Saturday Craft Seminar:
"Spring, Summer, Asteroid, Bird" with Henry Lien

Lecture Outline

Lecturer Henry Lien

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Housekeeping

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2. Book: https://henrylien.com/spring-summer-asteroid-bird/

B. Overview — Diversity = Forms, Not Just Faces — Discussions in the West around diversity in the arts often focus on the identities of characters and creators. This workshop explores expressions of diversity that go beyond just plopping different faces into stories that are 100 percent Western in spirit. It examines diverse structures, themes, and values from Eastern storytelling, particularly the East Asian four-act structure and explains how Eastern value systems such as collectivism can dictate form.

C. A Game of Lenses — I'm going to use a very traditional East Asian lens to describe some stories that are very popular here in the West. Guess the story.

1. Example 1 — Unruly student raised with no parental discipline is rewarded by permissive faculty members for flouting rules, smuggling illegal contraband, and killing one of his professors.

2. Example 2 — Civic-minded young women promote harmony in the empire by helping childless couples realize their dreams of starting a family.

The point of this game is to show a) how vastly different cultural values can be; b) how those values serve as lenses that affect how cultures view stories; and c) how those values affect what constitute satisfying storytelling structures and themes in a culture.

D. Disclaimers and Definitions

1. No Value Judgments — Western vs Eastern, three-act versus four-act, individualist versus collectivist, etc.

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2. “West” and “Western” Definitions

3. No Monoliths or Binaries

F. Cultural Appropriation

1. What It Is — American animated film set in non-Western setting with non-Western characters who talk and act exactly like American teenagers.

2. What It Is Not — Deeper understanding of the values underlying a culture.

3. Everyone is Welcome to Study This

4. Not the Cultural Appropriation Police

II. EAST ASIAN FOUR-ACT STRUCTURE

A. Western Three-Act Structure

1. Conflict

Traditional Western storytelling, especially the three-act structure, is based on conflict. To appreciate how baked into our culture these aesthetics are, imagine if in *Star Wars*, there were no Darth Vader and no Empire. That wouldn’t be *Star Wars*, that’d be *Star.* Because there’s no conflict.

2. Symmetry

The Western three-act structure values symmetry. By symmetry, I don’t mean that the acts have to be of uniform length. I mean that the main elements have to be introduced at the beginning of the story and appear at the end. The protagonist, the antagonist, and the main problem, issue, or conflict have to appear in the first act of the story and reappear in the final act. Leave one out and the story swerves until all the other wheels fall off.

Imagine if in *Romeo and Juliet*, the first half is entirely about Romeo. Then kapow! After the halfway point, a new character named Juliet enters the story. Audiences would howl, “That’s not *Romeo and Juliet*. That’s *Romeo THEN Juliet*.”

B. East Asian Four-Act Structure

1. Elements

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a. Introduce Main Elements
b. Develop Main Elements
c. Introduce New Element
d. Harmonize All Element — Define

2. Short story “Spring, Summer, Asteroid, Bird”

a. Act One — The characters are two distant cousins in the theropod family, Chelsea (a bird) and Marilyn (a Tyrannosaur). They dislike each other.
b. Act Two — Chelsea lays her first eggs. Marilyn couldn’t care less.
c. Act Three — Asteroid! An asteroid slams into the Earth, and the resulting dust and smoke block out sunlight for years, ending most life.
d. Act Four — Most dinosaurs die but Chelsea survives because she has a beak, which means she can eat seeds, which remain edible for years after the asteroid.

3. Not Focused On Conflict — It’s less focused on conflict than it is on the relationships among the story elements. This does *not* mean that all stories told in the four-act structure lack conflict. Remember what I said about resisting monoliths and binaries. It’s a matter of emphasis. The story is not primarily interested in any conflict between or among the story elements. It’s not about Chelsea defeating Marilyn or Marilyn defeating Chelsea. And it’s not even about the two of them teaming up to defeat the new element of the asteroid. Instead, it’s about revealing the previously invisible relationships among all the elements. The asteroid creates a new context that reveals new relationships between being small instead of huge, between having a beak instead of fangs, between eating seeds instead of meat. It reveals that Chelsea’s seeming disadvantages are in fact massive advantages that allow her to survive.

4. “The Daughters of Itoya”

a. Read text from book.
b. Analysis — four elements applied to the poem.

5. Not Symmetrical — Deliberately holding back a major story elements.

6. Genre Track Jumps — Act three’s new element often makes the story actually jump tracks to a different genre. Sometimes, act four’s harmonizing also makes the story seem to jump genre tracks yet again (see “The Daughters of Itoya”).

7. Abrupt, Ambiguous Ending — At least four possible explanations

8. Pumping Up Acts One and Two

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a. General — The four-act structure is a more difficult structure to pull off than the three-act structure. Part of the reason for this is that you are deliberately holding back a main element of your story, perhaps the best element, until after the halfway point. That puts great pressure on the first two acts to be even more engaging so that it isn't anemic. The storyteller thus has to pump more firepower into the first half of the story in order to compensate for the lack of the withheld element and ensure that audiences remain engaged.
b. Organization — One of the ways to make the first two acts more engaging is to use structural devices within those acts.
c. Example — *Parasite* — four con games to get each of the Kim family jobs in the Park household, requiring escalating complexity.

9. Values Dictate Structures
    a. Buddhist/Taoist Ideas — sublimation of the individual ego, surrender of will, relinquishing of preconceptions
    b. Collectivism — relationship among all elements, including the unexpected, unwelcome surprise element
    c. Revelation Over Conflict

10. Real-Life Four-Act Stories
    a. Fong-Chi Lien — https://www.getty.edu/news/henry-fong-chi-lien-getty-as-muse/
    b. Henry Lien — https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02tYyxgzPsjxo1nQbLhvVpGaJ96Dr7zhgvu83UU3TMzz5N8BE1NCU5FPiCTaFwXC6Al&id=1513467221&mibextid=wwXIfr or https://youtu.be/wFPJHtjB9kY?si=uszOP1XTB85UBtTD

III. CIRCULAR/NESTED STORYTELLING

A. Cyclic Storytelling

1. Elements — same characters, setting, situation, time, and/or place, visited multiple times.

2. Case Study — Akira Kurosawa's "Rashomon"
    a. Plot — The story centers around a trial. A bandit is accused of killing a samurai and raping his wife. Surprisingly, at the trial, all three main characters claim responsibility for the samurai's death: the bandit, the samurai's wife, and even the dead samurai himself (speaking through a spiritual medium).
    b. Practical Takeaway for Storytellers — The multiple accounts of the crime are not identical. In fact, they are mutually exclusive. The multiple accounts are not duplicative because they offer opportunities to gain more information. Note that

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the information is less about the facts of what happened (plot) than they are about the relationships among the characters (character development). For example, the samurai's wife reveals that after the bandit raped her in front of her husband, her husband disowned her, calling her tainted, producing a desire for her to exact revenge on him rather than on the bandit.

B. Nested Storytelling

1. Elements — Nested storytelling is similar to cyclic storytelling. However, the stories do not have to revisit the same event from multiple angles, starring the same characters, etc. They can involve different events starring different characters, but united by their structure (e.g., stories told within stories told within stories) and/or thematic motifs uniting the various stories.

2. Case Study — *The Thousand and One Nights* — Anonymously written collection of tales (probably) from the Muslim world, Persia, India, and China, organized by a frame tale. *Content warning for The 1,001 Nights in general — racism, sexism, sexual violence, animal cruelty*.

a. Plot — Shahriyar, the king of India and China, discovered his wife's infidelity. He killed her and then vowed that he would repeatedly wed a new woman only to kill her the morning after their wedding night so that she could never betray like him his queen had. The king's Wezier had a brave daughter named Shahrazad. She developed a plan to stop the king and save the realm's women from being wedded and beheaded. She begged her father to offer her as bride to the king. Then, on their wedding night, she began telling him one enchanting, interconnected tale after another, only to stop at dawn on a cliffhanger, ensuring that the king would allow her to live to another night so he could hear what happened next. The tales she tells him include famous stories such as "Aladdin's Wonderful Lamp," "The Seven Voyages of Sindbad," and "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." After telling tales for 1,001 consecutive nights and bearing King Shahriyar children over their couple years together, Shahrazad begged the king to renounce his vow to wed and behead the women of the realm and to return to his senses. He agreed. Thus, through her courage and ingenuity and the power of storytelling, Shahrazad saved herself and the women of the realm.
b. Practical Takeaway for Storytellers — The non-linear structure allows for more complex, nuanced, gradual, and believable treatment of certain material, such as the themes of empathy, mental health, and recovery. Even though *The Thousand and One Nights* predates modern notions of mental health, it can be read as an attempt to address a mental health crisis. King Shahriyar was so broken by his wife's betrayal that he suffered a mental break and did a horrendous thing. Shahrazad has the empathy to see this, and to realize that her harrowing mission is actually a mission to bring the king back to his senses, back to himself. But she

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does not enter the task with judgment. She instinctively realizes that she needs to meet the king where he is mentally and emotionally, and that is, at the beginning of the story, a very dark place. Thus, she spins him tale after tale that echos his own sense of betrayal that drove him to this mental break. It's as if she's saying, "I know how you feel. I know how hurt you were." She accepts that healing and wellness are slow processes and she must be patient. So for nearly three years, she spends every night building a connection with him to let him know that she understands and empathizes with how he must feel. And she doesn't just tell him, she shows him through stories, because stories reach us in ways that nothing else can. She instinctively senses that just words of agreement will bounce off him in his state. It's only the power of story that is able to show, not tell, him that she feels his pain. But she also doesn't want to just humor and coddle and enable his feelings. She doesn't just want to feed him sweet opiates that keep him comfortably stewing in his sense of being wronged and feeling justified. So she weens him off the milk by injecting drops of vinegar into the mixture. She seeds in tales about tyrannical and unjust leaders who abuse their powers or fail to show mercy. The juxtaposition of those stories against the stories of betrayal draw an unspoken analogy between the villains the king despises and himself. The subtext is, "King, you are through your actions betraying your people, betraying justice, betraying your better self. King, you are in danger of becoming what you hate." Then, finally, at the end of nearly three years, after having borne the king multiple children, she calls upon him to reverse his decree to wed, then kill, the maidens of the realm. She calls upon him to return to his senses. She calls upon him to return to his true self. Thus, *The Thousand and One Nights*, for all its salacious material and treacherous characters, is ultimately a story about how patience and empathy can reach even the most lost souls and give them their true selves back. And how stories do that better than anything else because stories are empathy engines.

C. Values — Western cultures tend to be more individualistic and Eastern cultures tend to be more collectivist (although remember my warning about monoliths and binaries). Circular/nested storytelling structures are more concerned with the relationships among the community of stories than with a solitary story. Examination of the community of stories allows invisible things to emerge, such as the hidden relationships and feelings that the characters in "Rashomon" had for each other or the patient demonstration of empathy in *The Thousand and One Nights.* Given these cultural values, it is not surprising that circular/nested storytelling structures resonated with audiences in those cultures.

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