

Werner Herzog calls three-act structure “brainless”. Is it?

The famous writer-director is teaching an online filmmaking class and his comments about three-act structure are noteworthy.

[Scott Myers](#)



Werner Herzog

Here is a transcript of what Herzog said about three-act structure:

“This whole three-act structure that is being taught in film school is kind of ridiculous. What is three acts in

Aguirre? In that the leading character at a certain point at the end has to change and has to be a different man. No, not so. Not Aguirre. Aguirre is bad and only worse at the end. So it doesn't function with me like that. Sometimes there may be something like five or six acts in the film I have made. I think it's brainless. It's really brainless to structure yourself in it. Very often it's a signature of mediocre filmmaking."

Herzog is a remarkable filmmaker, both fiction and documentaries. He's a writer, director, producer, and has even staged operas. Some of his more notable movies: *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), *Stroszek* (1977), *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), *Burden of Dreams* (1982), *Grizzly Man* (2005), and *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (2009). That we should take his comments seriously is a given, however I think they deserve closer scrutiny because he seems to be implying a couple of things which are not necessarily associated with three-act structure.

First, let's acknowledge that three-act structure is at its core simply a way of looking at how a movie's narrative is constructed. It echoes Aristotle's take in "Poetics":

"A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it. An end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it. And a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has

| also another after it.”

Technically speaking at its purest level, that’s all three-act structure is about: Beginning. Middle. End.

What Herzog is critiquing is something not necessarily associated with three-act structure, rather it’s the idea of what is often called a character’s “arc,” as Herzog puts it, “the leading character at a certain point at the end has to change and has to be a different man.”

Indeed, Herzog implies something even more specific and that is how a character needs to go through a *positive* change. We can infer that from this comment: “Not Aguirre. Aguirre is bad and only worse at the end.”

I think that is the primary thing which Herzog is calling “brainless,” that there is some sort of rule whereby a character, most often the Protagonist, must have a positive arc. With that, I agree. Some Protagonists refuse to change. Others have a negative arc, even to the point of self-destruction. Still other Protagonists don’t change, instead acting as change agents who inspire or compel *other* characters to go through some sort of personal metamorphosis. But this critique of a positive arc is not something by definition attributable to three-act structure.

Now if what Herzog is trying to say — that the Hollywood convention is (A) stories should be told in three acts and (B) the Protagonist must have a positive arc, which frankly is pretty much a default mode in development circles — and

that we as storytellers must slavishly stick to this particular paradigm, that is, indeed, brainless. We should feel free to write any and all types of stories, follow them where they lead us. Three acts, five acts, six acts, eight sequences, dozens of sequences... whatever. As long as the structure reflects an honest account of the story as it unfolds in our creative process, we ought to embrace the flexibility to create anything and everything.

That said, two final observations about why I would advise caution in trampling three-act structure. First, everyone in the Hollywood acquisition and development community talks in terms of three acts. As a writer, you can craft a story with however many acts or sequences as you want, however in story meetings, you have to be able to translate that into three acts because that's the most universal language of screenplay structure in Hollywood.

Second, I don't care how many acts, sequences, or scenes a script has. I don't care if it's told forward, backward, or nonlinear. If it's a mainstream or even indie movie, not an experimental film, that story is going to have a beginning, middle, and end. Why? Because those three movements are innate to story:

The Hero's Journey: Separation. Initiation. Return.

Sonata Form: Exposition. Development. Recapitulation.

Hegel: Thesis. Antithesis. Synthesis.

Human Existence: Birth. Life. Death.

Aristotle: Beginning. Middle. End.

Each movement can be and almost always is divided up into smaller subsets of beats or scenes, but still they exist within these three overarching narrative pieces. Besides rather than looking at this as something which restricts creativity, why not think of three-act structure as simply providing a context? And within that context, we as writers have total freedom to do whatever we want.

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