

## DAN O'BANNON'S DYNAMIC STRUCTURE: A Course Outline for Instructors

The following course outline is designed for classroom use of the Michael Wiese Productions book *Dan O'Bannon's Guide to Screenplay Structure*. The curriculum has been designed for a fifteen-week course (this includes a one-week semester break), but can be modified to accommodate fewer or additional weeks. Suggested films are optional; instructors can feel free to use any films they choose.

### WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION and A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF SCREENPLAY STRUCTURE

- The meaning of structure and how it applies to drama
- The major screenwriting structural systems
  - *Aristotle*: The three unities; action as the driving force of drama
  - *Lajos Egri*: Drama as the proof of a premise; the pivotal character; the “point of attack;” crisis, climax, and resolution
  - *Howard & Mabley*: A concrete definition of conflict; the character's inner life; hope versus fear
  - *Syd Field*: The 800-pound gorilla of three-act structure; the even division of act length; pivotal plot points
  - *Robert McKee*: Beats, scenes and sequences; three acts as a minimum; archplot, miniplot, and antiplot; “The Gap” and progressive complications

FOR NEXT WEEK: Students will select a film and identify how it uses: Aristotle's three unities; the Lajos Egri-style “premise;” details in the film that reveal the main character's inner life (Howard & Mabley); the Syd Field-style act breaks; is the film archplot, miniplot or antiplot (Robert McKee)? **Note: Ideally, the student should use the same film for all exercises throughout the course, unless otherwise specified**

### WEEK 2: DAN O'BANNON ON CONFLICT

- Striving-based conflict vs. fight-based conflict
- Not Protagonist vs. Obstacles, but *Antagonists in Opposition*
- Not Protagonist vs. Antagonist, but *Positive Antagonist vs. Negative Antagonist*
  - The use of the multiple antagonist (positive or negative)
- The three types of conflict
  - Conflict between characters: Luke vs. Vader; Batman vs. Joker; Dirty Harry vs. Scorpio
  - Conflict between man and non-man (“The Other”): the *Titanic* passengers vs. the sinking ship; the *Nostramo* crew vs. the xenomorph
  - Man versus himself: Charles Foster Kane's idealism vs. tyranny; apathy vs. political commitment in Rick from *Casablanca*
- Multiple conflicts within one story
- Using each of the three conflict types within one story

FOR NEXT WEEK: Students will identify the positive and negative antagonists of their chosen film, plus one example of each type of conflict from the film's story.

### WEEK 3: DYNAMIC STRUCTURE DEFINED – THE FIRST ACT

- The function of the first act: Defining the conflict
- The “issue of contention”
  - Positive and negative antagonists: What they want and how those wants differ to create conflict
  - Must all conflicts be introduced in the first act?
- Defining the characters
  - Identifying the polarization of the antagonists by their wants
- Defining the world of the story
  - Exposition: How much is too much, and knowing when you need less
- The first-act curtain: Locking the Conflict

FOR NEXT WEEK: Students will identify the positive and negative antagonists in their chosen film, and identify a moment as the first-act curtain / locking of conflict. Why have they chosen that moment as the locking point of the conflict?

### WEEK 4: DYNAMIC STRUCTURE DEFINED – THE SECOND ACT

- Escalation of conflict
- Utilizing hedonic adaptation
  - Redefining the characters' understanding of what their world is
    - The “What the hell was that?” moment and its use in exposition
    - The plateau moment before the next redefinition of the characters' world
    - Escalating shocks and their use in drama (focus on genre)
- Expectation vs. result in drama (McKee's “gap”)
  - The Phony Terrible Thing and how it can be the dramatist's friend

FOR NEXT WEEK: Students will identify moments of dramatic escalation in their chosen film and explain how they correspond to the concept of hedonic adaptation. They will identify at least one “What the hell was that?” exposition beat, and try to find a usage of the Phony Terrible Thing in creating suspense and audience engagement.

### WEEK 5: DYNAMIC STRUCTURE DEFINED – THE POINT OF NO RETURN AND THE THIRD ACT

- The Point of No Return as the cornerstone of dramatic storytelling
  - The conflict rendered unavoidable and the final confrontation inevitable
  - The loss of freedom of choice for your character
- The third-act resolution of the conflict
  - Brings the characters back to “normal,” though the normality of the story's first act can never be fully restored
- Why three acts?
  - The impossibility of multiple Points of No Return
  - Using up the element of surprise
- The one- and two-act structure
  - One-act basically just a third act, with one catastrophic conflict
  - Two-act structure combines the locking of conflict and Point of No Return into a single event

FOR NEXT WEEK: Students will identify the Point of No Return of their chosen film, and explain how it creates an inevitable confrontation. Also, they will find a story that they believe has a two-act structure that works and explain how it functions.

#### WEEK 6: DYNAMIC STRUCTURE DEFINED – CHARACTER

- Action as a means for revealing character
  - Actions demonstrate choices; choices demonstrate good or evil leanings of character's personality
  - Different means of surmounting, defeating or avoiding obstacles; the means the character chooses demonstrates personality polarization
- Second-act pressure on the character to change
- Third-act character change as a result of choices made or consequences of those choices
- Exceptions to the primacy of character change in drama
  - Science fiction and horror: Character is subordinate to idea (curiosity about the unknown in the former; fear of the unknown in the latter)
  - Comedy as a genre non-dependent on character change
    - Comic character's inflexible personality as a means of salvation
  - The “holy fool” in drama: Forrest Gump, John Coffey in *The Green Mile*, Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*

FOR NEXT WEEK: In the student's chosen film, they will identify up to five obstacles presented to the film's positive antagonist in the course of the narrative, and what the character's means of addressing those obstacles reveals about their inner lives.

#### WEEK 7: DYNAMIC STRUCTURE IN THE WORK OF DAN O'BANNON

- Screen a Dan O'Bannon film of the instructor's choice
  - Optimal Choices: DARK STAR, ALIEN, BLUE THUNDER, RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD, INVADERS FROM MARS, TOTAL RECALL, SCREAMERS

FOR NEXT WEEK: For the film viewed in class, the student will identify: positive and negative antagonists; first-act curtain (locking-of-conflict moment); second-act curtain / Point of No Return; resolution of conflict; three second-act beats indicating hedonic-adaptive escalation of stakes; choices that reflect the positive antagonist's inner life.

#### WEEK 8: DISCUSSION OF DYNAMIC STRUCTURE IN THE WORK OF DAN O'BANNON

- Discussion of previous week's film
  - Emphasis on students' interpretation of the points in the week's assignment
- Subjects for special focus
  - Use of multiple protagonists (ALIEN, RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD, DARK STAR)
  - Strong negative antagonists (ALIEN, RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD, BLUE THUNDER, SCREAMERS)
  - Concrete Points of No Return: Lyman Good's death in BLUE THUNDER; the “birth” of the xenomorph in ALIEN; Bomb #20's refusal to disarm in DARK STAR
  - Choices revealing character: Murphy vs. Cochrane's devotion to the military in BLUE THUNDER; Parker vs. Ash on the xenomorph in ALIEN; Frank's insecurity instigating the RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD)
  - Horror's use of fear of the unknown: RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD, ALIEN,

## SCREAMERS

### WEEK 9: DYNAMIC STRUCTURE IN THE WORK OF OTHER SCREENWRITERS

- Dan's system as a universal principle
- Screen a film of the instructor's choice that illustrates effective usage of Dan O'Bannon's dynamic structure
  - Optimal choices from *Dan O'Bannon's Guide*: CITIZEN KANE; CASABLANCA; INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS; PSYCHO; SOME LIKE IT HOT
  - Other strong choices: THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION; SIDEWAYS; GROUNDHOG DAY; DIE HARD; UNFORGIVEN; GOOD WILL HUNTING; THE DARK KNIGHT; STAR WARS; THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

FOR NEXT WEEK: For the film viewed in class, the student will identify: positive and negative antagonists; first-act curtain (locking-of-conflict moment); second-act curtain / Point of No Return; resolution of conflict; three second-act beats indicating hedonic-adaptive escalation of stakes; choices that reflect the positive antagonist's inner life.

### WEEK 10: DISCUSSION OF DYNAMIC STRUCTURE IN THE WORK OF OTHER SCREENWRITERS

- Discussion of previous week's film
  - Emphasis on students' interpretation of the points in the week's assignment
  - Subjects for special focus
    - Strong negative antagonists: Little Bill in UNFORGIVEN; Hans Gruber in DIE HARD; the Joker in THE DARK KNIGHT; Warden Norton in THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION
    - Concrete Points of No Return: The pods leaving town in INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS; Kane chooses Susan in CITIZEN KANE; the bomb on the roof in DIE HARD; Ned's death in UNFORGIVEN; Sally's good samaritan is one of the killers in TEXAS CHAIN SAW
    - Choices revealing character: Jack seduces the steakhouse waitress in SIDEWAYS; Phil helps the homeless man in GROUNDHOG DAY; Rick sends Ilsa away with Victor in CASABLANCA; Andy brings music to the prison in SHAWSHANK; Harvey Dent reveals his changed character by giving up his freedom of choice (the coin) in THE DARK KNIGHT

### WEEK 11: SEMESTER BREAK

### WEEK 12: WHEN DYNAMIC STRUCTURE GOES WRONG

- Screening of a film in which dynamic structure's principles are misused or ignored
  - Optimal choices from *Dan O'Bannon's Guide*: DRACULA (1931 version); DUMB & DUMBER; LOST HORIZON
  - Other strong choices: STAR WARS – EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE; BATTLEFIELD EARTH; ALL ABOUT STEVE; JAWS: THE REVENGE; LAST ACTION HERO; THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES; THE SCARLET LETTER; GODZILLA (1998 version); TRANSFORMERS: REVENGE OF THE FALLEN; PROMETHEUS

FOR NEXT WEEK: For the film viewed in class, students will identify misuses of dynamic structure. They should place special emphasis on: characters functioning as exposition dumps; character choices that reveal illogical or contradictory personality traits; the “rules” of the film's dramatic world being too malleable or inconsistent; muddled distinctions between positive and negative antagonists; action sustained at too consistent a level for too long (undermining of hedonic adaptation); “we need an action beat here” action beats; impossible-to-identify Points of No Return.

#### WEEK 13: DISCUSSION OF WHEN DYNAMIC STRUCTURE GOES WRONG

- Discussion of previous week's film
  - Emphasis on students' interpretation of the points in the week's assignment
- Subjects for special focus
  - Characters as exposition dumps: Danny in LAST ACTION HERO; Nico in GODZILLA
  - Inconsistent character choices: Obi-Wan agrees to teach someone he mistrusts in THE PHANTOM MENACE; Chillingworth puts the village ahead of his revenge in THE SCARLET LETTER; Conway turns his back on his greatest desire in LOST HORIZON
  - Worlds with impossible-to-track “rules”: BATTLEFIELD EARTH; the movie characters all react differently to the real world in LAST ACTION HERO; the black slime does something different to every living thing it touches in PROMETHEUS
  - Which antagonist is which?: The monster too “positive” in GODZILLA; Mary too “negative” in ALL ABOUT STEVE; the unlikable Sherman McCoy as unironic hero in THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES
  - Hedonic adaptation ignored: Nonstop action in TRANSFORMERS: REVENGE OF THE FALLEN; action beats repeated in PROMETHEUS; too much cross-cutting in THE PHANTOM MENACE
  - Action for its own sake: The monster attacks in PROMETHEUS; the Indian attack in THE SCARLET LETTER
  - Where is the Point of No Return?: THE PHANTOM MENACE; PROMETHEUS

#### WEEK 14: DAN O'BANNON ON HOLLYWOOD AND OTHER ODDMENTS

- Appropriate act length for a screenplay
  - Acts do NOT need to be the same length
    - All acts should be as long as you require them to be for where they need to take your story
    - Objective time vs. subjective time (a discussion of real-time experiments in film)
- Appropriate length of a screenplay
  - Page count vs. screen time
    - Do large amounts of dialogue naturally result in a longer film?
    - The director's role in determining the length of a script
- Inspiration vs. Rules
  - Battling the concept of the theoretical flaw
  - Knowing when to go with your gut
- Perspective, and when to give yourself some
- Fear
  - Its use as a motivator in drama
  - Its use as a motivator for the writer
    - Recognizing your fears and learning how to write in spite of them

FOR NEXT WEEK: Assign each student a different film in current theatrical release (the more recent, the better, as less will have been written about it to influence the student's own perspective), and have them break down its narrative using dramatic structure. They should identify: positive and negative antagonists; first-act curtain (locking-of-conflict moment); second-act curtain / Point of No Return; resolution of conflict; three second-act beats indicating hedonic-adaptive escalation of stakes; choices that reflect the positive antagonist's inner life. They should also identify misuses of dynamic structure. Place special emphasis on: characters functioning as exposition dumps; character choices that reveal illogical or contradictory character traits; the "rules" of the film's dramatic world being too malleable or inconsistent; muddled distinctions between positive and negative antagonists; action sustained at too consistent a level for too long (undermining of hedonic adaptation); "we need an action beat here" action beats; impossible-to-identify Points of No Return. Finally, each student should write a few brief broad-view paragraphs on whether or not the film makes effective use of dynamic structure.

#### WEEK 15: IN-CLASS REVIEW OF FINAL FILMS

- Presentation and discussion of each student's assigned films and their dynamic-structural interpretations of these works
- Conclusion and course wrap-up

COURSE TEXT: *Dan O'Bannon's Guide to Screenplay Structure* by Dan O'Bannon with Matt R. Lohr (ISBN 978-1615931309)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DAN O'BANNON was born in Missouri in 1946. He was a scholarship student in fine arts at Washington University in St. Louis before moving to Los Angeles in 1969 to study film at the University of Southern California. While at USC, he collaborated with John Carpenter on the screenplay for what would become Dan's first feature film, 1974's *DARK STAR*, in which he also co-starred as "Sgt. Pinback."

Dan's credits include eleven produced screenplays, largely in the science fiction and horror genres. He is best known for his work on the Oscar-winning international blockbuster *ALIEN*, which ranked as number 6 on the American Film Institute's countdown of the 100 most thrilling American films; in 2002, this picture was inducted into the Library of Congress' National Film Registry. Dan's other credits include the Arnold Schwarzenegger hit *TOTAL RECALL*, *BLUE THUNDER* and *SCREAMERS*. Dan also directed two feature films, *THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD* (which he also wrote) and *THE RESURRECTED* (aka *SHATTERBRAIN*). He taught film studies and writing courses at USC and at Chapman University in Orange, CA.

Dan's later years were spent with his wife Diane and son in Los Angeles. He died of complications from Crohn's disease in 2009.

A native of Pittsburgh, PA, MATT R. LOHR is an award-winning screenwriter, essayist and critic. He holds an MFA in screenwriting from Chapman University in Orange, CA, where he first met Dan O'Bannon and agreed to work with him on this book. His views on contemporary and classic cinema can be found on his blog, "The Movie Zombie" ([themoviezombie.blogspot.com](http://themoviezombie.blogspot.com)).

Matt is also the host of the forthcoming Dan O'Bannon Writing Workshops™, which will bring a hands-on presentation of Dan's "dynamic structure" screenplay system to seminars, pitchfests and industry events worldwide. More information on these events, and on all upcoming projects and programs relating to Dan's works and teaching, is available online at the official Dan O'Bannon

website, [www.danobannon.com](http://www.danobannon.com). Matt can be contacted by email at [matt@danobannon.com](mailto:matt@danobannon.com), and he is available on Twitter by following [@TheMovieZombie](https://twitter.com/TheMovieZombie).

Matt currently lives in Los Angeles.