Platonic. It is reminiscent of the notion that the function of *mimesis* is to create an illusion of reality which, in turn, will harm our *logistikon*, which is our capacity to measure, number and weigh that which is real and undistorted.

Probability is the missing factor from this kind of reasoning and its importance was plain to Aristotle almost 2,000 years ago. For Aristotle, a believable probable impossibility (in tragedy) is preferable to an unbelievable improbable possibility, something that stands in the core of the meaning of *verisimilitude* and its use in the *Poetics*. *Verisimilitude* is the aim of the Aristotelian narrative and not a photographic realism. The reference to reality is crucial. It is the approximation to the real, the probable or likely element in an improbability that makes it credible. The poet, as well as the reader and the spectator, are aware of the 'mask' of realism. In fact, what disappoints the spectators is the breaking of the rules of probability and necessity so that the spectators find themselves no longer willing to suspend their disbelief.

For Aristotle, the object of imitation is not the Platonic Ideas and is not objects of raw reality. *Mimesis* is imitation of human actions, an imitation that transcends acting (as a performance) and has to do with the structure of actions, with the plot.

One of the reasons for the misinterpretations and confusion related to *mimesis* is that the meaning of the Aristotelian action – which is to be imitated – is not clear. Aristotle says that 'for even dancing imitates character, emotion, and action by rhythmical movement'.¹⁹

Emotion and *action* are a periphrasis for the word *μύθος* (myth), which in ancient Greek bears the meaning of plot. So, emotion and action is actually plot. Confusion arises when, in other parts of the *Poetics*, Aristotle refers to *action* alone and not to *emotion* and *action* together. For example, in the definition of tragedy he says 'ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις *πραξέως* σπουδαίας και τελείας'.²⁰ (Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an *action* that is serious and complete'²¹).

Action (*praxis*), for Aristotle, comprises not only what a person did, but the whole working out of the action and the consequences of his/her actions, that is, what has happened to the person after he has acted. It also comprises character, since character reflects the intent and the intrinsic life of the person that acts. Character is of course the basis of action, since it determines the quality of the action, but the *end* of *mimesis* is the action itself. The Aristotelian insistence on actions seems to agree with the maxim for screenwriters that character is action and that our impressions of a character are given by his/her actions, more than what he/she says or what is said about him/her.

Ἡ γὰρ τραγωδία μιμήσις ἐστὶν οὐκ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ πράξεως καὶ βίου, καὶ ἡ εὐδαιμονία καὶ κακοδαιμονία ἐν πράξει ἐστίν, καὶ τὸ τέλος πράξεως τὴς ἐστίν, οὐ ποιότης.²²

Tragedy then is the imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality.²³

In the above extract, even though it is not very clear from the translation, Aristotle refers to the concepts of good fortune (*εὐδαιμονία*) and misfortune (*κακοδαιμονία*). S. H. Butcher's translation of the Greek words *εὐδαιμονία* and *κακοδαιμονία* is just *life* as one can see from the underlined words. It is very important to understand what Aristotle means when he states that *good fortune and misfortune consist in action*. With the help of one of the most recognized Greek interpreters of the *Poetics*, I. Sikoutris, the exact meaning of the words good fortune and misfortune used in the extract is made possible.

Εὐδαιμονία was regarded, not only by Aristotle, an action or *energeia* of a psyche in virtue or in a state of virtue. *Εὐδαιμονία* is an action and *not* a psychological state, as it is believed today. *Εὐδαιμονία* and *κακοδαιμονία* – which is translated by Butcher as *life* – can happen only through action. Sikoutris explains that what Aristotle means by using *and its end* is that the

higher end of existence and every *action* is good fortune. Finally, the quality of virtue is not by itself good fortune, because it is possible for one to have a virtue that is not a benefit to the person and cannot induce happiness or good fortune unless this virtue is put in use, unless – in other words – the virtue becomes action.²⁴

Rephrasing Butcher's translation leads to the following definition of what a tragedy should imitate: Tragedy then is an imitation, not of men, but of action and life, and good fortune and misfortune happen in action and those are the ends of life if they are in the form of an action and not of a quality.

Plot imitates action, because only through action is a character's inner self revealed, at least in drama. The screenwriter who chooses to follow the Aristotelian narrative system, chooses from the incessant flow and chaotic form of reality, the pieces of action that best show and prove the *one action* (main action) or premise of the film. These pieces of action (scenes) will be interconnected by the rule of probability and necessity.

It is important to clarify that in this study I will be using the adjective *one* to describe *action* (one action) instead of the adjective *main* (main action) in an attempt to stay as close as possible to the text of the *Poetics*. The adjective 'main' implies the existence of other actions, contrary to the Aristotelian narrative method.

Syd Field's book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* is one of the first screenwriting books that applied the *Poetics* to the art of screenwriting and – contrary to other similar books – it captures an important element of the Aristotelian object of *mimesis*. Field writes that 'Aristotle says in his *Poetics*: Life consists in action and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. That means that your character has to be active, has to be doing things, causing things to happen, not just reacting all the time'.²⁵

The object of *mimesis* in an Aristotelian screenplay could not be the actions of a character such as 'A' in *Ulysses's Gaze* (Theo Angelopoulos, 1995). 'A' may be on a quest to find an undeveloped film from 1905, but in the process he is being submerged into a dreamlike journey around the Balkans where he follows life as it happens and sometimes does not even wish to react to it. The Aristotelian character needs to be active, because only through action can the spectator follow the logical steps that will lead to *katharsis*. The

proper *mimesis* is the only road to *katharsis* in a tragedy and these two concepts cannot be viewed separately. Inaction is a form of action of course, but a character's inaction usually prevents the spectator from understanding the character's motives. Thus a passive character, such as 'A' is counter-Aristotelian.

In *Aristotle in Hollywood: The Anatomy of Successful Storytelling* Ari Hiltunen accurately observes that the Aristotelian *mimesis* involves 'taking on the characteristics of something else in order to arrive at a true understanding of it'.²⁶ In writing the *Poetics*, Aristotle decided to base his narrative method on the relationship between *mimesis* and *katharsis*. *Mimesis* was the cornerstone that initiated the entire discussion on plot structure and character delineation. But most screenwriting texts prefer to leave the mimetic quality of a screenplay out the equation and examine *katharsis* on its own, while other texts such as *Screenplay* or *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, do not even refer to *mimesis*. In his 130 pages book, Hiltunen dedicates just a paragraph to the analysis of *mimesis*. He writes:

One of Aristotle's important concepts of drama is *mimesis* which is the taking on of the characteristics of something else in order to arrive at a true understanding of it. It could be said that *Oedipus Rex* is about giving an aesthetic form to the basic human tragedy, the essence of which is that of *moira*, or fate, that plays a trick on the hero's good intentions.²⁷

Oedipus Rex is indeed about giving an aesthetic form to a central human tragedy: the decisions characters make and the actions they take to achieve happiness tragically become the key reasons of achieving the exact opposite of their intentions - misfortune (*peripeteia*). But that is hardly related to *moira*. In fact, the whole point of tragedy is to clearly show – through a well structured plot – all the steps that lead to a logical mistake, an *hamartia*, that brings about unhappiness.

According to the *Poetics*, *mimesis* of a man's existence is not to be done mechanically by the poet. The object of imitation for the poet is not the objective reality that lies in front of his/her eyes, but the already observed reality, which is processed in his/her mind freed from unimportant and arbitrary elements. In other words,

Stories or situations such as we meet in the real world except that they are more consistent, being free from both the inert superficialities that signify nothing, and the occasional contradictory happening that appear for the moment to invalidate general truths.²⁸

This selected reality is plot, something that differentiates the Aristotelian method from realist film theory that views the use of plot as a 'tool' that hinders realism. Plot for realist theory is the tool by which the screenwriter selects parts of reality thus not all of reality. The importance of this 'selected reality' in the Aristotelian mimetic process is one of the reasons, as it will be demonstrated in Chapter III of this study, that Aristotle gives emphasis to plot.

It is important to understand that to select parts of reality (Aristotelian narrative) is different from idealizing reality (classical narrative) or from annihilating, distorting or *defamiliarising* reality (counter-Aristotelian narrative). In Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (*To Live*, 1952), the screenwriter Shinobu Hashimoto, has constructed the plot in such a way as to demonstrate a logical coherence in the units of action that led the dying civil servant, Kanji Watanabe, to realise the emptiness of his life and find a new goal in his remaining time; to patiently push through a project of turning a city dump into a playground for children. The specific screenplay has an extraordinary plot structure, giving the impression that no scene has been selected accidentally. *Ikiru* is the ideal example of what Aristotle meant when he insisted on the criterion of indispensability for the plot events. The plot should be structured in such a way that if one were to take out a scene, the meaning of the *whole* would be harmed and *mimesis* would not have been achieved. In *Ikiru* what moves the audience is the protagonist's change and not that this change takes place quickly (in 143 minutes or in a few months of screenplay

time). Due to the plot's *verisimilitude*, the audience does not wonder about the believability of the rapid change in the hero's life. The realism gives way to the illusion of realism, the screenplay becomes believable and thus realistic. The audience travels along with the protagonist to understand and experience the process of his change. The 'selected reality' of *Ikiru* has successfully imitated the *one action* selected by the screenwriter.

In now returning to the types of characters imitated, it should be noted the object of the Aristotelian *mimesis* is not the downfall of a villain. Aristotle explains that 'a plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear'. The Aristotelian *mimesis* does not aim at offering moral instructions to the spectator.

The actions that should be imitated are the actions of a rather good character, who has an *extraordinary element* (εξαιρετικόν) which is the extension and the depth of the important and the essential, the whole (εννιαίος). What is important and essential is that which will not only make the spectator curious or excited, but that which will arouse the feeling of a deeper psychological connection or *συγγένεια* (kinship) with the hero. This extraordinary element will move action forward to its wholeness or completeness. So from the extraordinary (not common) we proceed to the common element in all human beings, to the universal.

Something is whole when it is presented in its essential form, the form that corresponds more clearly and vividly to the nature of the represented object, after it has been freed from any obscuring accidental element. Wholeness has to do with the logical clarity, logical coherence (unity) and logical necessity, elements that compose the Aristotelian rule of probability and necessity. The action imitated is the one that is likely to happen, the one that *could* have happened (logical not moral necessity).

The *whole* should not be confused with the *general*, with the average of the empirical reality. The average – when it comes to human attributes – does not necessarily contain the important or essential, rather the peripheral and the inessential. There are, for example, many average women tortured by jealousy, but they do not all of them kill their children, like *Medea*. The general trait of jealousy as it is found in the average type of the jealous woman, under the right circumstances of probability and necessity can lead to the extreme

reaction of revenge through murder, and not any murder (the husband, herself, the lover), but the murder of the woman's children. *Mimesis* then, in the Aristotelian use of it, sets out by means of the plot, to show why the specific character Medea, as opposed to any jealous woman, committed these hideous crimes. There is no morality in Aristotle's system, but only an analysis of all the logical steps that could lead to the most illogical, extreme and immoral actions.

It is not everyday that an intelligent and charismatic king kills his father and marries his mother, especially when his intentions were to do the exact opposite, to protect them. But in the case of Oedipus, the plot reveals that, under the right circumstances (selected plot scenes) such parricide and incest *could* happen. A different selection of scenes would probably not have the same effect because each scene is a logical step that when ignored, results in a non sequitur. Because the *Poetics* presents a narrative structure that relies primarily on logic and not chance, it cannot be considered as promoting an ideal sense of reality that portrays how things *should* be.

In Chapter XIII, Aristotle analyses in greater detail the characters of whose actions are to be imitated. First, Aristotle writes a tragedy should *not* imitate decent people passing from good fortune to misfortune. The adjective used in the Greek text is *επιεικείς*, which here bears the meaning of not only decent or virtuous, but also *χρηστός*, that is a person that has not committed an *hamartia* (a tragic mistake), a flawless, a completely innocent human being. Depicting the passing from good fortune to misfortune of a person who has not committed an *hamartia* would not be pitiful and fearful, but rather *μιαρόν*. (The adjective *μιαρόν* has been translated either as 'disgusting' [Potts] or 'shocking' [Butcher]). Fate or chance is something that does not concern Aristotle's epistemological analysis. What falls upon the person is his own tragic mistake and not fate. If the purpose of *mimesis* was to 'preach' the spectator then an immoral character becoming progressively unhappy and punished for his immorality would be perfect for the role.

Chris Gardner, the protagonist in the *Pursuit of Happiness* (Gabriele Muccino, 2006), even though larger than life has not committed an *hamartia*. His social background was the primary reason for his unhappiness. But Chris surpasses all obstacles and manages to move from rags to riches. He is the

ideal character for the classical screenplay narrative. He is an active protagonist in the pursuit of a desire in direct conflict with the people around him. By contrast, the object of imitation for an Aristotelian screenplay would be the selected actions of an active protagonist who in the pursuit of happiness commits an *hamartia* (a tragic mistake) that is in direct conflict with his own desire and then with the desires of the people around him.

I have shown so far that the power of the Aristotelian *mimesis* is not only related to the *mimema*, the object of imitation, but also to the manner of *mimesis*, that is, the manner in which the plot imitates action. To make this point clearer I shall borrow Paul Woodruff's reasoning, which I believe is the single most accurate analysis of *mimesis* so far:

Mimesis in Aristotle then cannot be anything like imitation, which in modern usage implies the existence of something real which is imitated. We speak of imitation flowers and fake flamingos, but not of imitation goblins or fake fairies, because there are no goblins or fairies. Again, *mimesis* in Aristotle cannot be the same as fiction. The comic poet does indeed produce fiction – he makes up events and characters (the word for doing that is simply *poiein*); but then he accomplishes a *mimesis* which has as its object precisely the fiction that he has made up. If *mimesis* were fiction then it would make no sense to say that it can take fiction as its object. But if fiction is the making up of people and events, and if that is what a poet does, then what in the world could *mimesis* be? What role is left for *mimesis* if fiction is prior to it? Aristotle's way of speaking implies that there is a difference between simply making up actions and, and producing a *mimesis* of actions that have been made up. The difference is that *mimesis* affects us, while simply making things up – without *mimesis* – does not. To produce a *mimesis* of a fiction is to give to that fiction the power of engaging our attention and our emotions almost as if it were real.²⁹

I have argued so far that Aristotelian *mimesis* is not a realistic (photographic) representation of objects. Neither is it a reproduction of

emotions by unrealistic means, but by the selection of probable events, which is the plot. The object of *mimesis* is the action of a rather good character with an extraordinary element who nevertheless commits *an hamartia*. *Mimesis* is realized by means of the proper selection of *mimemata* which will lead to *katharsis*. *Mimesis* is not related to an idealistic representation of reality as it is the case with the classical narrative, but to a representation of a probable and thus convincing reality. Also, I have shown that the purpose of the Aristotelian *mimesis* is not to moralise the spectator.

I wish now to discuss the secondary means of representation (filmic technique) for film in relation to the *Poetics*. So important was for Aristotle that the poet achieves *verisimilitude* by means of the plot that he considered any attempt of achieving *verisimilitude* by means of the 'spectacle' an inferior form of art. Aristotle put little emphasis on aspects such as the 'spectacular':

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts [plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, song] it is the least artistic and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we maybe sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.³⁰

Although the kind and quality of spectacle in ancient Greek tragedy differs greatly from the advanced special effects used in film today, 'spectacle' would have had the same meaning for Aristotle as it has for us. For the Aristotelian *mimesis* what reproduces life's emotions is more important than that which produces sense-impressions, like the 'spectacle'. Thus an Aristotelian film would put less emphasis on realism derived from filmic techniques and setting and more emphasis on *verisimilitude* derived from the screenplay's plot. The Aristotelian realism is linked primarily to plot events causally interrelated and therefore convincing, rather than a realistic scene that is shot, for example, on location.

The illusion of realism in film is inevitable, even in narrative structures that purposely avoid realism in either their screenplay or their filmic techniques. Jacques Tati's *Traffic* (1972) or *Playtime* (1967) aim at distorting

reality and challenging realism. But, even in surrealistic films, especially in the case of later screenwriters work, such as Michael Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) or Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999), there is a plot that takes the role of compensating at some level for the unrealistic direction methods. The fact that these films are unusual or non-conventional in their filmic techniques does not exclude them from the Aristotelian paradigm. Especially in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* the line of action embodies one of the most distinctly Aristotelian elements. Both the central characters, Joel and Clementine, in their attempt to become happier by forgetting each other, they commit the *hamartia* of erasing all the memories of their relationship. But their wrong decision results in the exact opposite of their intention (*peripeteia*). Excluding the film's conventional happy ending that is reminiscent of the classical narrative, the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is directly influenced by the Aristotelian narrative method.

All arts possess a distinct rationale of their own. But the illusion of realism is inseparably bound up with all forms of art and especially with the cinema. What differentiates the various narrative techniques from each other is the degree and the manner in which they imitate reality. The Aristotelian method chooses a *mimesis* that is more related to the structure of the plot than the realism of the setting.

The illusion of realism is closely allied to the very essence of cinema, perhaps to a greater degree than that of theatre due to the uniquely 'unrealistic' elements of this medium. In cinema, everything is larger than life and everything is depicted on a big screen. But the illusion of reality is a precondition the audience accepts *provided that* the narrative and the camera/editing techniques do not become self-reflexive. The spectator willingly suspends his/her disbelief as long as the writer plays by the rules (of *verisimilitude*). It is important to realise that even self-conscious cinema, such as Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959) is not composed accidentally. The creation of meaning presupposes a reference to something, a reference to reality and reason, even if the *one action* presented in the narrative is completely unrealistic, as it is the case in the fantasy or horror genres.

The Aristotelian narrative structure depends on a *mimesis* not guided by *idealistic realism* that would portray an ideal version of a constructed reality, but by a logical version of a constructed reality. In the classical narrative, the story is primarily about what *should* happen in an ideal world, rather than what *could* happen in real world; good conquers evil, David somehow manages to beat Goliath, ordinary people become heroes, the poor go from rags to riches. Logical believability, *verisimilitude*, or simply what *could* happen – not what actually happens or should happen – is the object of the Aristotelian *mimesis*. On the contrary, a counter-Aristotelian narrative structure pertains to a *mimesis* of a) raw reality freed from dramatic qualities, a mere recording of what actually happens regardless of any rules of probability and necessity; b) what does not happen ‘out there’ but in the character’s inner world; c) a non-linear *mimesis* of reality conveyed with the episodic narrative structure; d) a representation of multiple realities and countless variations of the above four categories – all of them aiming at challenging the spectator’s expectations.

To achieve *logical mimesis*, the Aristotelian poetic structure involves selecting *a part* of reality and not the whole of it. Therefore it is not and it does not aspire to be a ‘true’ or accurate representation of raw reality. As I have said earlier in this Chapter, plot is the selection of the important incidents in a story. The incidents’ importance is determined by the degree of relevance they have in relation to the *one action* (premise) represented by the screenwriter. Only by a proper plot can the Aristotelian *mimesis* be realised, that is why the plot has the primary role in the Aristotelian method.

I now wish to continue the discussion of the Aristotelian *mimesis* by juxtaposing it with the purpose of *mimesis* in film as it has been formed by the realist and the formalist film tradition. I will then analyse the neo-realist film *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) from an Aristotelian point of view.

Realist film theory ostensibly opposes the Aristotelian theory in that its tenets are based not on a structured story, but on a found story. It is not, for example, the intention of counter-Aristotelian films, such as the neo-realist *Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) or *La Strada* (Federico Fellini, 1945) to create an illusion of reality, but to depict reality as it is. These films aspire to ‘guide’ and not manipulate the audience to an understanding of

reality. Neo-realists avoid neatly plotted stories in favour of loose structures that evolve organically. Their filmic techniques are minimal with avoidance of artifice in editing, camera movement and lighting in order to achieve a 'style-less' style. On the other hand, the formalist tradition in cinema aspires to draw the audiences' attention to the cinematic technique, to the medium of the *mimesis* itself and not to the object of *mimesis* alone, in order to give birth to the true life of cinema. Alain Renais's *Last Year in Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) is an example of formalist film that overtly use the language of cinema (editing, shot composition and so on.) so as to emphasize the graphical and not the diegetic qualities of the film.

The tradition of realism in film can be viewed more clearly through the light of the formalist film theory, from which it almost naturally developed by way of reaction. Formalist film theory can be said to have started from Hugo Munsterberg and his book *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), the first and also most direct study in film theory. Munsterberg described all cinematic properties as mental. According to his theory, techniques such as the close-up and the various camera angles do not only exist because of the lenses and the cameras that make them technically possible, but also because our mind works this way. Our thoughts are doing 'close-ups', for example, when they want to pay attention to something. The motion picture, in the same way, should not be a mere recording of motion in the world, but an organized recording of the way humans' mind create a meaningful reality. For Munsterberg, the mind is not separated from emotions, because emotions occupy the highest mental level. Emotions are in fact complete mental events. And if mental events are expressed, in film, by the technical aspects of the film, the emotions are expressed by the story itself, the story which is 'the highest unit or ingredient available to this narrative art, and the one which directs all the lower processes of film'.³¹ 'The photoplay', explains Munsterberg, 'tells us a human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely space, time and causality and by adjusting the events to the form of the inner world, namely attention, memory, imagination and emotion...[These events] reach complete isolation from the practical world through the perfect unity of plot and pictorial appearance'.³²

Munsterberg's theory, while giving emphasis to the plot, differs from Aristotelian narratology in two ways. First, he believed that all material are suitable for a film, even the most violent and prurient, as long as they reach their proper conclusion, releasing the energies they have aroused. Aristotle was very specific in demarcating the object of *mimesis* and the characters that best fit in carrying out the *one action* of the plot. Secondly, Munsterberg placed the filmic technique and plot on the same level, whereas in the Aristotelian method the 'spectacle' was inferior to plot. Strikingly relevant to the Aristotelian notion of *katharsis* is Munsterberg's belief that emotions are complete mental events. As it will be discussed in Chapter II of this study, *katharsis* is a state that is brought about only after the proper mental processes have allowed the emotional part of the spectator to be expressed.

While Munsterberg's theory revolves around the psychological processes of the spectator, Rudolf Arnheim in his book *Film as Art* (1923) stated that what must constitute the film's material is all the elements that make it, not the illusion of reality, but the elements that make it less than a perfect illusion of reality. Arnheim moves beyond the plot and examines all the elements of the medium (cinema) that are potentially non-real, for example, 'the reduction of a sense of depth, lighting and the absence of colour, the framing of the image, the absence of space-time continuum due to editing and the absence of inputs from other senses'.³³ For Arnheim, then, film art stands between representation of the real and distortion of the real. The artist has to suppress the 'natural' capacity of the medium to represent reality in order to make it artistic. It follows that the object of the representation comes *second*. The artist focuses on the medium of the representation.

Sergei Eisenstein was also uncomfortable with the idea that cinema is a simple representation or recording of reality. He believed that 'there is no such thing as bare reality directly apprehensible. The filmmakers' task, the task of the artist, is to apprehend the true form of an event or natural phenomenon and then utilize that form in the construction of his art work'.³⁴

The subject matter is not out there, but it will be discovered through the form of the medium. Eisenstein focused on the dynamic and unifying concept of montage. The shot is a bit of reality, an almost lifeless bit of reality that needs an 'animating principle' in order to become cinema. This 'animating

principle' is montage. Aristotle bases his theory on the same principle of apprehending the true form of an event, but he differs in the proposed way of achieving it. For Aristotle, the true form of an action is realised by the narrative structure (the screenplay's plot). Eisenstein puts emphasis on the narrative structure created by technique (montage) and not by the screenplay.

Bela Balaz was a theorist who, even though embracing formalism as a way to discover the distinctive quality of the art of cinema, shifted his focus onto the filmic subject. As J. Dudley Andrew points out in *The Major Film Theories*,

So great was Balaz's respect for the proper selection of cinematic subjects that he gives to the film script itself the stature of an independent work of art. Just as we consider Shakespeare's plays fully realized even when they are not produced, so Balaz felt that the complete film script could, on occasion, be read as a full transformation of reality.³⁵

This is reminiscent of Aristotle's statement that tragedy should be equally *cathartic* even when not performed on stage, but simply read. With Balaz the screenplay starts to gain its deserved value.

While recognizing the conventional and formalist nature of film techniques and while he insisted that cinematic inventions are used for their formalist rather than their realistic potential, Balaz asked for 'strange angles only to the extent that the spectator can still orient him/herself in the picture and differentiate the familiar from the strange'. He believed that subjective shots, including entire dream sequences, should be allowed as long as 'such narrative and visual distortion is set against an orderly plot *which is commented upon or advanced*'.³⁶

In the formalist theory plot has a secondary role, but in realist film theory plot has a minimum role or at least this was the intent or belief of the filmmakers of the time. The film has a 'found story', a story that naturally emerges from the film process. The subject matter of cinema is the photographable world, the reality which seems to give itself naturally to the medium.

Siegfried Kracauer in *Theory of Film* states that films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality. The true film-maker is 'a man who sets out to tell a story but, in shooting it, is so overwhelmed by his innate desire to cover all of physical reality, that he ventures even deeper into the jungle of material phenomena. The film is equipped to capture the flow of life and the ideal form of film structure is an episodic one which allows this to be both suggested and represented'.³⁷ According to Kracauer the creativity of the film maker is limited to his/her ability to 'let nature in and penetrate it'. The filmmaker has the minimum role possible and the screenwriter does not even need to exist.

A more serious challenge to the formalist theory is the work of Andre Bazin, who embraced the use of the filmic technique (camera angles, lighting, editing) as long as this use was aiming at naturalistic techniques. All this has the basic goal of letting the spectator find his own reality in the reality presented. According to realist film theory, realist cinema does not manipulate the spectator, rather it gives him/her space to choose /her own interpretation of the filmic object or event.

Both the formalist and realist theories of *mimesis* and reality contradict the Aristotelian method. The formalist theory focuses on the medium of *mimesis* and not the filmic object and the story, so *mimesis* is realized solely by means of technique. The neorealist film, on the other hand, does not attempt to guide the audience in an immediate and explicit way. Rather it seems to help them find a meaning by probing reality without offering solutions to the problems or the situations represented. The filmic techniques do not contradict the story and the ultimate goal of the neo-realist director is not to draw attention to the means of *mimesis*. Most films are shot in actual locations – usually exteriors – with no studio sites. Editing, camerawork and lighting are almost invisible to achieve a documentary visual style and the actors are non-professionals even for primary roles. Finally, a recurrent theme of neo-realist films is poverty, not because this theme was more dramatic than others, but because poverty actually reflected one of the most important social problems at the time. One of the basic tenets of neo-realism is that the object of *mimesis* is not the exceptional, but the normal.

The realist film tradition annihilates the importance of *verisimilitude* on the grounds that it manipulates the spectators, depriving them from the opportunity to discover reality. So, the realists propose a *mimesis* that is ostensibly opposed to the Aristotelian *mimesis*.

I will now analyse Vittorio De Sica's neo realist film *Labri di Biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*) in order to trace the Aristotelian elements in an ostensibly counter-Aristotelian film. I will show that *Bicycle Thieves* is a film that adheres to the tenets of the Aristotelian *mimesis* by representing a convincing illusion of reality by means of a well-structured plot.

The black and white film *Bicycle Thieves* was based on a script written by seven people, a uniquely large group of writers. The story revolves around a stolen bicycle, an idea taken by Luigi Bartolini's novel. All the other elements had to be re-written and especially the characterisation. According to one of the main screenwriters, Cesare Zavattini, *Bicycles Thieves*, as a neo-realist film, 'is the exact opposite of the plotted film, that is, the film in which one event produces the other in a causal chain, until the happy ending is reached'.³⁸

The plot of *Bicycle Thieves* appears initially to be simple, but is imbued with most of the elements of a complex Aristotelian plot. According to Aristotle, any plot, simple or complex, must adhere to the rule of probability and necessity. Each scene has to be causally connected to the next. A plot should imitate a rather good character coming from good fortune to misfortune due to his tragic mistake (*hamartia*). Also, what makes a plot complex is the presence of the element of *peripeteia* which is the state in which the character produces the exact opposite result of what he intended to do.

The rule of probability and necessity characterizes the narrative structure of *Bicycle Thieves* screenplay. Even if Zavattini's intention was – as he stated – to produce the 'exact opposite of the plotted film, that is the film in which one event produces the other in a causal chain, until the happy ending is reached'³⁹, the screenplay's events are all causally interrelated. Each scene is connected causally to the next in such a way that if we were to take out one scene, the meaning of the whole would be compromised. All the events that led Antonio's act of stealing the bicycle were logical thus convincing. The protagonist has to first use all possible ways of regaining his stolen bicycle in

order to resort to the act of theft himself. It is vital that the act of theft is justified, or the *one action* of the film (despair drives people to crime) would be jeopardised along with the spectator's empathy for the character. In order to prove the *one action* of *Bicycle Thieves*, Zavatti represented all the logical steps that *could* lead an honest man to crime. Before resorting to theft Antonio

- a) went to the police station to report the theft
- b) went to the housing project to find Biaocco
- c) went to Piazza Vittorio to search for the bike
- d) went to the church to find the witness
- e) went to the fortune teller
- f) chased the thief

Zavatti knew that he would not have the spectators' empathy towards Antonio unless he showed that his protagonist has exhausted all options before the theft.

Antonio is not an Aristotelian character. He is not extraordinary and he did not commit an *hamartia* in the strict Aristotelian sense. His clumsiness – not paying attention to his bike when putting the poster up – is a small mistake and cannot be compared to the tragic mistake that an Aristotelian character commits. He does have, though, the necessary character elements that make the audience identify with him and experience the pity and fear emotions. In fact, the premise of *Bicycle Thieves* would have been impossible to prove with a protagonist that was not sympathetic.

The protagonist is an active character, who passes from misfortune (absence of bicycle) to good fortune (gaining the bicycle) and then misfortune again (loosing his bicycle and forced to steal a new one). So, not only does the plot of *Bicycle Thieves* have the basic Aristotelian element of *Reversal of Fortune* (transition from fortune to misfortune), it also has *peripeteia*; by stealing the bicycle, Antonio produces the exact opposite result of what he intended to do.

The secondary means of representation (filmic techniques) of *Bicycle Thieves* does not contradict the primary means of representation (plot). There are only a few close-ups, but most of the film is shot in long takes in order to show what *seems* like life unfolding. There are no striking camera

movements, no complicated and interchanging lighting techniques, no conspicuous montage construction. The basic aim is not to make the audience aware of the medium of *mimesis* (technique), but of the object of *mimesis*; the story of Antonio and his bicycle. The approach of not drawing attention to the *medium* of *mimesis* is purely Aristotelian. As I have mentioned before, the 'spectacle' is considered by Aristotle an inferior form of stimulating the spectators' interest. The aim of the Aristotelian film is that the filmic techniques are in harmony with the narrative, as it is the case with *Bicycle Thieves*.

Bicycle Thieves is based on the rules of probability and necessity (*verisimilitude*). We are presented with a simple, logically probable story. We are convinced that under the right circumstances, a good and decent character as Antonio *could* become a criminal. The right circumstances are presented by the selection of the right scenes, the scenes that carry us to the logical conclusion of the *one action* selected by the screenwriter. It is true that another poor person could have other choices in real life. But, this specific character had no other choice so we are convinced.

The audience and the characters do not experience pure *katharsis*. According to Aristotle, *katharsis* is an intellectual and emotional clarification of the protagonist and the spectator. In *Bicycle Thieves*, the spectator clearly sees the reasons why poverty leads to crime. Intellectually, the spectator is satisfied. There are no doubts of the reasons that led Antonio to resort to theft. But because the element of *hamartia* is missing in its pure Aristotelian form, *katharsis* cannot be achieved. In the last scene we see father and son holding each other's hand and we feel that love, understanding, forgiveness and partnership *could* overcome the ordeals of the characters we have identified with. But there is no irreversible, tragic change brought about from some *anagnorisis* (recognition) of the protagonist's *hamartia*. Thus, a pure Aristotelian *katharsis* is not possible in this specific film. Finally, the writers avoided the simplistic idealistic representation of the happy ending that characterizes the classical narrative design.

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CHAPTER II

KATHARSIS

KATHARSIS

Katharsis has been one of the most celebrated concepts in literature, theatre and film. There is a certain attraction to this term, an attraction perhaps attributed to the fact that there is still uncertainty of its exact meaning. One can only be sure that there are five widely accepted interpretations of *katharsis*, each of them explaining it as a moral, medical, structural, emotional or intellectual phenomenon.

In the previous Chapter, I have examined the definition of tragedy in order to discuss and clarify the concept of *mimesis*. In this Chapter, I will be focusing on the last sentence of Aristotle's definition of tragedy: '*by means of pity and fear effecting its purgation (katharsis) of these emotions*', and specifically on the word *katharsis*. There will be a discussion about the controversy over the true meaning of *katharsis*, as well as the polemic it has received from the founder of the *People's Theatre*, Augusto Boal, in the book *Theatre of the Oppressed*. By analysing the two major misinterpretations of *katharsis* (purgation and purification theories) I will conclude with a more accurate description of the Aristotelian *katharsis*. This will illuminate the true function of *katharsis* in an Aristotelian narrative as opposed to the classical and counter-Aristotelian narrative structures. Finally, I will give examples of inaccurate descriptions of *katharsis* in contemporary screenwriting texts.

Aristotle's definition of tragedy is:

Ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας και τελείας μέγεθος εχούσης, ηδυσμένο λόγω χωρίς εκάστω των ειδων εν τοις μορίοις, δρώντων και ου δι' απαγγελίας, δι' ελέου και φόβου περαίνουσα την των τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρση.¹

Tragedy then, is an imitation of an action of high importance, complete and of some amplitude; in language enhanced by distinct and varying beauties; acted not narrated; *by means of pity and fear effecting its purgation of these emotions.*²

The last sentence of Aristotle's definition (*by means of pity and fear effecting its purgation of these emotions*) has resisted interpretation due to the use of the word *katharsis*, but also the words *παθημάτων* (*emotions*), *των τοιούτων* (*these*), *περαινουσα* (*by means of*) that are open to various interpretations themselves. The interpretation of *katharsis* is further hindered by the absence of a coherent detailed explanation of the term in the *Poetics*. Aristotle explains all other elements of poetics that are included in the definition of tragedy and, even though he states in the *Politics* than he intends to discuss the meaning of *katharsis* in the *Poetics*, he fails to do so.

Regarding this omission S. H. Butcher observes the lack of a *katharsis* explanation in *Poetics*. A. Rostangi believes that Aristotle did give an explanation of *katharsis* in a treatise written earlier than *Poetics*, in the book *Περί Ποιητών*.³ A. Gudeman believes that there is a missing part of the *Poetics*, in which Aristotle analysed the meaning of *katharsis*.⁴

Gerald F. Else infers that Aristotle's explanation of *katharsis* in the *Poetics* would have been much different from his initial understanding of it in *Politics*⁵ and thus any explanatory comparisons between *katharsis* in music and *katharsis* in poetics is inaccurate. Carnes Lord believes that we cannot assume that there was a part of the *Poetics* missing, since when Aristotle referred to *katharsis* in *Politics* he was discussing the political and ethical functions of *katharsis* or music in general, a point of view that diverts attention from the preoccupation of the *Poetics*.⁶

However challenging it may be, the clarification of the true function of the Aristotelian *katharsis* is vital to the study of the screenplay's narrative. The reason is that the function of *katharsis* is directly related to the purpose and the effect of film on the spectator. For example, to accept that the function of the Aristotelian *katharsis* is to teach a set of moral values to the audience would make a film like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* entirely counter-Aristotelian. A sexually deviant character such as Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini)

cannot easily produce the feeling of empathy, which is an important ingredient of *katharsis*. Accepting, on the other hand that *katharsis*' function is not related to teaching the spectator any moral values but that it aims at exercising his/her reasoning would make the specific film a very good example of the Aristotelian *katharsis*.

If *katharsis* were a purely emotional phenomenon then the Aristotelian narrative method would not depend on spectators' intellectual involvement. Giving *katharsis* a purely emotional function would mean that many classical narrative films are Aristotelian, since the classic narrative structure depends primarily on the spectators' emotional rather than mental involvement. But, as I will argue in this chapter, to experience the Aristotelian *katharsis* the spectator needs firstly to be intellectually involved and secondly to be emotionally involved. Mental involvement is a *precondition* for emotional involvement and for *katharsis* to be achieved.

To accept that the function of *katharsis* is purely emotional would entail that the Aristotelian method manipulates the spectator. When a spectator is making a decision based on emotions rather than reason, he can easily be convinced. In this sense, a film could become a very powerful weapon of propaganda.

One of the *Poetics*' opponents, Augusto Boal, bases his case against the *Poetics* on the emotional function of *katharsis*. Boal labels the Aristotelian method as *idealist poetics*, describes it as a repressive system and contrasts it with his own poetics, *the poetics of the oppressed*. According to Boal, Aristotle's method is repressive because besides the emotional relief that it produces, *katharsis* also satisfies and mitigates the spectators' need for action. Boal asserts that after having experienced *katharsis* in theatre, the spectator no longer feels the urge to take action in real life. In the book *Theatre of the Oppressed* Boal sets out to prove that 'Aristotle constructs the first extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the bad or illegal tendencies of the audience'.⁷ 'The system is', Boal observes, 'fully utilized, not only in conventional theatre, but in the TV soap operas and in Western films as well: movies, theatre and television united, through a common basis in Aristotelian poetics, for repression of the people'.⁸

I am going to examine the logical steps Boal takes to arrive at this conclusion. Boal starts his discussion by analysing the concept of *mimesis* and pointing out the difference between our contemporary understanding of *mimesis* as imitation of nature and as a raw copying and reproduction of reality. He explains that the Aristotelian philosophy of *mimesis* is not related to a process of copying an original, but is associated with a 're-creation'. Poetry does not imitate nature, but 're-creates the creative principle of created things'.⁹ Boal then states that according to Aristotle 'this is the purpose of art and science: to correct the faults of nature by using suggestions of nature itself'. Indeed, Aristotle mentions in his *Physics* that art partly completes what nature cannot bring to finish, and partly imitates her. To clarify further the notion of *mimesis*, Boal does not refer to what Aristotle says in the *Poetics* itself, rather turns to the philosophical realm from which Aristotle's philosophy grew. This diversion from the *Poetics* is the beginning of Boal's false reasoning. He proceeds to form his own definition of what Aristotle meant when he defined tragedy. Aristotle's definition is:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.¹⁰

Boal's definition is 'Tragedy imitates the actions of man's rational soul, his passions turned into habits, in his search for happiness, which consists in virtuous behavior, whose supreme good is justice and whose maximum expression is the Constitution.'¹¹

This definition is derived from an analysis of Aristotelian concepts as discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Approximately in the same way that Aristotle proceeds with his reasoning in the *Ethics*, Boal explains what Aristotle meant by action (*praxis*). He differentiates between *faculties*, *passions* and *habits* to arrive at the conclusion that the actions worthy of imitation are the habitual passions, not the faculties. 'But to what end is a passion exerted, what is the purpose of man?' asks Boal. 'Happiness' he

answers, just like Aristotle answered in *Ethics*. Following Aristotle's reasoning, he eliminates the first degree of happiness as pertaining to the material goods that are a common aim and source of happiness for both humans and animals. Then, he eliminates the second degree of happiness as a state necessitating the approval of others to be realized and he arrives at the superior level of happiness: the virtuous exercise of the rational soul. Boal then concludes: 'Since the virtuous exercise of the rational soul is the object of a tragedy and since from other passages in the *Ethics* we see that Aristotle believed that the greatest virtue is the political good, tragedy imitates the political good which is justice.'¹² Basing his rationale on Aristotle's view that we must examine empirically the real, existing inequalities and base our criteria for equality on them, he *falsely assumes* that this leads us to accept as just (as in 'equitable' or 'rightful') the already existing inequalities. Boal concludes, 'For Aristotle, therefore, justice is already contained in reality itself as it is. He does not consider the possibility of transforming the already existing inequalities, but simply accepts them'.¹³ The intentional or unintentional false step in Boal's reasoning is that he 'jumps' from Aristotle's empirical *examination* of the real, to Aristotle's assumed *acceptance* of the real. This is not evident in the Aristotelian argument and Boal's assertion appears to be false.

Boal's conclusion contradicts Aristotle's argument, which Boal himself had previously used as a step in his reasoning, namely that the aim of art is to correct nature. The subsequent Chapters of *Theatre of the Oppressed* portray Aristotle as believing that the constitution *as it is* is the maximum expression of the supreme good which is justice and therefore happiness consists in obeying the law. This is another false step in Boal's syllogism. Aristotle's idea is that those who do not agree with the law might not be satisfied, but should at least remain passive, explains Boal. And then he asks once more: How can they remain passive? Boal says that there are many ways of repressing rebelliousness: politics, bureaucracy, habits, customs and Greek tragedy. The fundamental aspect of the tragedy is its repressive function in the Aristotelian system of tragedy. According to Boal's perspective, the coercive system of Aristotle works as follows:

First stage: The action begins. The tragic hero exhibits a trait, which even though appearing to be an *hamartia* – a tragic flaw – contributes to his/her happiness. Through identification and empathy the spectator's *hamartia* is stimulated. The character follows the path of the hero until a change in his/her fortune comes. The hero and the character start moving from happiness to misfortune.

Second stage: With the risk of distancing the spectator from the character after *peripeteia* occurs, the system employs recognition or *anagnorisis*. The protagonist accepts his/her error, hoping that the spectator will also accept as bad his/her own *hamartia*. The spectator has the great advantage of having erred only vicariously: he does not really pay for it. The spectator recognizes his/her own error, his/her own *hamartia*, his/her own anti-constitutional flaw.

Third stage: Aristotle demands that tragedy should have a *catastrophe*, a terrible, unhappy ending, so the spectator will keep in mind the terrible consequences of committing the error, not just vicariously but in actuality. The spectator, terrified by the spectacle of the catastrophe, is purified of his/her *hamartia*.

For Boal, *katharsis* and the repose it produces, takes away from the character and thus from the empathetic spectator the ability to act. To prove the inaccuracy of Boal's argument I intend to a) examine the existing theories on the function of *katharsis* to prove that its function is different from the repressive function Boal has attributed to it and, b) analyse Boal's narrative system in order to show that his method has many Aristotelian characteristics. I will also argue that if his allegation against the *Poetics* (*katharsis* has a repressive function) were true, then his proposed narrative method would be much more dangerous than the Aristotelian one.

As mentioned at the beginning of this Chapter, there are five main interpretations of the function of *katharsis*, but two of them have received most attention: the purification theory and the purgation theory. Such has been the controversy about these two interpretations that they are both accepted. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, defines *katharsis* in a way so as not to exclude any of them:

Katharsis: The effect of 'purgation' or 'purification' achieved by tragic drama, according to Aristotle's argument in the *Poetics*. Aristotle wrote that a tragedy should succeed 'in arousing pity and fear in such a way as to accomplish a *katharsis* of such emotions).¹⁴

The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* also accepts both theories: a) purification or purgation of the emotions (as pity and fear) primarily through art and b) a purification or purgation that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension.¹⁵ The same can be observed in M. H. Abrams' *Glossary of Literary terms* where it is written that 'Precisely how to interpret Aristotle's *katharsis* – which in Greek language signifies 'purgation' in a physiological, medical sense or 'clarification' or both is much disputed.'¹⁶

The view that *katharsis* functions as a form of moral *purification*, a correction or refinement of the feeling of pity and fear has been held primarily by the 18th century German Aesthetician Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. It is a view that has been embraced by Butcher and Rostagni and it has revived in a purer form by Humphry House.¹⁷ According to the purification theory, the theatre serves as a vehicle for the purification of our pity and fear since through *katharsis* these feelings are allayed and ennobled. The main argument used by the proponents of this theory comes not from the *Poetics* itself, but from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle states that the nature of moral virtue is to aim at a mean between excess and deficiency. In *Ethics*, *katharsis* is the process of training the person to respond with the proper amount of pity and fear, under the proper conditions, towards the proper objects. Since both pity and fear are analysed in *Ethics*, *Ethics* becomes a bridge to *Poetics* where pity and fear are regarded as basic tragic emotions. Building on this connection between the *Ethics* and the *Poetics*, the purification theory proponents argue that *katharsis* in *Poetics* must be the same with the one in *Ethics*.

House in his study *Aristotle's Poetics: A Course of Eight Lectures* uses the following passage from Aristotle's *Ethics* to support the purification theory:

If it is thus, then, that every art does its work well by looking to the intermediate and judging its works by this standard and if further virtue is more exact and better than any art, as nature also is, then virtue must have the quality of aiming at the intermediate. I mean moral virtue; for it is this that is concerned with passions and actions, and in these there is excess, defect and the intermediate. For instance, both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little and, in both cases, not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue.¹⁸

Based on this extract from the *Ethics*, House concludes:

The result of *katharsis* is an emotional balance and equilibrium and it may well be called a state of emotional health. The worst mistake we can fall into, in considering this theory of *katharsis*, is to think of the emotions of pity and fear in some abstract way irrespective of the objects to which they are directed, or by which they are aroused. Aristotle's whole doctrine only makes sense if we realize that the proper development and balance of the emotions depend upon the habitual direction of them towards worthy objects.¹⁹

But in discussing music Aristotle clearly contrasts the kind of music that is educational with the kind that is cathartic. Therefore, it seems that for Aristotle, serious drama may in general improve the quality and direction of our pity and fear, but its strictly cathartic effect does not have a moral connotation. House is basing his whole theory not on the *Poetics*, but on selected extracts from the *Ethics* and *Politics*. It seems that House puts emphasis on one aspect of *katharsis* that is not emphasised by Aristotle himself. The moral effects of drama and the educational aspect of a tragedy might not be directly related to *katharsis*, although they are a part of the whole

process. House assumes that the calmative effect on the audience is not intellectual but emotional, an argument that is used also by Boal to support his allegation against the Aristotelian method.

In discussing the essential pleasure of tragedy, Aristotle does not discuss at all any moral conditioning of the audience's emotions. He says that it is the task of the poet to provide pleasure by means of the *mimesis* of pity and fear. On mimetic pleasure Aristotle does say a lot in the *Poetics*. As Leon Golden observes in his essay *The Clarification Theory of Katharsis*,

Mimesis for Aristotle is an intellectual process involving learning and inference by which we move from a perception of particulars to the knowledge of individuals. No moral conditions of any kind are set by Aristotle on this learning process that is described in the *Poetics*. We, therefore, must reject the moral interpretation of *katharsis* both because there is no evidence for it in the *Poetics* itself, and because it stands isolated from the central mimetic pleasure attributed by Aristotle to all art forms, including of course, tragedy.²⁰

Equally unfounded seems to be the *purgation* theory, which views *katharsis* as a metaphor derived from Greek medicine and signifying the purgation of pity and fear from the audience. This view is traced back to the ancient Greek theory of homeopathic medicine and was revived by 19th century theorists, the most influential of them being Jakob Bernays.

According to the purgation theory there is strong evidence that *katharsis* means purgation, but not in the modern sense that bears the meaning of that which can be found in any medical dictionary as 'the evacuation of the bowels with the aid of a purgative or cathartic'. In the older, wider English sense, *katharsis* meant a sort of purgation which included partial removal of excess 'humours'. This theory has its roots in the School of Hippocrates where it was believed that the physical and mental health of the body depended on a balance or symmetry of these humours. Pity was associated with excess of wetness (tears) and fear with excess of cold (chills). Gorgias, a Greek pre-socratic philosopher (483-376 BC) had compared words with drugs that can remove the body's humours. The connection of mental

states and physical states was thus deemed to be quite strong. This theory assumes that the mental states were open to medical treatment as well.

To support his interpretation, Bernays turns to Aristotle's *Politics* where music is connected to *katharsis* as a relief of overcharged feeling.

Music is to be studied for the sake of many benefits and not of one only. It is to be studied with a view to education, with a view to *katharsis* – we use this term without explanation for now; when we come to speak of poetry, we shall give a clearer account of it – and thirdly with a view to the right use of leisure and for relaxation and rest after exertion...For every feeling that affects some souls violently affects all souls more or less; the difference is only one of degree. Take pity and fear, for example, or again enthusiasm. Some people are liable to become possessed by the later emotion, but we see that when they have made use of the melodies which feel the soul with orgiastic feeling, they are brought back by these sacred melodies to a normal condition, as if they had been medically treated and undergone a *katharsis*. Those who are subject to the emotions of pity and fear and the feelings generally will necessarily be affected in the same way; and so will other men in exact proportion to their susceptibility to such emotions. All experience a certain *katharsis* and pleasant relief. In the same manner, melodies give innocent joy to men.²¹

Bernays asserts that the purgative function of *katharsis* of certain types of music as described in the *Politics*, must be same we are to expect from the *katharsis* of tragedy. He assumes that as it is the case *with souls overpowered by religious ecstasy*, so with tragedy an audience overcharged with fear and pity undergoes a kind of *katharsis*, a purgation or – as F. L. Lucas suggests – a 'healthy relief'.²²

In the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle does not say anything about a restoration of atrophy or excess of pity and fear that should undergo any purgation. Bernays assumes that evidence from the *Politics* can be applied to the solution of the problem in *Poetics*. As Golden Leon observes:

Bernays' unargued assumption that the meaning of *katharsis* in the *Poetics* must be the same as its meaning in the *Politics* represents a grave methodological error because it fails to take account of the individuality of the works concerned and the specific context from which the term appears'.²³

Perhaps the strongest argument against the purgation theory supported by Bernays comes, paradoxically, from the *Politics*. Golden observes:

In *Politics* Aristotle tells us that he will speak of *katharsis* generally now but that he will tell us more precisely what he means by this term in the *Poetics*. Now, a few lines later, he tells us that some highly emotional people, after they have been exposed to violent melodies, react as if they have received 'medical treatment' and 'purgation'. If Aristotle's concept of *katharsis* were limited to medical purgation, there would be little reason for him to advise the reader to await a more precise discussion of the term in the *Poetics*. As Flashar has elaborately documented, *katharsis*, in the sense of medical purgation would have been an easily and commonly understood term that would not require additional explanation.²⁴

The inaccurate view that pity and fear should undergo a process of purgation may have roots in the past but it is still accepted by contemporary screenwriting theorists. Kevin Boon in the article *Poetics and the Screenplay: Revisiting Aristotle* writes that 'Aristotle's explanation for the appeal of tragedy is that well-crafted tragedy results in a purgation of pity and fear. To put it in the popular idiom, by watching dramas that excite pity and fear in us, we effectively get them out of our system'.²⁵

Another argument that weakens both the purification and the purgation theories is that pity and fear are not the only tragic emotions, they are only the basic two tragic emotions. The first and only passage that Aristotle mentions *katharsis* is the definition of tragedy in Chapter VI (*through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions*). The translations of the definition found in both the two most popular translators of the text – Butcher

and L.J. Potts – fail to convey the crucial importance of the word *τοιούτων* by translating it as *these* emotions and not as *such* emotions. By translating *τοιούτων* correctly with the word *such* one can see that Aristotle did not refer only to the emotions of pity and fear, but probably included *adjacent emotions*. The nature of the emotions of pity and fear are mentioned mainly in Chapter XIII of the *Poetics* as ‘the distinctive mark of tragic imitation’ and are therefore regarded as conducive towards the distinctive tragic pleasure. This, however, does not exclude the existence of other feelings such as grief, weakness, contempt, blame. The emotional aspect of the cathartic function is not to be limited to only the emotions of pity and fear. Why then the emphasis on pity and fear and the use of them nearly always as a pair?

An accurate understanding of *katharsis*’ function is impossible without answering first the above question. Pity and fear are directly related to the *kind of katharsis* achieved in a classical narrative film as opposed to the Aristotelian narrative film. I will argue that the emotions of pity and fear, in the Aristotelian sense, are not enough for *katharsis* to occur. *Katharsis* cannot be brought about without the spectator’s mental involvement. In Chapter XIII Aristotle states:

The change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity, for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy: it possesses no single tragic quality; it neither satisfies the moral sense nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor again should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; *for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.*

There remains the character between the two extremes – that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity but by some error or frailty.²⁶

Why wouldn't the passage of a virtuous man from good fortune to misfortune produce *such* feelings to us? Because an eminently good and just man, a character possessing no flaws, would not be one 'like ourselves' and would not produce empathy. His downfall would be due not to a mistake but to an accident and the accidental is shocking but not tragic. In the case of the hero-villain, the spectator misses the element of unmerited misfortune necessary for pity, since he feels that the hero *did* deserve the calamities that fell upon them. Again, the spectator will not identify with the character. The downfall of a villain satisfies our sense of justice, but does not produce any sort of empathy.

Pity and fear are very closely allied to one another. Fear, says Aristotle, is 'a kind of pain or disturbance due to a *mental picture* of some destructive or painful evil in the future', but one that 'when it happens to or threatens others, causes us to feel pity'.²⁷ Referring to pity, he explains:

Pity is a sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which might expect to happen to ourselves or to some of our friends, and this at a time when it is said to be near at hand.²⁸

The only way that we might expect the disaster to happen to ourselves is that the character is 'like ourselves', hence Aristotle's insistence on a character not eminently good, but *rather* good. It is important to understand that Aristotle's treatment of pity is not as an altruistic emotion. We cannot feel pity without being afraid for ourselves. 'The character', said Aristotle 'should be lifelike; this is distinct from making the character good and appropriate'.²⁹

The relationship of the *dramatis personae* to the spectator has to be balanced. The characters cannot be too removed from the spectator. That would jeopardise the emergence of empathy by annihilating the common emotional ground between spectator and character. But the tragic hero has to be close enough so that the spectator can experience fear.

Through the tragic plot, tragedy arouses these emotions of fear and pity. Fear and pity as 'species' of pain are not elements to be *extinguished*.

Therefore, the purgation and purification theories that speak of *katharsis*' power to purge away or purify the painful elements do not make sense.

Why would a controlled release of emotions in tragedy prevent their being expressed in real life? It seems that not only it does not prevent them, but it could also feed them. Freud himself used the term *katharsis*, until he found that the release of emotions is not enough without the analysis of repressions. It seems that there is a missing element in the equation of *katharsis*. Pity and fear are not enough for *katharsis* to occur.

Celie Johnson in Steven Spielberg's film *The Color Purple* (1985), however sympathetic, still cannot be considered a character that produces the tragic emotions of pity and fear in the Aristotelian and not the contemporary sense of these emotions. Celie's tragic life and her inability to rebel against it is not due to her own *hamartia* (tragic error of judgement), but to the cruel living conditions any African American woman was destined to have in the early 1900s in the United States of America. The spectator is convinced that because of her social background, Celie has no other choice than to endure her husband's abuse. Thus the emotions of pity and fear that the spectator experiences in the classical narrative of *The Color Purple* are not related to the Aristotelian fear and pity that the spectator experiences when he is aware of the character's own *hamartia*.

Celie is not a rather good active character, but an eminently good, passive character who gets undeserved misfortune. More importantly, she is not achieving the opposite of her intentions (*peripeteia*) and the spectator cannot experience the tragic irony. The unconvincing ending of her escape and a chance to live 'happily ever after' is the typical ending of the classic narrative structure. The effect on the spectator is some variation of emotional relief and thus different from the Aristotelian function of *katharsis*.

Even in the case of an Aristotelian character, there are chances that *katharsis* won't be experienced by the spectator. An example of a counter-Aristotelian *katharsis* even if the character is Aristotelian can be found in *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2002). The protagonist, Szpilman is a rather good man, but not an eminently good one because he was not active in the revolutionary action initiated by Jews in response to the German invasion to Poland. Szpilman not idealised. He is depicted as being *finer* than common

people because he is a charismatic pianist, but he is not heroic. He is a sharp-eyed, remote, solitary man, who – though liked by the people to whom he relates – does not seem close to anybody, including his family, although he feels loyalty toward them. He is not an activist, but he is not willing to betray his beliefs either.

The plot of *The Pianist* imitates a serious action (war and its consequences) and a complete one (clear beginning, middle and end). The plot has unity of action by focusing on *one action*: the tortures that a Jew had to undergo in War World II. There is narrative linearity with clear motivation of a series of causes and effects without significant digressions or delays caused by irrelevant actions. *Verisimilitude* is achieved because the scenes and sequences are causally connected and the rule of probability and necessity is not violated. The film is plot-oriented with the characterization closely interwoven. Its high degree of closure resolves all lines of action. It also incorporates in the narrative the element of the *inevitable* and the *unexpected*. According to Aristotle, (chapter IX) the best tragic effects depend on the combination of the inevitable (probable and necessary) and the unexpected (element of surprise). Szpilman undergoes inevitable tortures but he is also unexpectedly rescued by the German officer.

Even though the spectator experiences pity and fear for Szpilman and the plot has some Aristotelian elements, *katharsis* is not possible in this ostensibly Aristotelian film. *The Pianist* lacks one of the most essential Aristotelian plot construction elements, *peripeteia*. *Peripeteia* seems to occur when the German officer discovers Szpilman and decides not to kill him but to do the exact opposite, to save him. But *peripeteia* should be the state where the protagonist himself is led to misfortune, having achieved – because of his *hamartia* – the opposite of his intentions. Szpilman has not committed an *hamartia*. Szpilman was a victim of a war and he was just trying to survive. Without *hamartia*, *peripeteia* is impossible. And without *peripeteia* there cannot be *anagnorisis*, the recognition of *hamartia*. Therefore, *katharsis* is not possible.

In *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1998), the protagonist, Lola, is a character that produces the emotions of pity and fear. However, *katharsis* in the Aristotelian sense of it cannot be brought about in *Run Lola Run*.

Lola is trying to save her loved one, Manni, from being murdered by a drug dealer. In the whole 76 minutes of the film the spectator sees a woman running endlessly, robbing a bank, climbing onto ambulances, recovering from a car accident, robbing a supermarket, gambling – doing everything humanly possible to save the man she loves. Also, Lola is adopted, her mother is an alcoholic and her father does not love her. All she has is Manni and the spectator has no choice but to experience the emotions of pity and fear for her.

Lola is not an eminently good character, because she does not hesitate to break the law in order to save Manni. At the same time, Lola appears to be better than a common woman. She is brave, she is courageous, she just does not give up. But Lola has not committed an *hamartia*. The spectator thus experiences the climax of emotions that characterizes a classical narrative structure. But to arrive at a climax of pity and fear is not the same as to experience an Aristotelian *katharsis*.

In the above examples, the spectator feels pity and fear for the protagonist. But this is not enough for *katharsis* to occur. The dead end and the confusion associated with the interpretation of *katharsis* has to do with overemphasizing emotion (pity, fear and adjacent emotions) and failing to put the *intellect* into our equation.

I have argued that both the two major approaches to the interpretation of *katharsis* (purification and purgation theories) are dependent on evidence outside the *Poetics*. And, as it has been demonstrated, any cross-reference or other external evidence supporting the one or the other theory should follow somehow the interpretation derived from the *Poetics* itself and should not precede it. Boal's interpretation is derived from his allusion to the *Politics* and *Ethics* and the same allusion is used by those who believe that *katharsis* is purification and/or purgation of the spectators' emotions.

Both interpretations take for granted that the *katharsis* formula, whatever it actually means, has necessarily to do with the emotional reaction of the spectator. H. Otte and Else offer us a structural interpretation of *katharsis* and they differ from other scholars in that they base their arguments on evidence from the *Poetics* without needing any external justifications. For Otte the purification related to *katharsis* does not have to do with the emotions

of the audience, but with purifying the events of the plot. With Otte's observation *katharsis* is at last seen as a vital element of plot construction and not simply as the aim of the tragic experience.

Else, in *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* takes Otte's theory a step further and attributes *katharsis* to an element within the play itself. *Katharsis* signifies the purgation of the guilt attached to the hero's tragic act, through the demonstration by the course of the drama that the hero performed his/her *hamartia without knowledge* of its nature. His theory examines a *katharsis* as attained from the *plot* of the tragedy.

The theories I have analysed so far have some common characteristics: the two tragic emotions, pity and fear, are taken to denote the spectator's emotions. It is the spectator who experiences pity and fear and thereafter is purged or purified.

There are two points to be made here. The first pertains to the alternative translations offered for the concepts of *έλεος* (pity) and *φόβος* (fear) as they are structured in the definition of the tragedy. Some interpreters have translated *έλεος* and *φόβος* as 'pathetic and fearful incidents'. (*δι' ελεεινών or οικτρών και φοβερών παθημάτων*). Indeed, it is not unreasonable to be uneasy with the first interpretation as it poses the following question: How it is possible to assume that fear and pity can be purged of themselves? This does not agree with Aristotle's theory. Else points out,

The reason why the notion of pity and fear being purged by pity and fear has persisted is that no other agency has been visible in the sentence, through which the *katharsis* could be brought about. It is natural to refer *παθημάτων* (incidents) to *ελέου και φόβου* (pity and fear) since the latter stand so near.³⁰

Else re-interprets pity and fear as *pitiful and fearful incidents*, as a *praxis painful* (*παθος δε εστι πραξις φθαρτική ή οδυνηρά*) and not as emotions. *Pathos* as it is explained in Aristotle's definition of tragedy does have an emotional quality but it is not an emotion itself. In Chapter XI Aristotle makes clear that *pathos* or the scene of suffering is 'a destructive or painful

action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like’.

Pathos is a *praxis* (action) not an *emotion*.

Strong evidence for Else’s interpretation is to be found in the *Poetics* itself where Aristotle clarifies exactly what he means by *τοιούτων παθημάτων* (such incidents). In Chapter XIV, Aristotle states:

Let us then determine what are the circumstances, which strike us as terrible or pitiful. Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another. If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or the intention (*proairesis*) - except so far as the suffering is in itself pitiful. So again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another-if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother, or any other deed of the kind is done-these are the situations to be looked for by the poet.³¹

It is clear now what Aristotle meant by *such incidents*. *Pathos* is an important part of the play, but the kind of incidents that are capable of producing the *pathos* that stimulates pity and the fear are specific and they involve murders intentional or not among blood relations. The presupposition of *παθημάτων* to stand for pity and fear and not pitiful and fearful incidents does not seem as plausible as before.

Most theorists agree that *katharsis* has to do with a change of feeling that tragedy causes in the spectator. But, as Else observes, the meaning of *περαινουσα*, (*through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions- δι’ελέου και φόβου περαιίνουσα την των τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν*) has not received much attention. The word carries the meaning of something that takes a while to be completed, or something that is progressively completed (*περαίνω* means bring to completion). As mentioned earlier, most of the *Poetics* interpreters come to the conclusion that *katharsis* as the emotional change occurring in tragedy, is achieved by means of pity and fear. However, it should be noted that the preposition *δια* (*δι’ελέου και*

φόβου περαίνουσα – *through pity and fear*) when it is accompanied by the genitive can mean: a) the place where one exits from and b) duration. The meaning of causality (*because of pity and fear effecting*) has been attributed to the word in contemporary Greek, but does not have the same meaning in ancient Greek. In ancient Greek the meaning of the preposition *δια* is *through* or *in the course of* the feelings of fear and pity as experienced throughout the tragedy through the structure of the plot events.³²

If the word *παθημάτων* means incidents or actions rather than emotions, then *katharsis* must be related to some sort of purification, not purgation. The incidents or events cannot be purged from the play. The purification, however, will not be of the kind already analysed. It will not be the moral refinement of the feeling of pity and fear, but it will refer to the *purification of the tragic act* of the hero by the demonstration that its motive was not polluted (*μιαρόν*). Oedipus's tragic act of killing his father and marrying his mother is 'purified' when the spectator realises through the plot that his intentions were pure and he in fact committed these tragic acts while trying to protect his family.

I have argued so far that *katharsis* is neither a purgation, nor a purification of the emotions of pity and fear. *Katharsis* is related to the clarification/purification of the protagonist's tragic act by showing that his/her intention was not 'polluted'. This conclusion is the first step in disengaging the Aristotelian *katharsis* from the repressive nature Boal has attributed to it, because it shows that *katharsis* is not a means to intimidate the spectator by means of the emotions of fear and pity. To complete my argument that *katharsis* is a more intellectual process than Boal presents it, I need to take a closer look at the dyad *hamartia/anagnorisis* (*tragic mistake/recognition*).

According to Aristotle, the best tragedy is the one that employs a complex plot, that is, one that the action changes with *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and not simply with reversal of fortune. The complex plot is founded on an *hamartia*, a tragic mistake of the intellect. This *hamartia* has to do with a crime towards a family member and not with unconstitutional behaviour as Boal asserts. *Hamartia* is the cornerstone of the complex plot. But the dramatic potential inherent in the *hamartia* is not carried forward without *anagnorisis*.

Pathos then, becomes tragic when it involves close relatives, when it is based on an *hamartia* (*pathos* would actually not be performed without the existence of *hamartia*) which will be discovered by means of *anagnorisis* later in the tragic plot. *Anagnorisis* is essential for the purification of the protagonist's tragic acts.

Hamartia, Aristotle writes, must occur between those who are near or dear to one another; *hamartia* must involve family. I intend to briefly discuss the reasons for this preoccupation, if not obsession of ancient Greeks (even in the 4th century) with the concept of pollution derived from spilling kindred blood and with the means of purification of that act. By this discussion I will show that the spectator/citizen in ancient Greece was given more power than Boal assumes.

In *Laws*, Plato adopts the recognized Attic division into murders *εκούσιοι* (voluntary), *ακούσιοι* (involuntary), *δίκαιοι* (just). I will focus on the wilful-voluntary murders and specifically on the most heinous of all, the wilful murder of a close blood-kin (*εν ταις φιλίαςιας*). It is interesting to note that the deliberate killing of any blood-relative is so fearful that even Plato hesitates to legislate about it. Plato says that 'there is no other possible purification of the common blood that has been defiled, and the pollution cannot be washed out until the guilty soul has paid for murder with murder, like with like, and so appeased and stilled the wrath of the whole clan.'³³

The offender is to be killed and his/her body thrown naked outside the city at a crossroads, his/her head stoned and then finally thrown outside the city's borders, unburied. More specifically, the crime of parricide and matricide constitute especially monstrous crimes that cannot even be put in the realm of crimes committed in anger. So, whereas the killing of a brother by a brother in anger, in war or any circumstances that involve self-defence is treated as a regular homicide, parricide and matricide find no excuse.³⁴

The mere pronouncement that a homicide has been *δίκαιος* (just) or accidental, was enough to assure the agent as *καθαρός* (clean): there was no further requirement for religious purification. It is important to note that the *people were given considerable power*. If the doer was forgiven by his/her victim he would be regarded as *καθαρός* and he would be at once exempt from the necessity to be purified. In parricide or matricide if the victim (mother

or father) 'before he dies, of his/her own free will releases the doer from the murder the latter is clean after undergoing the purification procedures required for those committing an involuntary crime'.³⁵ *The individual could act of his own accord in the capacity of the court of law.* The dying person, not only could forgive his son/daughter but had the power to nullify the blood-pollution.

Boal fails to observe that the judges in tragedy are the Athenian citizens, people that have been given the power to judge, but will not pass legal judgement without thinking that even men *like themselves* can commit an *hamartia* and be involved in the most monstrous of crimes. The *philanthropon* (humane) is an essential element of tragedy. Are these spectators using their *reason* for this judgement, or are they, as Boal asserts, victims of their emotions manipulated and forced to repress their anti-constitutional behaviour?

How is it possible that the modern spectator can feel pity for a criminal and drug dealer (*Scarface*, Brian De Palma, 1983), despise the police when it riddles the bodies of two 'evil' bank robbers with bullets (*Bonnie and Clyde*, Arthur Penn, 1967), come to admire a secret service agent working as a 'stool pigeon' (*The Lives of Others*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), anticipate the moment a woman kills the father of her child (*Kill Bill* Vols. 1 and 2, Quentin Tanantino, 2003/2004) or feel pity when a ruthless mafia chief finally dies (*Godfather: Part III*, Francis Ford Coppola, 1990)? It is possible because the spectator has *decided* that the above protagonists are worthy of his/her empathy and not because he was 'tricked' into pitying them.

Empathy for Boal is a 'terrible weapon', an insidious mechanism that consists of two people – the spectator and the character – and makes one of those two people (the spectator) *surrender* to the other (the character) his/her power to make decisions. But this is totally opposed to the power that the spectator is given in Greek tragedy. There is strong evidence to support the idea that the tragic emotions involve an element of judgement, *contrary to Boal's beliefs*. Boal's view of the Aristotelian dramatic method is reminiscent of Plato's view of poetry and especially the theatre that it excited and fed the emotions, that is the 'irrational part' of the soul.

Aristotle believed that man *qua* man must have in him/her the power to reason, to govern and the power to act. And what reason governs is not itself,

but desire and the feeling (αρχη δ' ο λογισμός ου λογισμοῦ αλλ' ορέξεως και παθημάτων). There are two kinds of virtue in man, the intellectual and the moral, the former belonging to the rational part of the soul per se, the latter to the part which is irrational but by its nature is obedient to the part possessing reason.³⁶ So, the soul of man is made up partly by reason and partly by something which, even though is irrational, it is *amenable* to reason. The feelings thus are potentially rational, capable of being subjected to reason, capable of 'listening' to reason. And so, contrary to Plato and contrary to Boal's claim, the life of feeling is brought into direct contact with reason. Else accurately writes that 'from now on, we can be talking about rational aspects of feeling or emotional employments of reason (practical and moral reason) depending on the point of view'.³⁷

It is possible to feel pity and fear and empathise with characters who have committed hideous crimes, such as Sophocle's Oedipus, Euripides' Medea or Shakespeare's Richard because there is something deeper than feelings, there is some sort of *mental process*, a judgement involved to allow for empathy and *katharsis* to occur.

Aristotle's definitions of pity and fear show that fear is a state of mental pain or discomfort caused by the imagination of an impending danger which will be destructive or painful. Not *all* evils are to be feared. The fear has to appear close at hand and entail major pain or damage. These are *prerequisites* to our being afraid. It is clear that a *judgement* is involved.

With pity, the spectator understands that there is a threat of pain or destruction to somebody who does not deserve it, someone 'like ourselves'. Here, there are two judgements prerequisite to this kind of pity: a) that the hero is 'like ourselves' and b) that the hero does not deserve this misfortune. These judgements *are not after effects of the spectator's feelings*, they are the *prerequisites* of it. As Else observes, the conditions which must be satisfied before the spectator's psyche (the rational element in his/her soul) will allow the emotions to be felt'.³⁸

In *Godfather: Part III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990) we see an aging Michael Corleone who has recognized the mistakes of the past (*anagnorisis of hamartia*) and is trying to remove himself from the violent underworld. But, unlike the classical narrative structure, the Aristotelian structure of *Godfather*

Ill does not allow for an unrealistic happy ending. Michael's *anagnorisis* of his *hamartia* is followed by his *pathos* (death). The spectator has made the decision that Michael has repented and thus he is able (the spectator) to empathise with him. The same mental process occurs in *Kill Bill Vol I* (Quentin Tanantino, 2003). In the beginning of the film we are introduced to 'The Bride' who kills Vernita Green while her daughter is in the house. The motives behind this hideous act and the ones to follow are progressively revealed in the five Chapters of the screenplay and primarily in Chapter 2 where we see 'The Bride' in the hospital. Scene by scene, the spectator makes the decision to take 'The Bride's' side and to anticipate the moment that she will finally take her revenge.

The spectator makes the decision that the hero's *hamartia* was not intentional and only after making this decision can the spectator experience *katharsis*. As demonstrated in the previous Chapter and in the present analysis of *katharsis*, Aristotle does not suggest in any way that *mimesis* is related to purification or purgation. On the contrary, Aristotle does explicitly define *mimesis* as an intellectually pleasant learning experience. Therefore, only *katharsis*, in the sense of an 'intellectual clarification', could provide an explanation that is in harmony with the meaning of *mimesis* and with the general argument of the *Poetics*. Also, this is the only approach that seems to agree with Aristotle's insistence on keeping the rule of probability and necessity. Any false step in the plot's logical coherence hinders *verisimilitude*, stops the proper mimetic process and thus the proper cathartic experience.

I have argued that the most plausible explanation of *katharsis* is Else's idea of intellectual clarification. Taking Else's theory to be true, then Boal's argument is seen in a different light. Tragedy's audience cannot be passive. A passive audience would not have been able to experience *katharsis*, since empathy *presupposes* a mental involvement. How could Boal's alleged repression work without *katharsis*? It couldn't.

I now wish to develop this into a discussion of Boal's own experiments and arrive at a set of conclusions regarding the narrative structure of his method.

Boal was a part of a national literacy campaign (*Operation Alfabetizacion Integral* [ALFIN]) initiated and organized by the revolutionary

government of Peru in 1973. The ALFIN project had the aim of teaching literacy in all possible discourses and especially the artistic ones, such as the theatre, photography, puppetry, films and journalism. Boal, as an active member of the attempt to utilise theatre as a language, tried to show in practical ways how the theatre can be placed at the service of the oppressed so they can learn to express themselves, to discover new concepts, but primarily to *rehearse for action*.

Boal juxtaposes his system to Aristotle's idealist poetics and to Brecht's Marxist poetics. According to Boal, Aristotle proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him/her. Brecht, on the other hand, proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who acts in his/her place but the spectator reserves the right to think for him/herself, often in opposition to the character. In the first case, Boal asserts, a *katharsis* occurs. In the second, an awakening of the critical consciousness occurs. But Boal's poetics, *the poetics of the oppressed*, focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character either to act or to think in his/her place. On the contrary, the spectator assumes the leading role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions and discusses plans for change. This way, the spectator trains him/herself for action. In this case, according to Boal, 'perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a *rehearsal for revolution*. The liberated spectator as a whole person launches into action. No matter that the motion is fictional; what matters is that it is action! The theatre is a weapon and it is the people who should yield it'.³⁹

Boal's Theatre as Language is divided in three parts: simultaneous dramaturgy, image theatre and forum theatre. Each of these represents a different degree of direct participation of the spectator in the performance. The spectator is encouraged to intervene in the action, abandoning his/her place as an 'object' and assuming fully the role of subject.

Whereas simultaneous dramaturgy is an invitation made to the spectator to intervene without necessitating his/her physical presence on stage, in the forum theatre the participant has to intervene decisively in the dramatic action and *change it*. The procedure is as follows: First, the participants are asked to tell a story containing a political or social problem

that has a difficult solution. Then a ten to fifteen minute skit portraying that problem and the solution intended for discussion is improvised or rehearsed and subsequently presented. When the skit is over, the participants are asked if they agree with what was presented. At least some will say no. At this point, it is explained that the scene will be performed once more, exactly as it was initially. But now, any participant in the audience has the right to replace any actor and lead the action in the direction that seems to him/her more appropriate. The displaced actor stands aside, but remains ready to take part again at the moment that the participant feels that his/her own intervention has finished. The other actors have to face the newly created situation, responding instantly to all the possibilities that it might present.

The participants who choose to intervene must continue the physical actions of the replaced actors; they are not allowed to come on the stage and just talk. They must carry out the same type of work or activities performed by the actors who were in their place. *The spectator becomes the actor.*

Boal gives us an example of the forum theatre play:

An eighteen-year-old man worked in the city of Chimbote, one of the world's most important fishing ports. Her boss was a ruthless exploiter forcing his employees to work from 8 in the morning to 8 at night, or vice versa; twelve consecutive hours of work. Thus, the story problem was how to combat this exploitation.

Each participant had a proposal. One of the proposals, for example, was the initiation of the "operation Turtle", which consists in working very slowly, especially when the boss is not looking. One young man had a brilliant idea: to work faster and build the machines with so much fish that it would break with the excessive weight, requiring 2 or 3 hours to fix it. During this time, the workers could rest. When this was rehearsed, the outcome was that the boss would arrange to fix the machine and even though the workers would get some rest, the problem was not permanently but only temporarily fixed.

There were other proposals as well: to start a strike, throw a bomb at the machine, start a union etc. Then the technique of Forum Theater took place. The

scene would be staged exactly as it had been the first time, but now each spectator-participant would have the right to intervene and act out his proposal. After much disagreement and trying out proposals, the third attempt which has found all in agreement was the forming of a small union for the purpose of negotiating the workers' demands, politicizing the unemployed and the employed citizens.⁴⁰

In the forum theatre, Boal concludes, no idea is imposed: the audience has the opportunity to try out all its ideas, to rehearse all possibilities and to verify them in theatrical practice. Boal notes that:

The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. While he rehearses throwing the bomb on stage, he is concretely rehearsing the way a bomb is thrown. Acting out his attempt to organize a strike, he is concretely organizing a strike. Within limits, the experience is a concrete one. *Here the cathartic effect is entirely avoided.* We are used to plays in which the characters make the revolution on stage and the spectators in their seats feel themselves to be triumphant revolutionaries. *Why make a revolution in reality if we have already made it in the theatre?* But that does not happen here: the rehearsal stimulates the practice of the act in reality. Forum Theatre instead of taking something away from the spectator, evokes in him a desire to practice in reality the act he has rehearsed in the theatre. The practice of these theatrical forms creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment in real action.⁴¹

I would like now to examine the narrative structure of Boal's example of a Forum Theatre story. Abbreviating the solutions presented would result in the following:

The worker in the fish factory cannot physically endure the working hours forced by his boss (empathy-identification, complication, crisis).
He tries various ways of dealing with the problem (unravelling):

- 1) He contrives a way to stop the machine and rest for a while (false resolution).
- 2) He thinks of throwing a bomb (false resolution).
- 3) He decides to go on a strike but he is immediately replaced, since there is so much unemployment (false resolution).
- 4) He finally decides to form a small union and gradually fight politically and actively for his rights (climax, resolution/positive ending).

The narrative structure of the story has many Aristotelian elements and it concurrently follows the classical narrative structure *crisis-climax-resolution*. The narrative dynamics of the selected story depend to great extent on the Aristotelian element of *empathy*. The audience recognizes this character and identifies with him/her. The worker is not an idealised character, he is one 'like ourselves', one that we can identify with and develop interest for. In the proposed ending, the character becomes extraordinary by selecting the long-term and more correct solution, something reminiscent of the typical happy ending of the classic narrative structure. Boal's system is an amalgam of Aristotelian and classical narrative structures as it is used – more or less – in mainstream cinema today.

To achieve and ensure the effect of identification, Boal uses stereotypical characters, such as the underpaid worker in the factory. Boal does not touch the specific issue in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. However, in an interview at the University of Nebraska in March 1996 when he was asked about stereotypes by Douglas L. Paterson and Mark Weinberg he said that the use of stereotypes is almost inevitable.⁴²

Augusto Boal does not seem to have a problem with the Aristotelian narrative structure or with the classical narrative structure, as long as this structure is composed and performed by the spectator. That seems to be the core of his polemic against the Aristotelian method: he accuses the Aristotelian method instead of accusing the ways in which the method is actually used.

Boal assumes that the cathartic effect is avoided entirely by his system. He asserts that we are used to Aristotelian plays in which the protagonist makes the revolution for us on stage and we – the spectators – feel like

triumphant revolutionaries without 'moving a finger'. We do not have to because the character revolts on our behalf. The Aristotelian system and specifically *katharsis*, Boal writes, prevents us from taking action in real life.

But as I have demonstrated in this Chapter, *katharsis* necessitates the intellectual involvement of the spectator. This means that the spectator cannot be passive. On the contrary, he is actively thinking and he decides that, despite the character's mistake (*hamartia*), he can experience empathy (for the character) and *katharsis*. Without the involvement of the spectator's intellect, the mimetic purpose is hindered and the cathartic process is not realized.

I will take Boal's assertion (*katharsis* is dangerous because it prevents the spectator from taking action in real life) to be true to prove that, if it were true, *Boal's system is more dangerous to the spectator than the Aristotelian system*.

If it is true that the spectator identifies with the character and is sort of 'tricked' by him/her to act on his/her behalf, and if this is such a strong influence on the spectator so as to repress any need for him/her to act in real life, then the actual acting out of the revolutionary impulses by the spectator on stage might relieve the spectator more and produce a deeper and more intense *katharsis*. This *katharsis* will make the spectator feel that he has achieved something greater than just viewing. Pretending to be a hero who takes action instead of just viewing a hero would, in turn, mitigate and reduce the spectator's inner desire to revolt in real life.

Boal contradicts his own system when he asks 'Why make a revolution in reality if we have already made it in the theatre?'. He answers: 'But that does not happen here: the rehearsal stimulates the practice of the act in reality'. Boal argues that the cathartic effect is avoided by his poetics, but he does not offer solid arguments to support this statement besides his sincere belief that 'this does not happen here'. But this is a statement, not an argument.

With Boal's system, the worker-spectator might feel *katharsis* (in Boal's use of the term) after forming the small union on stage. The spectator is taking part in the 'realization' (on stage) of a solution in his life, a solution he materialized only on stage, but in fact has experienced as 'real'. The

spectator's anti-constitutional behavior is mitigated without having to jeopardize anything in real life.

Boal contends that the practice of his poetics creates an uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment in real action. But it makes more sense that this uneasy sense of incompleteness might be actually reduced by acting it out on stage. One could even assume that this uneasy sense of the unfulfilled action is stronger when the spectator *does not* get the chance to act it out and leaves the theatre not contended.

I have argued that Boal's basic argument against *katharsis* and the Aristotelian poetic method is false. I have also shown that if we take it to be true, then his own system becomes more dangerous than the Aristotelian. I have demonstrated that amongst the various interpretations of *katharsis*, the most plausible is *katharsis* as a process of emotional relief that would not have come about without a preceding intellectual clarification of the protagonist's *hamartia*.

I wish now to turn this discussion to the examination of *katharsis* as it is interpreted by contemporary screenwriting books. There are various textbooks applying the Aristotelian *katharsis* in the narrative structure of the screenplay that offer a simplistic explanation of *katharsis* as related only to pity and fear and not to the protagonist's *hamartia*.

In *Aristotle in Hollywood*, Ari Hiltunen, states that:

Aristotle might well have adapted the medical term catharsis to relate to the way the audience experiences the intense anxiety of impending fear which creates the same physiological response - the pulse and breathing become rapid and the pupils dilate - as when we are aware of a real threat directed towards us...We could say that if witnessing moral injustice produces pity and fear, witnessing the re-establishment of moral justice produces pleasure. The more intense the injustice, the greater the pleasure when moral justice occurs at the end of the drama. Catharsis is therefore, an emotionally pleasurable experience that is also morally satisfying.⁴³

Michael Tierno in *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters*, explains *katharsis* as follows:

In the final moments of a movie, the audience experiences the moment that allows them to purge themselves of pity and fear built up through the plot structure. Through this 'catharsis', the audience releases not just the emotions the movie has stirred up in them, but they also dump other psychic garbage they've been carrying around.⁴⁴

Such descriptions are confusing and inaccurate since they present *katharsis* as a mystical state occurring unexpectedly at the end of the film. As I have shown in this chapter, *katharsis* is not related to a moral justice (Hiltunen's interpretation) and it is not related to purging pity and fear of themselves (Tierno's interpretation).

Much of the confusion around *katharsis* is also related to the fact that at some cases the climax and/or *pathos* are confused with *katharsis*. In *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, Christopher Vogler writes,

Catharsis works best through physical expression of emotions such as laughter and crying. Sentimental stories can bring an audience to a catharsis of tears by pushing their emotion to a climax. The death of a beloved character like the doomed young woman in *Love Story*, may be the climatic moment. Such characters are inevitably "resurrected" in the hearts and memories of those who loved them.⁴⁵

But Vogler just borrows the Aristotelian term *katharsis*. He does not claim that he describes *katharsis* as discussed in the *Poetics*.

Katharsis is a process that necessitates all the Aristotelian preconditions of the complex tragedy. Since *katharsis* is an intellectual clarification that leads to an emotional relief the screenwriter should pay attention to the construction of the plot, so as to not jeopardize the rule of probability and necessity. The screenwriter should make clear that the protagonist's *hamartia* is not an *intentional* mistake, but an unintentional tragic

deed that produced the exact opposite of the intended result (*peripeteia*). The structure of the plot cannot include *peripeteia* without *anagnorisis*, since an essential part of *katharsis* is the recognition of the mistake. Emotional relief will then occur, and it will not occur with a great and witty twist at the end of the screenplay as Tierno implies. It will occur as the natural continuation of the preceding elements of the plot's structure. In short, only by following all the Aristotelian narrative structure steps can one assume that a film is cathartic. In this sense, many films influenced by the Aristotelian method cannot be considered purely Aristotelian unless they follow all the rules of the complex plot as they are analysed in the *Poetics*.

It is highly unlikely that the Aristotelian system, or any other system for that matter, would make an audience revolt, as Boal wishes to believe, but it can be used towards that aim as other systems or methods can.

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CHAPTER III

PLOT

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My aim in this Chapter is to discuss the Aristotelian unity of plot in relation to its functional effects as they have been analysed in the *katharsis* Chapter of this study. This analysis aims at an accurate way of applying the Aristotelian rules of plot construction (*hamartia*, *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*) and unity of plot to screenwriting. Before discussing the issue of unity of plot, I will investigate two widely spread misinterpretations of the *Poetics*, a) the Aristotelian rule for the beginning, middle and end of a narrative and, b) the so-called rule of the three unities. Finally, I will argue that the polemic the *Poetics* has received on the grounds that Aristotle favoured plot over character is unfounded and false.

Aristotle dedicates the biggest part of the *Poetics* to discuss the complexities of plot structure and divides his discussion into four different sections:

- a) the structure and the unity of the plot
- b) the kinds and classifications of the plot
- c) the basic plot elements (*peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*)
- d) the plot as a functional organization that achieves tragedy's proper pleasure: the *katharsis* of pitiful and fearful incidents caused by the protagonist's *hamartia*.

In Chapter VII, Aristotle clearly states that he is going to discuss the plot's structure, since plot *πρώτον και μέγιστον της τραγωδίας ἐστίν* (is the first and chief consideration in tragedy¹). Aristotle starts his analysis of the plot by repeating a phrase from the definition of tragedy. According to S. H. Butcher's

translation this phrase is: 'Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end.'²

The sentence 'A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end' while appearing initially a simplistic view of a given, almost self-evident explanation, implies more. The analysis of what a proper beginning, middle and end are is of crucial importance for screenwriting since it is usually one of the principal means of determining whether a film is based on a classical, Aristotelian or counter-Aristotelian narrative structure. When the spectator sees Mark Renton and Spud pursued by two store detectives and hears Mark's voice-over 'Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family', he knows that this is not the opening scene of a classic narrative film. *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) opens *in medias res*, yet there could not have been a more appropriate opening scene for the *one action* of this non-conventional film. By contrast, in the classical narrative of *Life is Beautiful* the spectator is gradually involved in the line of action. In the beginning of the film there is the following voice-over: 'This is a simple story but not an easy one to tell. Like a fable, there is sorrow, and like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness'.

The voice-over is followed by a title card (Arezzo, Italy, 1919) that informs the spectator as to when and where the story will take place. It remains to see what a proper beginning, middle and end are for the Aristotelian screenplay.

The beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, Aristotle writes, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. The middle is that which follows something and which some other thing follows. The end, contrary to the beginning, is that which itself naturally follows something, either by necessity or as a rule, but has nothing following it. Aristotle concludes his reasoning by clarifying that 'A well-constructed plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes'.³

It follows that in an Aristotelian narrative, the selection of the proper beginning is not to be organized haphazardly (*οπρόθεν έτυχεν*). It is of course reasonable to assume that some incidents did precede the beginning of a

tragedy. These preceding incidents, however, will not be necessary elements of the plot and of the *one action* selected by the screenwriter. By necessary I mean that their absence from the plot will not impair or weaken its logical continuity. Euripides's *Medea* begins with Medea already aware of Jason's betrayal. The play opens with Medea grieving for her loss and with her elderly nurse fearing and foreshadowing what she might do to herself and her children. Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* does not open with Oedipus killing his father or when Oedipus solves the Sphinx's Riddle. In fact, much of the myth of Oedipus Rex takes place before the opening scene of the play. The play opens *in medias res* with the Theban chorus crying out to Oedipus for salvation from the plague that the gods have sent in response to Laius' death. This is the proper beginning for the *one action* of the tragedy *Oedipus Rex* that Sophocles selected from the entire myth of Oedipus. Robert McKee rightly observes that 'because lifelong Spines are rare, we take Aristotle's advice to begin *in medias res*, 'in the midst of things'. After locating the date of the climatic event of the protagonists' life, we begin as close in time to it as possible'.⁴

The Aristotelian screenplay, then, can start at any moment that can be the proper beginning for the specific unitary and cohesive action (*one action*) selected by the screenwriter, provided that this beginning does not hinder the spectator from understanding the plot. In *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noe, 2002) the opening scene starts with what we later learn is the concluding episode of the screenplay. In *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) events unfold in two separate alternate narratives and thus there are two beginnings – one in colour and the other in black and white. Both films, and especially *Irreversible*, have a counter-Aristotelian beginning.

The end, Aristotle writes, has to be inevitable or probable. It follows that there should not be any room left for doubt about how probable and thus how believable an end is. Contrary to the often imperative happy ending of the classic narrative structure, the Aristotelian ending is based strictly on plausibility.

The causal relationship of the units of the action should be strong enough so as to suspend the spectators' disbelief till the last minute. This does not necessarily mean that the spectator has to be aware of what

happens to the protagonist after the end of the film. In the case of *Oedipus Rex*, the spectator knows at the end that Oedipus is a different man from what he was in the beginning of the tragedy. And this is all the spectator needs to know. The Aristotelian ending therefore is not like the classical narrative ending that demands all threads of action to be resolved at the end and the hero's future destiny to be known. Neither is it the open haphazard ending that characterises counter-cinema, but one that clearly shows that the protagonist has realised his/her *hamartia* and will lead his/her life in a different manner. Exactly how and where the protagonist will be is of little importance for the Aristotelian narrative structure.

The Aristotelian beginning, middle and end have been widely misunderstood. An example is Lajos Egri's bestseller *The Art of Dramatic Writing* Egri attacks Aristotle's tenets by saying:

No doubt you have heard the old adage 'every story must have a beginning, a middle and an end'. Any writer who has the naivete to take this advice seriously is bound to run into trouble. You may protest that this is a too literal interpretation of Aristotle. Perhaps it is, but many plays met their Waterloo for the very reason that their authors, consciously or otherwise, obeyed this Aristotelian dictum. You may argue that Aristotle meant that even the 'middle' must have a beginning and an end. Perhaps, but if that is what he wanted to say, he certainly could have expressed himself more clearly than he did.⁵

But, nowhere in the *Poetics* did Aristotle say that 'every story must have a beginning, a middle and an end', as Egri asserts. In fact, Aristotle said 'A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end' and dedicated a whole Chapter (VII) for the discussion of the criteria for selecting the proper beginning, middle and end in relation to the plot's magnitude and to the causal relationships of incidents. Egri chose a sentence that does not exist in the original text or in any of the countable translations of the text.

In *Alternative Screenwriting*, Ken Dancyger and Jeff Rush argue that,

The basic screenwriting texts introduce some variation of three act form, which is claimed to be the basis for every mainstream American screenplay. The three-act form is derived from Aristotle's broad notion that all dramas have a beginning, a middle and an end and that these parts are in some proportion to one another. Unfortunately, this formulation is so general that it tells us very little (Afterall, was Aristotle completely serious when he said, 'A middle is that which is itself after some other thing and after which there is something else?').⁶

Nowhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle stipulate three acts. As I have discussed in the Chapter I, the idea held by many screenwriters that the *Poetics* preaches a three-act structure as a template for a dramatic story is unfounded. The three act division is in fact derived from Syd Field's paradigm, who – in his study *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* – took Aristotle's basic two divisions, *complication* and *unraveling* or *denouement* and came up with the three act film structure. The three acts commonly found in mainstream or Hollywood films are also derived from the French playwright Eugene Scribe and the book *The Well-Made Play* written in 1820. Aristotle talks about two divisions of the dramatic story, *complication* and *denouement*, not about a three act structure:

Every tragedy falls into two parts – Complication and Unravelling or Denouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the Complication; the rest is the Unravelling. By the Complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning point to good or bad fortune. The Unravelling is that which extends from the beginning of the change till the end.⁷

The Aristotelian screenplay does not need to be divided in three acts. Aristotle insisted on complication and unravelling to put emphasis on the kind of action that ought to be selected by the poet. The poet should choose events that compose the complication of the narrative's *one action* and events

that lead to the denouement of this action. This division is like a compass and aims at guiding the poet to use only incidents in his/her plot that are related to complication and denouement.

Dancyger and Rush take an isolated phrase from the *Poetics* (A middle is that which is itself after some other thing and after which there is something else) without considering the preceding argument in which Aristotle explains in detail the criteria for selecting the proper beginning and end.

In *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters*, Michael Tierno correctly observes that Aristotle's idea of a clear beginning, middle and end is not related to the three-act structure template that was formed by screenwriting theorists. But in trying to decipher what a beginning, middle and end are for Aristotle, he comes up with a set of terms (first and second cause of action) which – interesting as they may be – are not related to the content in the *Poetics*. He writes:

It is the plot's action that has a beginning, middle and end...The beginning of the plot action cannot be caused by something outside it. It starts up by itself. It's a self-initiated action, a virtual 'big bang' that sets the entire plot in motion, that can be committed by either the protagonist or antagonist, and that is an act of pure will...In *Dead Poets Society*, Mr. Keating shows his students old photos of now deceased students and tells them 'seize the day', urging them to take action before it is too late and to follow their dreams. Nothing in the plot has cause Keating to challenge his students in this way. Because this kind of inciting incident is not caused by anything else in the plot, yet sets the entire plot in motion, I call it a 'first cause of action'. It is important to understand that the first cause of action must occur after the movie begins, not in the back story.⁸

He goes on to connect his term of 'first cause of action' to Aristotle's prologue.

To give writers some space to work with before the first cause of action kicks the plot off, Aristotle offers us a tool called the 'prologue'. A prologue connects the back story part of the complication (e.g. what happened to the hero before we meet him) to the 'front story' (story after the movie starts) and otherwise sets the stage before the first cause of action happens.⁹

In *The Whole Picture*, Richard Walter writes

According to Aristotle, the well-structured story contains a beginning, a middle and an end. But, an examination of successful tales reveals that these three parts are not at all equal. Beginnings are short. Endings even more so. It is the middle that occupies the bulk of any well-made tale.¹⁰

Nowhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle stipulate that the beginning, middle or end should be of equal length.

I have come to the conclusion that a narrative that has a beginning which cannot stand on its own could be considered alien to Aristotelian ideas. It is clear from Chapter VII of the *Poetics* that the beginning should be one that can start the plot in a way that the second scene is logically connected to the first and the scenes preceding the opening of the film are easily understood or *do not need* – for the narrative structure of the selected *one action* – to be understood because the spectator can follow the story even if they are absent. One could then say that the opening scene of the *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989) or *The Pianist* is Aristotelian, whereas the opening scene of the film *Memento* is not. In *Dead Poets Society* the spectator does not need to know what happened before the opening scene of the film because the spectator can follow the story without needing background information. In *Memento*, on the other hand, the spectator is confused and bewildered and cannot understand any of the preceding events.

The uniqueness of the narrative is exactly this: the spectator travels along with Leonard to solve the riddle of his life.

Finally, the beginning of the Aristotelian narrative could be *in medias res* as long as the chosen beginning adheres to the aforementioned criteria.

The action must be carried through to its end. Tragedy represents 'one action that is whole and complete and has beginning, middle and end'. As Rudiger Bittner points out: '*Complete* makes a claim implicit in wholeness: no loose threads should be left'.¹¹ Obviously, the spectator does not cease to suspend his disbelief right at the end of the play. The feeling that the story is 'real' remains if the end has satisfied the spectator by being logically probable and thus potentially true. In this sense, one can say that an open ending that has not resolved the *one action*, leaving it incomplete, is not considered to be Aristotelian.

The Aristotelian closed ending is, nevertheless, different from the one that characterises counter-cinema or the classical narrative structures. The end of *Oedipus Rex* is one that has indeed resolved all story threads: the guilty is found, Thebes is saved and Oedipus has achieved his goal. He has saved his city and he knows who he is. What will become of him is something unresolved, because it is not of primary importance for this specific tragedy. It is more or less predictable that he will never be the same. The *one action* of Sophocles' tragedy is carried to its probable and necessary conclusion, but the spectator does not know what becomes to the protagonist. There is a hint, but not a certainty.

On the contrary, in the classical narrative structure we get the chance to experience the protagonist's finding his/her 'true self' but also we get a glimpse of his/her better, new life, as it is the case with the film *Das Lieben den Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*). In the final scene of this film Wiesler sees that Dreyman published the novel *Sonata for a Good Man* and has dedicated it to him. The spectator witnesses Wiesler's new life and the recognition he has received from the people he helped.

It is interesting to note that some films appear to be open-ended whereas they are really close-ended, such as one of the first French New Wave films, *The 400 Blows* (Francois Truffaut, 1959). The story is about the life of an unwanted single child, Antoine Doinel, who is being mistreated by

his mother and step father. He has problems at school and he runs away. Antoine is put into an observation centre for young offenders. He manages to escape and the film ends with a marvellous freeze frame of the protagonist at the seashore.

The *one action* of the story is 'Antoine's escape'. This action is resolved and thus the ending of the film is closed. Nevertheless, the spectator is unsure of Antoine's future but he feels satisfied in the end. For the narrative structure of the specific screenplay the knowledge of Antoine's future is unnecessary. What counts is that he managed to escape. Thus the end of the film has fulfilled its maker's aim. This film exemplifies the Aristotelian closed ending, which has a high degree of closure and does not show the protagonist's new life. The same can hold true for the Wim Wenders' film *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984). At its climax, father and son are reconciled. Other relationships (husband/wife, mother/son) are left unresolved, but their importance is minimal and does not hinder the spectator from having a sense of a closure because the *one action* of the film is exactly this: the father and son reconciliation.

I now wish to develop this into a discussion of another important misinterpretation of the *Poetics* – the rule of the three unities.

The rule of the three unities – time, place and action – has been wrongfully attributed to the *Poetics*. The unity of action demands that a play should only have one main action. The unity of place demands that a play should cover a single physical place and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place. Finally, the unity of time demands that the action in the play should take place for not more than 24 hours.

To clarify this misconception and show that Aristotle insisted only on unity of action is vital to the process of applying the *Poetics* to the narrative structure of screenplay. If the rule of the three unities is true, then the application of the *Poetics* must be limited to the needs of playwriting rather than screenwriting. Cinema's major advantage over theatre is exactly this: that there can be unlimited variations of and/or experimentations with place and time due to the medium's flexibility. Cinema is receptive to countable filmic techniques.

The only unity Aristotle endorsed was the unity of action. F. L. Lucas in *Tragedy: Serious Drama in relation to Aristotle's Poetics*, observes:

The interest of the Three Unities is mainly historical, but a brief outline of their development provides among other things a very clear, and unfavourable, example of the influence of critics on creative arts. Two main reasons were adduced in support of this strange trinity, both false – that Aristotle had enjoyed them; and that without them a play would be, not inferior in artistic form, but incredible. It was the name, above all, of realism that was invoked to defend a rule responsible in practice for some of the most fantastically unreal situations in drama. Aristotle had in fact insisted only that the action must have in fact an artistic unity, free from irrelevances.¹²

I. Sikoutsis, attributes this misconception to the fact that great writers such as Corneille and Racine have followed such a set of rules. Sikoutris traces the origin of this misconception to Aristotle's Chapter V where he remarks:

Epic poetry agrees with Tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type. They differ, in that epic poetry admits but one kind of meter, and is narrative in form. They differ, again, in their length: for tragedy endeavours, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit; whereas the Epic action has no limits of time.¹³

Aristotle here refers to what used to be practised in ancient tragedy (in relation to the tragedy of Aristotle's time). His interpreters, however, took this comment as a rule not of what *used to be practised*, but as a rule of what *ought to be practised* in tragedy in general. An example is Corneille's translation of the above extract, where he uses the word *ought to* (*doit*) to translate the word *endeavours*.

Even less unsupported by the content in *Poetics* is the rule of unity of place – a misconception that seems to have started from the Italian interpreter

of Aristotle, Lodovico Castelvetro. Castelvetro's rule was that all the actions of the plot should take place in a single place.

Lucas observes that Horace insisted, like Aristotle, on unity of action only. He traces the beginning of the misconception to the Renaissance. Lucas observes:

Trissino's *Poetica* (1529-49) and Cintio (1554) reasserted the Unity of Time: Robertelli (1548) narrowed it to twelve hours ("no work is done at night"), while others as arbitrarily limited the epic to one year. Scaliger (1561) cut down the allowance still further from six to eight hours; but the phrase, 'les Unites Scaligeriennes' is a misnomer; and the real discredit of formulating the "Three Unities" seems to belong to Castelvetro (1570). The idea now spread like a plague, that no intelligent person's imagination could lend credence to a play that was so unreal as to represent more than one place or one day. Sidney preached it; Jonson praised himself for practising it in *Volpone*. Milton agreed; but Dryden brought respectful objections to the cramping effects of such rules, and they always sat uneasily on English shoulders. It only remained, as far as the English stage was concerned, for Johnson to sweep what was left of the unities into the wastepaper basket, in the preface to his *Shakespeare*...As an aid to illusion they [the three Unities] were never worth what they cost in other ways; how needless they are for illusion, the cinema has further shown.¹⁴

In *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, Hegel discusses the misconception of unity of place observing that 'the inalterability of one exclusive *locale* of the action proposed belongs to the type of those rigid rules which the French in particular have deduced from classic tragedy and the critique of Aristotle thereupon'.¹⁵

Humphry House has the same opinion and writes that 'about the unity of place, Aristotle nowhere says anything to the effect that the stage should represent only one place throughout the course of the action'.¹⁶

Even though the misconception regarding the three unities has been clarified, contemporary screenwriting theorists still maintain it. In the book *Screenplay. The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Field opens a discussion about the duration of a feature film by saying that ‘Aristotle talked about the three unities of dramatic action: time, place and action’.¹⁷

I have argued that the rule of three unities attributed to the *Poetics* is unfounded. It remains to discuss the only rule of unity that is accurate, the unity of action.

Aristotle devotes five whole Chapters of the *Poetics* (VII-XI) to discuss the structure and the unity of the plot. In Chapter VII he begins his investigation with the formal cause of the plot’s structure – its order and magnitude – so he can then proceed to the examination of the most important point of his treatise: the *kind of incidents* that are to be chosen to form the plot.

The question of which incidents are to be included in the plot and which do not have the necessary dramatic quality to be a part of the ‘whole’ is of crucial importance to Aristotle and to this study. To answer the question of which *scenes* or *units of action* are to be selected to create the *one action* (and thus the unity of action) I have to first refer briefly to the Aristotelian concept of action in general.

According to Aristotle, the core of action is a mental activity – a motivation that slowly works its way outwards. But action is not only the motive to do something, but the whole working out of the motive to an end (successful or not). As it has been demonstrated in Chapter I, the object of imitation in dramatic writing is connected to this kind of action. Poetry tries to imitate something more than a physical act. It imitates the ‘movement of spirit’, that is the whole process from the motivation to the action itself.

Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976) exemplifies this ‘movement of spirit’. The selected units of action in this screenplay represent accurately the gradual increase of Travis’ movement of spirit, the subtle but acute change in his mental state before he proceeds to action. The screenplay abides by the Aristotelian narrative structure because the actions that reflect Travis’ mental change are included in the structure of events. The action is shown and the spectator can understand to a great extent Travis’s motives. In the set-up of

David Fincher's *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), all the units of action in the narrator's life prepare the spectator for the action that follows. The protagonist's motives are clear and his actions, however extreme, are comprehensible to the spectator. A protagonist that does not express in action this 'movement of spirit' would be counter-Aristotelian, as 'A' in *Ulysses' Gaze* is.

The Aristotelian concept of action, then, should not be connected only to a bodily activity. This comes as a result, this will be only the reflection of the inward action and that reflection should be brought about only when the inward activity has arrived at a point of having to be expressed. This is basically what modern textbooks of screenwriting refer to as the need to *foreshadow conflict*. The selection of scenes that fail to show the movement of spirit as the preparation for action, but focus only on the action itself often produce the so-called *jumping conflict*.

To clarify the way of selecting or discarding the units of action, Aristotle uses two ways. Firstly, he distinguishes the *unity of action* from the *unity of protagonist*, and secondly he states that all units of action have to be interconnected with the rule of probability and necessity.

In Chapter VIII Aristotle states that 'the Unity of the Plot does not consist, as some suppose, in having one man as its subject'.¹⁸ Unity of plot means that the plot is built around *one action* and not the actions of *one hero*. There are many actions performed by one man. In fact there is 'an infinity of things (that) befall that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to Unity. And in like manner there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action'.¹⁹

The incidents that are to form the tragedy's plot are selected according to two criteria; a) that they have a nexus of cause and effect amongst them (rule of probability and necessity); b) that this connection is necessary for, or it necessarily leads to, the existence of one and only action in the play.

This nexus, this necessary and probable connection, is of course dictated by the *one action*. Since tragedy is not history, the dramatist will not be interested in the biographical elements or actions of the protagonist. Instead, he will use history to select the incidents that are connected to the main action that he aspires to represent via the plot. As S. Ramfos points out,

Biography handles and exposes the aggregate or the larger part of the incidents in a man's life; The *Poetics* focus on the praxis that produces the tragic change (reversal). The consequences of the difference in question (the difference between poetry and history) is obvious: drama does not follow the natural course of a life's incidents, neither does it start at any accidental point. The beginning of a drama is always the *praxis* that will cause the tragic charge (reversal) in the hero's life regardless of the other incidents related to the first praxis...In drama what stands out is the spirituality or the inwardness of the incident...From an essentially physical and historical figure, the man is transformed into a purely intellectual-spiritual figure, inasmuch as the 'fate' revealed by the dramatic incidents has to do with their inwardness and not with them as such.²⁰

The units of action selected to represent the *one action* of a tragedy should have a specific thematic resemblance with each other. In cinematic terms, this means that the plot's scenes are selected according to their potential of proving the narrative's premise.

In the beginning of Chapter VIII, Aristotle discusses in detail the events that are appropriate or inappropriate to the *one action*.

In writing an *Odyssey*, he (Homer) did not make the poem cover all that befell the hero – it befell him for instance, to get wounded on Parnassus and also to feign madness at the time of the call to arms, but the two incidents had no probable or necessary connection with one another – instead of doing that he took an action with a unity of the kind we are describing as the subject of the *Odyssey* as also of the *Iliad*.²¹

In discussing the issue of plot in narrative, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in *The Nature of the Narrative* observe that,

In narratives which are fictional in plotting as well as in spirit, the tendency is either to focus on a single episode in the hero's life or a single sequence of episodes... The plot of the *Iliad* focuses on one episode in the hero's life, just as his characterisation focuses on one element of his psyche; and the subject is the same in both – anger. The plot of the *Iliad* is the story of Achilles getting angry – the how and why of it – and of the appeasement of his anger – the how and why of that...'.²²

If every action in a story bears several meanings then the writer should select those actions whose meanings are most closely related towards the *one action* of the plot. In the *Iliad*, Homer selected the units of action that would best exemplify and prove the *one action*, that is 'Achilles getting angry – the how and why of it – and of the appeasement of his anger – the how and why of that'.

If there are, for example, twenty potential scenes that can reveal a character's final 'movement of spirit' from sanity to insanity (*Taxi Driver*) then the screenwriter ought to choose those scenes that best reveal the character's state of mind in relation to the film's *one action*. In *Taxi Driver*, Paul Schrader decided to choose one scene that best reveals the final transition in Travis' mental state. In one of the most memorable scenes in film history, Travis glares at himself in the mirror and repeats conversations in which he threatens and repetitively challenges imaginary victims. In this scene it is clear what happens in Travis' mind, but it is also clear exactly what his intentions are for future action. This would not be the case if the screenwriter has chosen a scene that could have several meaning, such as Travis buying a gun.

R. Bittner accurately describes the boundaries of the meaning each unit of action has by using the expression *limits of meaning* which determine each unity of action. Borrowing the phrase *limits of meaning* one could say that a screenwriter is achieving the unity of action when he is able to construct a narrative structure made up of scenes that are characterized by the same *limits of meaning*. In other words, by selecting scenes whose meaning does not diverge from the *one action*. If the screenwriter tries to keep the Aristotelian rule of unity of action between the scenes then he would be less

likely to get carried away by creating scenes unrelated to the *one action*, something that happens often in an effort to achieve characterisation or when the screenwriter overuses the technique of flashback.

Aristotle gives another practical rule that simplifies the above. In Chapter VIII he writes:

The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole with its several incidents so closely connected *that the transposal or withdrawal of any of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole*. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole.²³

This rule is that if the plot seems to be coherent without a scene, then the scene can be simply taken off. Conversely, if by taking out one scene the plot's unity seems to be destroyed, then the specific scene is indispensable. The problem is that this very important and practical criterion of indispensability has rarely enjoyed the attention it really should be given.

The *one action* of *Taxi Driver* is the gradual dehumanization of Travis. The scenes selected are thematically connected to that and only single action. Every scene's *limits of meaning* leads to the *one action* and each scene comes as a result of the previous one in a way that if one scene was to be taken out, then there wouldn't be logical coherence.

The rule of *one action* cannot stand on its own. It has to go with the existence of a causal relationship between the scenes. For the unity of action to be achieved, the rule of *one action* cannot be viewed separately from the rule of probability and necessity in an Aristotelian narrative.

Unity of action necessitates complete lack of the element of chance. Aristotle almost excludes chance from the processes of poetic creation. Chance is contrary to the fundamental qualities of probability (*το εικός*) and necessity (*το αναγκαίον*), which Aristotle time and again insists should be the primary material of each and every part of the plot in a tragedy. Well-constructed plots cannot begin or end at a chance point. Each unit of action is

not connected with one another by chance. They are logically united to form the one complete action of the plot. What Oedipus or Antigone do has to be represented as a necessary outcome of their specific character and their *hamartia*, as the action that the type of person they represent would probably do in the type of action they find and/or bring themselves into. Everything that is not strictly motivated, is outside the drama. Chance solutions, says Aristotle, such as the *deus ex machina* are examples of a bad writer. In fact, as Dorothea Frede points out in '*Necessity, Chance, and What Happens for the Most Part*:

Accidents are not the poet's but rather the historian's concern, as Aristotle decrees, since history is full of unrelated coincidences that have no place in tragedy. It is the possibility of depicting events undisturbed by accidents that establishes the superiority of tragedy over history and makes it a more philosophic enterprise, because it can depict the universal, i.e. what is not distorted by the incalculable vicissitudes of everyday life.²⁴

The plot centres on one unified action. Aristotle was opposed to the idea of a 'double thread of thought' in *Poetics*. He believed that the perfect plot must have a single, and not a 'double issue'. Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) or Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) combine a number of short stories with the characters appearing in more than one story and are therefore distinctly counter-Aristotelian.

I have demonstrated so far that, according to the *Poetics*, there are four criteria for selecting a plot's scenes, a) thematic resemblance between the scenes, b) the quality of each scene to impair the whole with its absence (criterion of scene indispensability), c) scenes causally connected/absence of the element of chance and d) scenes pertaining to *one action*/absence of subplots. If any of these criteria is missing then the unity of action is compromised.

I will now discuss three of the most important elements of the Aristotelian plot structure: *hamartia*, *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* (recognition).

After giving what I believe to be the proper reading of the concepts of *hamartia*, *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, I will discuss the misinterpretations that these two concepts have been subjected to and conclude as to their accurate application in a screenplay composed according to the *Poetics*.

In simple plots, says Aristotle, the change in the hero's fortune from misfortune to good fortune or vice versa takes place without the elements of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. In Chapter IX Aristotle explains that there is a subspecies of simple plots, the episodic plots that are the worst kind of plots. An episodic plot lacks probability and necessity in the sequence of its episodes.

The contrary of the simple plot is the complex plot, which involves either *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis* or both. The classical narrative structure is in most cases a variation of the Aristotelian complex plot adopting primarily the element of *anagnorisis* of an event that is, however, not the recognition of the hero's *hamartia*. Counter-Aristotelian films often include the protagonist's *anagnorisis* but not in the Aristotelian sense of it. *Anagnorisis* cannot be deemed Aristotelian unless it is combined with the protagonist's *hamartia*, which is rarely the case in counter-Aristotelian narratives.

In Chapter XI Aristotle gives a clear definition of the concept of *peripeteia*:

A peripety is the change of the kind described (from misfortune to happiness or from happiness to misfortune) from one state of things within the play to its opposite, and that too in the way we are saying, in the probable or necessary sequence of events; as it is an instance for Oedipus: here the opposite state of things is produced by the Messenger, who, coming to gladden Oedipus and to remove his fears as to his mother, reveals the secret of his birth.²⁵

Aristotle gives another example of *peripeteia* from *Lynceus*: 'And in Lynceus: just as he is being led off for execution, with Danaus at his side to put him to death, the incidents preceding this bring it about that he is saved and Danaus put to Death'.²⁶ Aristotle goes on to explain that:

Anagnorisis is a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune. The finest form, of *anagnorisis* is one attended by *peripeties*, like that which goes with *anagnorisis* in Oedipus. This (anagnorisis) with a *peripety* will arouse either pity or fear-actions of that nature being what tragedy is assumed to represent.²⁷

The concept of *peripeteia*, even though clearly defined in the beginning of Chapter XI has been many times misinterpreted by many of Aristotelian commentators.

Peripeteia and *anagnorisis* are quite often in English rendered as reversal and recognition respectively. As Lucas points out, 'the only reason for translating *peripeteia* by "reversal of fortune" is that it bears this sense in later Greek and in the modern languages that have adopted this word...But a very little study either of drama or of Aristotle would surely suggest that this sense of *peripeteia* makes nonsense of Aristotle. He [Aristotle] implies for example that there are no *peripeteias* in Homer's *Iliad*: yet it is full of changes of fortune'.²⁸

Aristotle means just what he says. Paraphrasing the definition of *peripeteia* in Chapter XI would lead to the simple following statement: *peripeteia* occurs when the course of action intended to produce a result x, produces the reverse of x. Oedipus is trying to escape his fortune and by doing so he fulfils it. Juliet is trying to consummate her love with Romeo and achieves the opposite – the metaphorical and physical death of both lovers. Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*, intends to save her husband and in doing so, she breaks up with him.

The difference between reversal of fortune (simple plot) and *peripeteia* (complex plot) is of crucial importance for the application of *Poetics* to screenwriting. Unless this misconception is clarified, the screenwriter fails to see that by using just reversal of fortune, he cannot produce the effect of tragic irony on the spectator which is achieved only with *peripeteia*, only by showing the hero achieving the exact opposite of his/her intentions.

Lucas' way of describing the difference between a simple reversal and a *peripeteia* is accurate. He observes:

The deepest tragedy of life is not when men are struck down by the blow of chance or fate, like Job or Maurya in *Riders to the Sea*, nor when they are destroyed by their enemies, like Polyxena, or Henry VI; but when their destruction is the work of those that wish them well, or of their own unwitting hands. For it is the perpetual tragic irony of the Tragedy of Life that again and again men do thus laboriously contrive their own annihilation, or kill the thing they love.²⁹

When one realizes that *peripeteia* is the tragic situation where human beings manage to produce the opposite of what they have intended, the reasons why Aristotle's *peripeteia* goes almost always as a pair with *anagnorisis*, become more clear. *Peripeteia* is the state where the hero's ignorance drives him to bringing about the opposite of what he intended to do. *Anagnorisis* is the realization of the truth, the opening of the eyes, the true understanding of his/her *hamartia*.

The concept of *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis* and *pathos* (tragic suffering) come as the conclusion of a long discussion about plot. Interestingly, regardless of the importance of *peripeteia*, Aristotle gives it only a brief definition followed by two examples. *Pathos* is defined in a single sentence. *Anagnorisis*, on the other hand, is referred to briefly in Chapter XI and then Aristotle devotes to it an entire Chapter (Chapter XVI).

Anagnorisis in Greek has a strong association with the English word recognition. *Ανα-γνωρίζω* (*ana-gnorezo*) means re-cognize, not discover. *Anagnorisis* means regaining some lost knowledge or memory, recovering something once known. *Anagnorisis*, then, is not related to some sort of new knowledge, but to an uncovering of a hidden knowledge. Aristotle devotes an entire Chapter to explore the ways this knowledge can be regained by the hero.

Anagnorisis, according to Chapter XI, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, and 'thus to either love or hate in the personages marked for good

or evil fortune'. *Anagnorisis*, then, suggests a change not only in the state of the hero (change from ignorance to knowledge) but also – or at the same time – a change in the relationships within the action. There is thus a further particularization of the way in which *anagnorisis* may embrace *peripeteia*. The phrase 'and thus a change to either love or hate' leaves room to redefine the complex plot as

one which contains an intrication built in, presumably, from the outset but revealing its necessary or probable consequence only at the end, that consequence being a reversal of the supposed relations. The plot is twisted, folded back on itself (peplegmenos), like an elegantly designed syllogism that proves the opposite of what the premises seemed to imply.³⁰

Peripeteia and *anagnorisis* cannot be viewed separately from *hamartia*. In fact, without *hamartia* there wouldn't be a complex plot. *Hamartia* is the corner stone of tragedy and the reason it leads to *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. What produces the opposite effect to the hero's intention is his/her own tragic error, his/her own *hamartia*. And what the hero later recognizes is exactly this, his/her *hamartia*. Yet, *hamartia* is a much more complicated term than it initially appears to be.

To understand what *hamartia* means is vital to this study for two reasons. First, because it further weakens Augusto Boal's argument regarding the repressive function of the Aristotelian *katharsis* as it has been discussed in the previous Chapter of this study. Proving that *hamartia* is not a moral flaw or a sign of an anti-constitutional behaviour, but a mistake in reasoning, leads to the conclusion that tragedy exercises the spectator's process of reasoning, and thus it cannot be repressive. Secondly, a true understanding of the Aristotelian *hamartia* makes even more clear the distinction between Aristotelian and counter-Aristotelian films and shows that it has in fact been rarely, if ever, used in its pure Aristotelian sense in the classic narrative or any sort of narrative structure for that matter.

The differences in translations of *hamartia* reflect the great ambiguity and confusion regarding its true meaning. Butcher prefers the translation 'error or frailty' while Potts translation remains simple: 'some error'. D. S. Margoliouth prefers the word 'mistake', L. Cooper chooses the translation 'some error of judgement or shortcoming', Kenneth A. Telford translated *hamartia* as 'some mistake' and so on.

The majority of the commentators seem to prefer the idea of *hamartia* as a mistake. Lucas observes:

The word he (Aristotle) uses means simply 'a mistake', though there have always been persistent attempts on the part of moralizing critics to make the *hamartia* much more definitely a moral weakness, a sin, than it really is. This false step may be either a crime, like Clytemnestra's or a mere miscalculation like Dejanira's. It is a distortion to read into this theory the moralist idea of tragic disaster as necessarily the punishment of sin.³¹

Lucas concludes that,

At its best, tragedy is a story of human blindness leading human effort to checkmate itself – a Tragedy of Error. The *hamartia* is the tragic error; the *peripeteia*, its fatal working to a result the opposite of that intended; the *anagnorisis*, the recognition of the truth. The error may or may not be moral.³²

But it is important to really know whether *hamartia* has a moral nuance to it or not, for a basic reason: *hamartia* is the causal link that moves the protagonist from ignorance to knowledge and from good fortune to misfortune. *Hamartia* is the mechanism that initiates the mechanisms of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. Taking *hamartia* to be a moral error then the crucial element of the required empathy for the hero's *undeserved suffering* could not be fulfilled. If the protagonist is morally responsible then he deserves his/her suffering and the spectator cannot feel pure pity and fear for a protagonist who deserves his/her misfortune. Without pity and fear *katharsis* is not possible.

Hamartia, then, cannot be a moral mistake. As N. Sherman points out in analysing Chapter XIII of the *Poetics*:

The ruin of a very good person excites moral outrage; the downfall of someone evil evokes our sense of justice and human satisfaction (*philanthropon*) in witnessing deserved suffering; his rise again our sense of moral outrage and anger. To feel pity and fear, in contrast, we need to see characters on stage who can err and suffer consequences without our being morally shocked by either their senselessness of the error or the disproportion between it and the calamity. And this requires characters who are more good than bad, but who nonetheless fall short of full perfection.³³

Much of the most significant scholarship on *hamartia* has sought to determine whether the protagonist's lack of full perfection is an intellectual or moral phenomenon. Butcher identified *hamartia* with 'a single great error, whether morally culpable or not' or 'a single great defect in character otherwise noble'. D. W. Lucas suggested that an imperfect understanding of Butcher may have led to the wide popularity of *hamartia* being understood as 'tragic flaw'. Also, scholars such as P. W. Harsh strongly supported the moral interpretation of *hamartia*. After his analysis of *Oedipus Rex*, Harsh asserted that 'surely the pre-eminently good and just man does not fly into a fury when a carriage crowds him from the road, and he does not commit murder indiscriminately even when he is lashed by the driver'.³⁴

Harsh concludes that Aristotle judged the most effective tragic character to be 'at least in part morally responsible for his fate'. Harsh believes that *hamartia* can be properly understood by the concept of tragic flaw and that this concept represents a moral failing, a weakness in the character of the hero.

But, to take *hamartia* as a sin instead of a mistake of the intellect leads the screenwriter to a selection of *one action* that would revolve around this sin. This would in turn lead to a dead end, since if *hamartia* was a moral error then there wouldn't be a proper *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis* and *katharsis*.

Van Braam was one of the scholars that pointed out the paralogism of taking *hamartia* as a moral flaw. He investigated five passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle employs the term *hamartia* and *hamartema*.³⁰ He argued that in each of these instances *hamartia* and *hamartema* designate some type of intellectual mistake and not a moral defect of the character.³¹ This seems to agree with Aristotle's insistence on the protagonist's undeserved suffering. As Van Braam observes:

An essential characteristic of tragedy is the existence of suffering without moral guilt, but a suffering whose source, nevertheless, arises in the hero himself. The hero must be the agent of his own destruction from whose actions the tragic consequences arise by necessity and probability but he must not be morally culpable in regard to those tragic consequences. The *hybris* so commonly spoken of in regard to Greek tragedy is often *the assumption by a character that he possesses greater wisdom and understanding than is actually the case*. The whole concept of tragic irony is derived from our observation of a hero who commits 'a fatal error of judgement at the very time he is relying on his intelligence to direct his actions'.³⁵

Braam notes that Oedipus' *hamartia* can be 'no specific sin attaching to him as an individual, but the universally human one of blindly following the light of one's own intellect. As Teiresias, the wise old man, in *Oedipus Rex* says, "your enemy is yourself".³⁶

Hamartia is directly related to *katharsis*, then, since it is *hamartia's* peculiar nature that creates the proper balances that permit the tragic emotion to occur. *Hamartia* is an amalgam of error and innocence that permeate a play's soul, that is, its plot. Tragedy is the place where 'a man is not suffering for his crimes, but for his ignorance. Ignorance, then becomes not the extenuatory, but the crime it self'.³⁷ In a brilliant analysis of *hamartia*, Ramphos observes that:

Hamartia is not purely an error of judgement, but an error of impulsiveness produced under the unspecified nature of the hero's practical aim. The ignorance inherent in the assigned action (goal) creates a gap, which is sometimes covered by illogical thinking having as its criterion the element of sorrow or pleasure.³⁸

Ramphos holds that this is where the hero's guilty innocence lays: under illogical thinking, the hero acts in ignorance, confusing – due to sorrow or happiness – the logical with the illogical. *Hamartia* produces 'the tragic emotion since it reveals the prevalence of ignorance while the character is in the certainty of logic, an ignorance corroding any hope of stability and certainty of human action'.³⁹

Hamartia, then, cannot be a moral error. Neither is it a simple error. It is not an error due to lack of information, which, if the hero knew he would have acted otherwise preventing *hamartia*. The tragic ignorance is not related to simple lack of information. *Hamartia* is the arrogant certainty of knowledge. It is the process of ignoring of one's ignorance. *Hamartia* then is not a crime committed in ignorance, *hamartia* is ignorance.

In *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) Kane's *hamartia* is the assumption that he possesses greater wisdom and understanding than is actually the case. Charles Forster Kane spent all his life going after the complete opposite of what he really needed. What Kane truly needed was reflected in 'Rosebud' as a symbol of innocence and happiness. Instead of achieving true happiness, Kane dies alone in his vast palatial estate, Xanadu. Kane's *hamartia* is not a sin or a moral mistake, but the intellectual mistake of overestimating his ability to buy happiness and to make others love him. The film *Citizen Kane* is one of the few existing film examples of a pure case of an Aristotelian *hamartia*.

As I have noted earlier in this Chapter, reversal of fortune is ascribed to both complex and simple plot. All tragedies represent a reversal from good fortune to misfortune or vice versa. In the best kind of tragedy (complex plot), however, the reversal is actually a *peripeteia* and it is necessarily accompanied by *anagnorisis*. Reversal, then, is not synonymous with

peripeteia. Taking reversal of fortune as being the same with *peripeteia* is one of the greatest misconceptions about the *Poetics*. As Terence Cave observes in *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics*:

In Aristotle's account, *peripeteia* cannot be synonymous with *metabasis* (change of fortune): it is one of the ways in which the change of fortune may become manifest. Later readers – including modern ones – will, however, often level *peripeteia* down towards the sense change of fortune.⁴⁰

House also makes this observation:

Peripeteia must not be translated or paraphrased 'Reversal of Fortune', for a Reversal of Fortune may well happen without it. If it is to be paraphrased at all, the phrase which fits best is reversal of intention. For that is what it is, from the point of view of the character involved. From the point of view of the spectator or reader it is, in the plot of the play as a whole, a reversal of the direction of action.⁴¹

Requiem for a Dream (Darren Aronofsky, 2000) has a narrative that does not only present reversal of fortune, but also *peripeteia*. When Sara makes the wrong decision to take medications to lose weight and become beautiful, her life does not just change from happiness to unhappiness. Her decision produces the exact opposite effect of her intention (*peripeteia*): she becomes ill and uglier than she was before deciding to become more beautiful.

In *Time Out (L'emploi du Temps)*, Laurent Cantet, 2001), Vincent makes the decision to lie to his family in order to maintain his dignity. By doing so, he not only becomes unhappy (reversal of fortune), but he throws himself into a vicious spiral of deceit and lies finally losing any dignity he could have had by telling the truth (*peripeteia*). By contrast, the classical narrative structure usually employs a reversal of fortune from good to bad fortune and then from bad to good fortune with the element of *peripeteia* missing.

Many books that apply the Aristotelian narrative structure to screenwriting fail to show the crucial difference between reversal of fortune and *peripeteia* while other books do not even mention *peripeteia*. In the book *Aristotle in Hollywood*, Hiltunen deals with the *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis* and *hamartia* only superficially:

The third element of the plot is reversal (*peripeteia*), a sudden turn of action or change of fortune which is accompanied by a powerful emotional impact... In *Oedipus Rex* the reversal takes place when the messenger from Corinth comes to Thebes with the announcement that Oedipus' father, King Polybus, is dead and that he, Oedipus, has succeeded to the throne. Recognition occurs at the same time as the change from good to bad fortune. In *Iphigenia in Tauris* the recognition happens between brother and sister and causes a change in action that is the opposite to that in *Oedipus*, that is, from good to bad.⁴²

In the above description, *peripeteia* is paralleled to reversal of fortune, a fact that completely alters the meaning of both *peripeteia* and reversal of fortune and possibly makes the whole Aristotelian triad *hamartia-peripeteia-anagnorisis* incomprehensible. It is important for the screenwriter to understand that *peripeteia* produces the *exact opposite* outcome of that which was intended and brings the hero to the exact opposite state to that intended so that Oedipus turns from a respected and admired king to an incestuous blind murderer and so on.. Misinterpreting or failing to analyse in detail such central Aristotelian concepts deprives the Aristotelian method of its potential in screenwriting.

In his article, *Pathos in the Poetics of Aristotle*, B. R. Rees comes to the inaccurate conclusion that 'peripeteia is a change in the direction of the tragic action which is either a necessary result of previous events or, at least is not improbable in the light of what has already happened'.⁴³

Hamartia is also described in an obfuscatory manner. In *Aristotle in Hollywood*, Ari Hiltunen states that *hamartia* is 'an error that frequently occurs in a good plot. Aristotle places value on *hamartia* probably because it is an

excellent means of achieving the state of undeserved suffering that in turn creates an intense emotional impact'.⁴⁴

This definition is also inaccurate and confusing and does not help the screenwriter understand the unique nature of the logical fallacy the protagonist commits. Inevitably, the screenwriter who wishes to apply the Aristotelian method cannot see the connection of *hamartia-peripeteia-anagnorisis* as the three elements that lead to *katharsis*.

Michael Tierno's *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters*, exemplifies the phenomenon of generalizing basic Aristotelian concepts to such an extent as to produce a chain of misunderstandings of the *Poetics*. Analysing the film *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) the writer says:

In *Rosemary's Baby*, Rosemary wanders into Minnie's apartment and gets to see the little bundle of evil she has just given birth to. At this moment, a reversal of fortune occurs; Rosemary realises that her child has lived (she thought it had died) and the big surprise is that it's the spawn of Satan.⁴⁵

Whether the protagonist's *hamartia* in the Aristotelian sense is apparent in the film is irrelevant at this point. What is striking is the use of the Aristotelian term *reversal of fortune* instead of the term *anagnorisis*.

There are a few instances where writers of screenwriting textbooks have taken pains to comprehend and properly teach the Aristotelian method, such as Linda Seger. In *Making a Good Script Great*, she observes:

A reversal changes the direction of the story 180 degrees. It makes a story move from a positive to a negative direction, or from a negative to a positive direction. It's stronger than most turning points, which only turn the action in another direction, but do not reverse it. A reversal is a complete turnaround.⁴⁶

Seger accurately describes reversal of fortune, even if her book is not an application of the *Poetics* to screenwriting, as the other texts are.

As I have mentioned earlier, Aristotle devotes most of Chapter X, XI and XVI to clarify the basic concepts of a complex plot: *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. Even though Aristotle considers *pathos* an essential part of a complex plot he dedicates only a few lines for its analysis.

...το δε πάθος είναι πράξεις καταστρεπτική ή οδυνηρά, οιον η εν τω φανερώ θάνατοι και οι μεγάλοι σωματικοί πόνοι και οι τραυματισμοί και όσα είναι παρόμοια.⁴⁷

...A third part is Suffering, which we may be defined as an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as murders on the stage, tortures, woundings and the like.⁴⁸

The confusion regarding the meaning of *pathos* can be reflected in the variety of translations: ‘crisis of feeling’, ‘catastrophe’, ‘the moving accident’, ‘the scene of suffering or calamity’ and so on. One of the reasons for the confusion is the phrase *εν τω φανερώ* and whether it can actually mean *επί της σκηνής* (on stage). Lucas rightly observes that many scholars are trying to evade the obvious meaning of the phrase. Indeed, what *pathos* refers to is the apparent, on the stage expression of suffering, and in Oedipus’ case the self-blinding. This is yet one more case where Aristotle means just what he says.

I have discussed the accurate meaning of the Aristotelian *hamartia*, *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* in relation to the narrative structure of the screenplay. I have also argued that the concepts of *hamartia*, *reversal of fortune* and *peripeteia* have been misinterpreted by Aristotle’s commentators, but also by contemporary screenwriting scholars. I now wish to turn this discussion to the last misinterpretation analysed in this study: character versus plot.

Aristotle has been criticised for favouring plot over character in his narrative method. However, the Aristotelian narrative is not character-centred, neither is it plot-centred. The proper Aristotelian narrative is centred on *one unified action* carried to its probable and necessary course by means of the plot and of the character that best fits this *one action*.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster begins his analysis of the plot as follows:

'Character, says Aristotle, gives us qualities, but it is in actions – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse.' We have already decided that Aristotle is wrong, and now we must face the consequences of disagreeing with him. 'All human happiness and misery', says Aristotle, 'take the form of action.' We know better. We believe that happiness and misery exist in the secret life, which each of us leads privately and to which (in his characters) the novelist has access. And by the secret life we mean the life for which there is no external evidence, not, as is vulgarly supposed, that which is revealed by a chance word or a sigh. A chance word or a sigh are just as much evidence as a speech or a murder: the life they reveal ceases to be secret and enters the realm of action.⁴⁹

Forster opens his discussion with a clear opposition to the predominance of plot over character in what has come over the centuries to be a clear controversy: character versus action. Forster, nevertheless, makes a clear distinction between the criteria with which this controversy can be applied to the narrative structure of the novel in contrast to drama.

There is, however, no occasion to be hard on Aristotle. He had read few novels and no modern ones – the *Odyssey* but not *Ulysses* – he was by temperament apathetic to secrecy, and indeed regarded the human mind as a sort of tube from which everything can finally be extracted; and when he wrote the words quoted above he had in view the drama, where no doubt they hold true. *In the drama, all human happiness and misery does and must take the form of action.* Otherwise its existence remains unknown and this is the great difference between the drama and the novel.⁵⁰

Although Forster makes the crucial distinction between novel and drama, he takes for a fact that Aristotle favoured plot over character. Forster and all the theorists that contend Aristotle favoured plot are basing their judgement on the following sentence from the second half of Chapter VI of the

Poetics which has produced a great deal of disagreement. Hamilton Fyfe translates:

A tragedy is impossible without action, but there may be one without character.⁵¹

Butcher's translation does not differ:

Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character.⁵²

Potts translation does not deviate greatly from the above:

Also, without an action there could not be a tragedy, but without Character there could.⁵³

It is uncertain whether Aristotle had a specific dramatist in mind when he said 'A tragedy is impossible without action, but there may be one without character'. Sikoutris suggests that Aristotle might have been trying to criticise the practice of the dramatists of his time, such as Euripides, who paid specific attention to the analysis of the character violating thus the drama's economy.⁵⁴

The confusion derives partly from the way the two concepts, *ethos* (character) and *praxis* (action) are presented by Aristotle in the statement 'A tragedy is impossible without action, but there maybe one without character'⁵⁵, a way that intensifies the already existing problem in the translation of *ethos* by the word *character*. Placing the word *action* close to the word *character* does give rise to a certain antithesis, which is nevertheless absent in the whole Aristotelian theory as presented in the *Poetics*. The words *ethos* and *praxis* in other passages of the *Poetics* not only are not in opposition, but inseparable.

To shed light on any ostensible opposition, House turns to *Ethics* and tries to capture the essence of the Aristotelian notion of *ethos*:

The virtues (and the vices) are acquired only in so far as we have acted well or badly. We learn to become good or bad by acting well or ill just as a builder learns to build

by building. By repeated acts of certain kind we acquire a habit or bent (εξίς) of character. We are not good or bad merely in respect of knowing what is good or bad. The guiding principle of ethics is not the Absolute good, but the practical good. In all ethical situations there is an element of desire which is the stimulus to decision and the determinant of direction. The action which is ethical [not in a moral connotation, but ethical in that it is proper to the ethos or character of a person] is a movement toward the desired end. The 'character' which a man acquires by acting is formed by the kind of 'ends' which he habitually proposes to himself as desirable. Character is only a tendency and it does not become fully 'actual' unless a particular end is desired and the movement is thus set on foot towards it.⁵⁶

Character, then is a tendency and the spectator can see the character realised only through action. The mere presentation of character qualities is something less than the fullness of character. In terms of drama, we cannot consider a character as 'real' unless we see him/her acting his/her qualities out.

House's analysis of the *Ethics* contributes a great deal to the illumination of the meaning of *ethos* and its relation to *praxis*, but Aristotle makes it quite clear in the *Poetics* itself. In the first half of Chapter VI he says that 'Unhappiness is located in doings, and our end is a certain kind of doing, not a personal quality; it is their characters that give men their quality, but their doings that make them happy or the opposite'.⁵⁷

It is as though there are two different characters: one before the action and one after the action. Aristotle clearly states that what matters in drama is to see the character's *ethos* in action, because only in this way can he be real. Moreover, Aristotle devotes Chapter XV in analysing the character that best fits the complexities of tragedy. Aristotle further clarifies his point by saying:

And again: one may string together a series of characteristic speeches of the utmost finish as regards Diction and Thought, and yet fail to produce the true tragic effect;

But one will have much better success with a tragedy which, however inferior on these respects, has a Plot, a combination of incidents in it.⁵⁸

The well-structured plot in drama becomes the only vehicle of showing the hero's *ethos*. Through the selection of the proper units of action, the character's actions towards *hamaria* are clearly revealed, the spectator decides whether the character is worthy of pity and fear and finally, *katharsis* – the intellectual and emotional clarification of *hamartia* – can occur.

In *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* McKee misinterprets Aristotle's insistence on plot. He writes:

As Aristotle observed, why a man does a thing is of little interest once we see the thing he does. A character is the choices he makes to take the actions he takes. Once the deed is done his reasons why begin to dissolve into irrelevancy'.⁵⁹

Aristotle insisted on action revealed by plot because this was the most effective and sure way of showing the reason behind this action, the seed of his/her *hamartia*.

The line that separates plot from character becomes very thin and the division of character as a separate element from plot seems implausible. This division is sometimes a 'tool' used by critics in their attempt to analyse the degree in which a film fails or succeeds in showing those actions that are most appropriate for the film's premise to be proven. Plot-centred screenplays and character-centred screenplays is an inaccurate distinction. A more logical distinction could be and has been made between the novel's receptivity to a detailed characterization and the play's or film's receptivity to a tight structure of action. As Forster suggested, the narrative structure of the novel is open to a detailed characterization in contrast to the structure of the screenplay that has to be more careful in the time it allows for a character to be portrayed on the screen. It is the nature of theatre and film that permits the predominance of action over character.

Exceptional in all other aspects of his analysis of dramatic writing, Lajos Egri exemplifies this controversy. In *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, he states:

'The plot is the first consideration, and as it were, the soul of tragedy. Character holds the second place', writes Aristotle in his *Poetics*...It is not difficult to understand why Aristotle thought of character as he did. When Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Rex*, when Aeschylus wrote *Agamemnon*, when Euripides wrote *Medea*, Fate was supposed to have played the chief role in the drama. The Gods spoke and men lived or died in accordance with what they said. 'The structure of the incidents' was obtained by the gods-the characters were merely men who did what have been prearranged for them. But while the audience believed this, and Aristotle based his theories upon it, it does not hold true in the plays themselves. In all important Greek plays, the characters create the action. Aristotle was mistaken in his time, and our scholars are mistaken today when they accept his rulings concerning character. Character was the great factor in Aristotle's time, and no fine play ever was or ever will be written without it.⁶⁰

McKee also seems to agree that Aristotle favored plot over character. He writes:

Plot or character? Which is more important? This debate is as old as the art. Aristotle weighed each side and concluded that story is primary, character secondary. His view held sway until, with the evolution of the novel, the pendulum of opinion swung the other way.⁶¹

In *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters*, Tierno writes:

Let me now explain more fully what I mean by action-idea. Aristotle teaches us to think of action as an idea of a story. In fact, he says that action is more important than people; that is, characters. Aristotle is fanatical about the need for our stories to be about action, about action that is larger than life itself and greater than the persons who partake in it...That is why we screenwriters build a dramatic story on a single action.⁶²

Aristotle never argued that action is more important than people or that action is greater than the people who partake it. Aristotle only insisted on the importance of plot because it is only by means of a good plot that character is revealed.

However, Aristotle did *not* write 'A tragedy is impossible without character, but there maybe one without action'. By this I mean that Aristotle's examination of the function of the plot in relation to character makes it clear that the plot as action of the character is more essential than the mere delineation of character without a proper plot. It follows that a counter-Aristotelian screenplay would not involve the hero's *ethos* in *action* but just the hero's *ethos* as loose strips of character study. Such films are *Ulysses' Gaze* (Theo Angelopoulos, 1995) or *Arizona Dream* (Emir Kusturica, 1993).

A long tradition of generalizations and misconceptions has led to the belief that the classical narrative of American films (Hollywood) is based on the *Poetics*. In this study, I have argued that the classical narrative has borrowed only a few of the Aristotelian elements. It is important to realise that the use of one Aristotelian element in a narrative does not make the narrative Aristotelian. For example, one cannot say that the film *The Pursuit of Happiness* is Aristotelian only because the protagonist has many Aristotelian elements. The protagonist has not committed an *hamartia*. Therefore, the triad *hamartia-peripeteia-anagnorisis* is not possible in this specific screenplay even though there are two reversals of fortune in the plot. On the other hand, many European films are presented as 'alternatives' of the Aristotelian narrative, where in reality they are 'alternatives' of the classical narrative structure.

The misconceptions related to the *Poetics* result in three main problems: a) the screenwriter who wishes to apply the method is confused and ends up with a mixture of classical narrative and Aristotelian narrative, b) a number of films are regarded Aristotelian whereas they are not and, c) a number of films are regarded counter-Aristotelian while, in reality, they are exploring and using Aristotelian methods as their basis.

It is interesting to note that some films are Aristotelian in their narrative structure, but are using counter-Aristotelian filmic techniques. More often than not counter-Aristotelian narratives use the Aristotelian character model to make sure that they capture the audience's interest and to ensure that they have a solid base where from they can later deviate. With this solid base they achieve empathy for the character and ensure the audience identification with the character. A film that has more elements of the Aristotelian method than initially appears is *Wild Strawberries* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957).

The action in *Wild Strawberries* takes place over 24 hours. Bergman presents the life of seventy-eight year old doctor of medicine Isak Borg (Victor Sjöström) by showing his stream of consciousness, creating an episodic narrative structure, which ostensibly makes the film counter-Aristotelian.

The film's plot is complex in a number of ways. On one level, the film's structure proceeds horizontally. The horizontal narrative can be summarized in the sentence: Borg drives to his hometown to receive an honorary degree from the university. The structure of the film becomes vertical when the present time is 'disturbed' by past memories (flashbacks) and dreams. The vertical dimension of the film, though, is inserted in such a way as not only to disturb, but to supplement and enrich the flow of action of the horizontal narrative structure. The film starts with a dream sequence and ends with a dream sequence giving thus a circular structure to the narrative and also a sense of a proper beginning, middle and end. In this film, as Edward Murray, points out in his analysis of *Wild Strawberries*, there is 'perfect unity of action'.⁶³

Wild Strawberries was considered to be one the films that characterized the end of neo-realism and a 'remove from true-neorealist practice, because it contains flashback sequences'.⁶⁴ But, the vertical structure of the film does not disturb the *verisimilitude* of the story and is,

therefore, in accordance with the basic Aristotelian rule of probability and necessity. The disturbance of the time sequence follows a 'normal' pattern. The verisimilitude of the plot is not harmed by the flashbacks or the dreams, not only because they are handled masterfully by Bergman, but also because these narrative devices are not alien to our everyday life patterns. For example, the audience might not identify with the narrative structure of a film like *Run Lola Run*, or *Memento* because such narrative structures completely contrast with a 'realistic' experience of time. It is more than often the case, nevertheless, that we day dream, go back to memories, or even doze for five minutes to travel the world of the past or to worlds completely unknown. The process of taking a break from everyday routine by dreaming has in fact a realistic and 'true' element in everyone's life and it is therefore something believable, something probable or possible.

The use of Borg's point of view throughout the film advances the *verisimilitude* of the story and acts as 'a unifying factor of the structure of events, something especially important in an episodic film which moves between inner and outer reality'.⁶⁵

Wild Strawberries might be considered episodic by modern film critics, but according to the *Poetics*, it is not. In Chapter IX Aristotle writes that a plot is episodic when 'the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence'.⁶⁶

Wild Strawberries' narrative has unity of action with each scene connected with the rule of probability and necessity and cannot be considered episodic in the Aristotelian sense. *Memento*, *Run Lola Run* or *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998) on the other hand, have episodic narrative structures. *Memento* and *Sliding Doors* are composed of two realities and *Run Lola Run* has three realities.

Borg is an Aristotelian character. He is a moderately good, but not an eminently good man. He has put his career first and he has committed an *hamartia* by deciding early in his life to be cold and unforgiving to people that loved him. Through the course of the narrative he progresses through an *anagnorisis* of his *hamartia* and a *pathos* (alienation from loved ones, torturing nightmares).

Despite the fact that *Wild Strawberries* has the typical happy ending of a classical narrative structure, the film borrows key Aristotelian elements and cannot be considered as counter-Aristotelian.

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CONCLUSION

In its pure form, the *Poetics* has not been yet applied to the narrative structure of screenplay. Through a discussion of central Aristotelian concepts and a clarification of the main Aristotelian misinterpretations, I have tried to show that the use of the Aristotelian method to date cannot be a criterion for limiting the possibilities of the method and that one of the most widely accepted ideas about the *Poetics* – that the Aristotelian narrative structure is closely associated with the classical or restorative narrative structure of the American mainstream cinema – is incorrect. To reach this conclusion, I have traced specific misinterpretations of the *Poetics* from Aristotelian scholars as well as contemporary screenwriting theorists. Meanwhile, I have tried to define *mimesis*, *katharsis*, *hamartia*, *anagnorisis* and *peripeteia* in relation to the ways that they can be applied more correctly to the narrative structure of screenplays.

In Chapter I of this study, I have looked at the way major literary and film theories have viewed the Aristotelian *mimesis* in relation to reality. This has revealed some inaccuracies arising from centuries of interpreting the Aristotelian *mimesis* as a means of representation. I have then argued that the Aristotelian *mimesis* is not related to a photographic realism or the *idealistic* realism of the classical narrative structure. Through a detailed analysis of the concepts of ‘probability’ I have come to the conclusion that logical believability, *verisimilitude*, or simply what *could* happen – not what actually happens or should happen – is the object of the Aristotelian *mimesis* (*logical mimesis*). To achieve *logical mimesis*, the Aristotelian poetic structure involves selecting *a part* of reality and not the whole of it. Therefore it is not and it does not aspire to be a ‘true’ or accurate representation of raw reality. I have also looked at the relationship between *mimesis* and plot and concluded that to achieve *logical mimesis*, the Aristotelian poetic structure involves selecting *a part* of reality and not the whole of it. Only by a proper plot can the Aristotelian *mimesis* be realised. That is why the plot has the primary role in

the Aristotelian method. In this chapter I have also looked at the interpretation of *mimesis* as it is found in contemporary screenwriting texts.

In Chapter II, I have tried to describe the true function of *katharsis* in an Aristotelian narrative as opposed to the classical and counter-Aristotelian narrative structures. I have looked at the two major misinterpretations of *katharsis*, the purgation and purification theories. I tried to show that to experience the Aristotelian *katharsis* the spectator needs firstly to be intellectually involved and secondly to be emotionally involved. Mental involvement is a *precondition* for emotional involvement and for *katharsis* to be achieved. I concluded that *katharsis* is related to an emotional relief derived from the intellectual clarification of the hero's *hamartia*. To prove that *katharsis* is related to the spectators' intellectual engagement was the first step in showing that one of Aristotle's strongest opponents, Augusto Boal, was false in alleging that *katharsis* functions a means to repress the spectator. If *katharsis* satisfies and mitigates the spectators' need for action, as Boal asserts, his narrative system would be even more dangerous. Then I looked at the various misconceptions of *katharsis* as it is interpreted by screenwriting theorists, in order to show how the Aristotelian *katharsis* would work for the specific needs of a screenplay's narrative.

In Chapter III have investigated two widely spread misinterpretations of the *Poetics*, a) the Aristotelian rule for the beginning, middle and end of a narrative and, b) the so-called rule of the three unities. I have also argued that the polemic the *Poetics* has received on the grounds that Aristotle favoured plot over character is unfounded. Chapter III was also devoted to a detailed discussion and clarification of the central Aristotelian plot construction elements *hamartia*, *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. I looked at the way these three terms were interpreted and misinterpreted by literary scholars as well as screenwriting theorists in order to offer a more accurate way of applying these Aristotelian concepts to screenwriting.

Throughout this study I have tried to discuss the most important misinterpretations regarding the *Poetics*. By referring to specific screenwriting texts that draw on the *Poetics*, I have demonstrated that the process of applying the *Poetics* in screenwriting has not always been accurate, which deprives the Aristotelian narrative method of its potential. A key objective of

this study was also to investigate the differences between the Aristotelian narrative structure and the classical narrative structure and show that these differences make the *Poetics* a unique method the potential of which is far from exhausted in screenwriting. By showing a number of inaccuracies of the *Poetics* in screenwriting texts, by clarifying the meaning of *katharsis* and *mimesis* and by discussing key Aristotelian plot structure elements I hope to have contributed with this study to a clearer understanding of the potential *Poetics* has for the prospective screenwriter or screenwriting analyst.

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