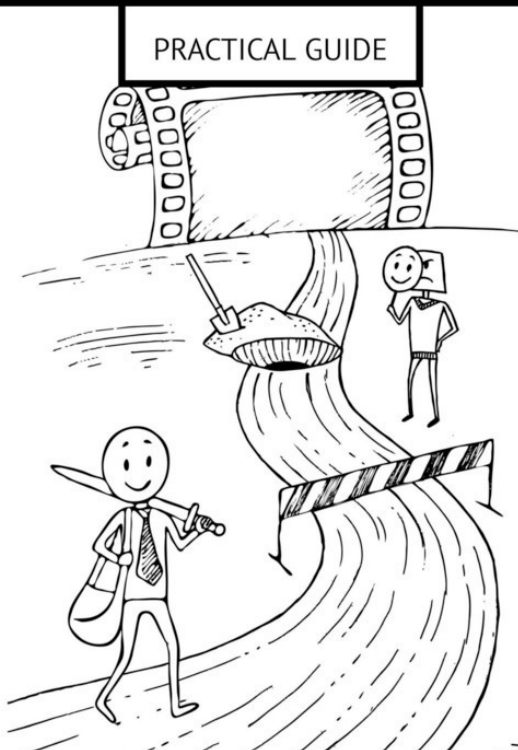


MAXIM BUKHTEEV

How to write screenplays using Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp approach

PRACTICAL GUIDE



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Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp
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Аннотация

Practical guide for film and television scriptwriters, based on the work of Russian scientist Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp “The Morphology of the Fairy-Tale”.

Содержание

Introduction	5
Why Propp if there is the Campbell writing?	10
Functions	12
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

How to write screenplays using Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp approach PRACTICAL GUIDE

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Introduction

Who is Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, quoted by many foreign screenplay manuals? Why had his work become so popular among screenwriters, that in the professional community people even started talking about overusing of this approach?

Indeed, many other scholars were engaged in folk art, and they have also noticed that many elements in fairy tales repeat themselves constantly. Attempts to somehow describe and systematize these recurrences to create a lean fairy tale structure, have been made repeatedly. However, it was only Propp who has managed to create a methodology flexible and versatile enough, which allowed it to be applied to other formats as well. By the way, this has happened already against the author's will, as he had deliberately limited his research solemnly by fairy tales, being afraid of losing some in scientific accuracy.

So, right from the start I would like to focus your attention on the fact that the Russian philologist, folklorist, Leningrad University professor has never written anything about movies. On the one hand, this is a very bad start for the “how to write a screenplay” book. But on the other hand, Joseph Campbell, the worldwide famous American mythology explorer, has not written anything about screenplays either. However, his works are in every serious Hollywood screenwriter's library.

How did that happen?

A motion picture is a young art comparing to painting, literature and poetry, and it didn't have a solid theoretical basis from the beginning. While a motion picture was just an attraction, this basis wasn't really required. The first directors were just filming crowd on a street. And it was enough for a box-office success. Everything was done by one single person and a separate screenwriter profession did not exist at all.

Sure enough, a viewer got bored of watching the screen, as through the window to the street, pretty fast, and authors started making up new tricks. They were moving a camera and went to different places with it. Then circus actors came into movies – clowns, acrobats and bearded women. Then gradually camera started filming actors and acting out simple scenes as in a theatre.

And when a motion picture became more complicated, it got clear that viewers like good stories a lot more than they like tricks and simple special effects. They started to take a backseat and that's how a screenwriting was born.

But a weak foundation cannot hold a big and complicated construction. Writers came to the movies aid. For some time, film adaptation of books worked pretty well, but all the more movies were filmed. They were becoming more and more complex and a viewer was getting choosier. It was not easy to surprise him, and the literary material was ending.

Gradually a motion picture has become an independent art, but for quite a long time the screenwriting theory was limited with just general words. Every author could hope only for his

own hunch, experience and talent. This continued until George Lucas had filmed his famous Star Wars. Film release was like an explosion. It has created a new motion picture and its own mythology. As an indirect process of this phenomenon, there was a surge of interest in common mythology. Although Lucas wrote the first movie in the old way, by touch, after its tremendous success the director has found out with surprise that he had been walking the same way as authors of ancient myths had.

There was nothing surprising about it. Firstly, viewers story perception has its laws, common to all humanity. Secondly, George Lucas himself studied these laws at Modesto Junior College, where he was taught anthropology, sociology and literature.

After success of his movies, Lucas reread “The Hero with a Thousand Faces” by Joseph Campbell, which he had studied in college, and in creating his next movies he deliberately used the mythology structure. George Lucas’s loud public announcements about kinship of fantastic plots and myths have led to popularity increase of Campbell scientific writings as well.

To facilitate a screenwriter work over a complicated book, Christopher Vogler, a Hollywood producer, writes a small manual “A Practical Guide to The Hero with a Thousand Faces”. And in 2007 he issues an expanded version of it – “The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for writers”.

What does it all have to do with Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, the Russian scientist, who wrote his most famous “The

Morphology of the Fairy-tale” writing in 1934? The thing is, his researches resonate closely with what Campbell describes. Not without reason Christopher Vogler mentions Propp frequently in his writing.

After it became clear to everyone, that stories told by movies were of the same nature as all other stories in the world, there was a surge of interest in their theory. This is where Propp’s work came in handy.

Propp’s book went down in the history of European philology in 1958, when it was translated into English. The American edition has immediately received a lot of enthusiastic responses in press. Many scholars believe that the philologist’s writing was far ahead of his time. Therefore, it is no coincidence that around the same time a new science of cybernetics gained recognition, the science with which Propp methods had much in common.

And in his motherland Propp’s writing was known by specialists only. Actually, it’s no wonder, considering constant authority attacks on this whole scientific direction because of its disagreement with Marks and Lenin teaching.

As the professor Elizabeth Warner, the Head of the Russian Language Department at Durham University, writes in her book “Vladimir Propp, 1895 1970: The Study of Russian Folklore and Theory”: “...it may be suggested that ‘Morphology’ could’ve been left relatively unknown in Russia, except to the specialists circle, if foreign critics would have failed to pay attention to it”.

Personally, I am sure that practical western writers, journalists

and screenwriters have appreciated immediately the Russian scholar writing's potential, as they understood how it could be used in their daily work, namely creation of new stories. But there was no simple and clear methodology on how to do it when creating screenplays, until now. And this is the gap I hope to fill.

Why Propp if there is the Campbell writing?

The most ancient and widespread stories are myths and fairy tales. Although they are close relatives, nevertheless these forms should not be confused.

Let's begin with the fact that the fairy tale scheme by itself is a lot more developed and complicated, than the mythology one. A myth is an ancient conservative form, but it lies in the basis of a fairy tale, as Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp writes. A myth tells about creation of the world, in which gods and similar heroes act. This is largely a sacred text, narrating about creation of all things existing.

This is what Campbell tells us about the difference between a fairy tale and a myth in his "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" book: *"As a rule, a fairy tale hero achieves a local victory within his microcosm, whereas a myth hero achieves worldwide historical macrocosm triumph. While a fairy tale hero is the youngest or despised child, who gets extraordinary abilities and defeats his own abusers, a myth hero at the end of his adventure obtains a means of revival of all his community in whole"*.

That is, in fairy tales, even with a presence of variety of magical creatures, the main characters are simple humans. Which naturally makes stories like this a lot closer to nowadays

viewers. Besides, working with a fairy tale is a lot more convenient.

In his writing Propp specifies several times, that he works with a very narrow topic, which is a folklore. He keeps his distance deliberately and tries not to touch any other form of creativity, although he mentions them from time to time. It's clear that this is the absolutely correct scientific approach. However, as the time has shown, a certain fairy tale case helps to uncover many general laws of making story.

In fact, this is exactly why the Russian scholar's writing has become world famous, having created the basis for the modern text theory. Experienced screenwriters know how to put plane scientific facts to good practical use.

I use their approach, just like Christopher Vogler did with Campbell theories, and I will try to create a comprehensive instruction for screenwriters.

I hope it will help authors, and Propp will come to having his own George Lukas.

Functions

To figure out how Propp's discoveries can be used in screenwriting, it is necessary to understand what exactly he had discovered. How does his approach differ from methods of other researchers, who studied the same topic?

The basis in the Propp approach are functions. When the scholar started analyzing fairy tales, he found out that with all the diversity of magic stories, it is precisely the functions that are repeated. Meaning, that some actions and situations are found again and again, regardless of characters, conditions and an environment. For example, in terms of the fairytale structure, it does not matter who fights whom and when. The main thing is the battle itself. And it makes no difference if the prince is fighting a witch or if the peasant is fighting a dragon. Important things are the place and the result of this battle in the overall dramatic structure.

This structure works as a unified system, and its basis is separate elements and the logical connection among them. Every story has its own set and combination of these elements, which provides diversity and originality of plots. These elements are functions.

This discovery allowed Russian scholar to systematize fairy tales, identify patterns of their structure, as well as to outline a creative method of making new stories.

Propp writes: *“A fairy tale attributes easily the same actions to people, items and animals... Fairy tales have one special feature: composite parts of one story can be transferred to the other one without any changes... Let’s take a theme ‘a Serpent kidnaps the king’s daughter.’ This theme decomposes into 4 elements, each of which can vary separately. The Serpent can be replaced by Koshei, a whirlwind, a demon, a falcon, a warlock. The kidnaping can be substituted with vampirism or with any actions that lead to disappearance in the fairy tale. The daughter can be replaced by a sister, a fiancée, a wife, a mother. The king can be replaced by a king’s son, a peasant, a priest”*.

Here is this very degree of freedom, which Campbell mythological structures lack!

Further it will be more interesting.

And for now, for starters, let’s figure out what kind of functions can be there in fairy tales.

(Note: I will give the basic wording, names and designations of functions strictly according to Propp. I give examples of functions from the collection which the scientist worked with (Alexander Nikolaevich Afanasyev, “Folk Russian Tales”), as well as from world-renowned fairy tales and movies.)



absentation

– One of the family members leaves the house (definition – the **absentation**)

An absentation can be different. Propp identifies three types of it in fairy tales. A temporary absentation, like parents leaving, their death or children absentation. In a fairy tale parents might go to a fair or to work, and children go to the forest for mushrooms.

It is important to notice, that family may be conditional. The main thing is that the group member, who provides safety and stability, leaves. Let's say, in the Russian tale "The cat, the rooster and the fox", the old man and the cat leave, and the rooster stays to guard the house.

As you understand there are many more options like this in movies.

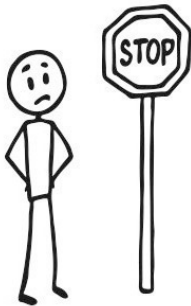
One of the brightest examples of the temporary "absentation" is Home Alone, 1990. The whole family departs, leaving the

character by himself. Also, the absentation in the form of “death” is pretty interesting. In Russian “Sivko-Burko” tale the father of three brothers, in dying, asks them to sleep on his grave alternatively.

In a movie it can serve as a starting point for the beginning of a story in a variety of genres, including thrillers and horrors. This method is used, for example, in Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, 2004 and *Grave of the Fireflies*, 1988.

Although, not only parents leave in movies. The point of the function is to trouble the balance and to give a push to the story, preparing the ground for some misfortune. That is, it is the person, who was keeping the balance, is to leave. Let’s say, in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001, it is Bilbo Baggins, who was keeping the ring for a long time, but was forced to leave, having passed the valuable item on to Frodo.

That is, normally “absentation” in a movie is the most common and simple way for the character to start the journey and get into some adventures. After all, the only thing required for it is for one character to leave the house.



interdiction

– The character is addressed with an interdiction (definition – **the interdiction**)

There are simple interdictions, such as “not to open the door”, “not to go to the forest”, “not to take something”. The interdiction can be strengthened with some physical obstacle, as for example, locking up, or, on the contrary, it can exist in a softer form of a request not to do something or an advice not to go somewhere. There is also an addressing form of interdiction, in the form of the order, which the character must follow strictly.

For example, Vasilisa the Wise from the “The Sea King and Vasilisa the Wise” fairy tale forbids her husband to kiss his sister, since in this case he will forget his wife. And in “Firebird and Vasilisa the Princess” the hero’s horse advises its master not to show the magic feather to the king, suspecting that the king will desire to get the whole Firebird.

Propp notices that in fairy tales the “interdiction” function

is the major turning point, after which the situation changes in the most serious way. That's why a fairy tale gives a space for description of the situation before and after violation of the interdiction. It is done for the contrast to be more striking and the dramatic circumstances of characters to look more dangerous.

Authors do the same in movies. It is one of all gangster movies favorite functions. In those the mob boss gives his henchmen the order for some mission, which they fail to complete. Most frequently, it is a handover or a transportation of dirty money. These functions are in movies *Le Transporteur*, 2002, *Pulp Fiction*, 1994, *Lola rennt*, 1998.

But, of course, the interdiction exists not only in such a strict form. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001, Frodo isn't allowed to put the ring on, but he does it repeatedly. That is, in this case violation of the interdiction is not a turning point, but the situation development, namely, worsening of character condition.



violation of the interdiction

– The interdiction is being violated (definition – **violation of the interdiction**)

It's clear, that if there is an interdiction, it will definitely be violated, otherwise there will be no story. Violation forms correspond to interdiction forms. If someone forbids the character to do something, that is exactly what the character will do. In Russian fairy tale “A Potter”, the demon promises to work for the character with one condition, that he will not control the process. But the potter cannot overcome his curiosity and spies, which certainly leads to troubles.

So, usually “interdiction” – “violation” are the pair functions. But sometimes the violation can exist separately.

One of the most common cases is being late (for a flight, a party, a meeting, etc.).

Propp notices, that usually at this stage the antagonist appears,

the enemy (“a pest” according to Propp). He is the one who convinces the character to violate the interdiction, as the Serpent does to Eve. His role is to disrupt the balance, to cause a misfortune, to harm. As soon as Frodo puts the ring on, enemies find it out immediately and begin to hunt the character. Besides, right in this moment the item itself shows its hostile properties, trying to subdue the owner.



reconnaissance

– The Antagonist is trying to conduct reconnaissance (definition – the **reconnaissance**).

This is a very interesting and up-to-date function, since it temporarily passes the plot initiative on to “bad guys”, which is specifically appreciated in screenplays, as it allows to reveal negative characters.

Here “the pest” has the widest field for actions. He can

impersonate someone else, to use other characters for his own purposes, to make up some clever trick.

Propp highlights following types of a fairytale “reconnaissance”:

1. “The pest” finds out the location of children and values.
2. The addressing form, when the victim itself asks the pest. For example, “Where is your death?”
3. Reconnaissance through the third party.

In the “Vasilisa The Priest’s Daughter” fairy tale, the king found out that the heroine is a girl disguised as a man. Further, the king makes up a clever plan how to expose her. In the “Ghoul” tale an evil creature in the form of a handsome young man comes to the celebration and romances the heroine. And for example, in the movie Die Hard 2, 1990, terrorists install their equipment in advance, which was noticed by the hero. In the mystical thriller Constantine, 2005, demons also prepare carefully before they take an action. In the Terminator 2: Judgment Day, 1991, T-1000 impersonates the policeman to find the character.

The reconnaissance function is one of the main ones in the fantastic action movie Total Recall, 1990. To spy on the hero, the whole false life is constructed there with several characters, including his wife.



delivery

– The Antagonist gets information about his victim (definition – the **delivery**)

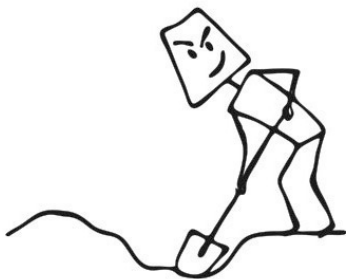
At the first stage, the bad guys plan has to work. If they fail right away, what's the point in the further story?

The delivery, surely, also corresponds to the reconnaissance form. The character gets a straight answer to the asked question. For example, the magic mirror answers directly to the Evil Queen, that Snow White is alive, and Red Riding Hood tells the wolf about her Grandma herself. Accordingly, it's a pair function. There is also a pair for other cases.

However, the “reconnaissance” function can also exist independently, if it is just a careless act, which the enemy took advantage of. For example, it is the case with the wolf, who eavesdrops on how the mother-goat instructs her seven goatlings. And in the Russian fairy tale “What am I!”, the greedy priest

spies on how his guest counts his money.

The character of the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001, by putting the ring on, involuntarily gives the enemy information about his location. Exactly the same trick is used in *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of The Black Pearl*, 2003, where pirates found out about a medallion as soon as it hit the water. And in the war drama *Black Hawk Down*, 2001, enemies learn about the beginning of operation through their scouts, located near the heroes' base. In the thriller *Life of the Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006), the secret agent gets necessary information about a hero through a wiretapping.



trickery

– The Antagonist is trying to fool his victim to harm it (definition – **the trickery**).

It can be a deception or manipulation as in “Cinderella” story, when the heroine is buried with meaningless work just not to let her go to the ball.

An enemy can also use some magic tool or to set some traps. He often takes on someone else’s appearance during these times. One of the most famous examples is Snow White poisoning by the Evil Queen, who pretended to be a harmless old lady. And in the Russian fairy tale “Bandits”, bandits pretend to be reach woovers to take a revenge on the heroine for foiling their previous plan. In “Ghoul” tale an evil creature in the form of a handsome young man convinces the heroine to take a walk with him after the feast.

It is important to remember, that before implementation of the trickery, an enemy had already got all necessary information, and he begins to act. In the drama Black Hawk Down, 2001, enemies know about the operation and ambush special forces. In the fantastic horror movie, The Thing, 1982, an alien monster at first studies creatures he met, and then he turns into a dog to trick and kill polar explorers.



complicity

– The victim succumbs to deception and with this involuntarily aids the enemy (definition – the **complicity**).

In fairy tales the character always succumbs to persuasions and trusts antagonist. The evil magic and traps also work flawlessly every time. Meaning, Snow White eats the poisoned apple, Cinderella gets to work. In the Russian tale “Trial of Cows”, a silly man trusts a priest and gives his only cow to the liar, believing that the whole herd will return to him.

In movie examples from above, special forces get ambushed and polar explorers bring the dog to their station.

Propp notices, that there always is a situation, when the hero kind of facilitates his enemy’s work: for example, he falls asleep in an inappropriate time or leaves his things unattended. In the Russian fairy tale “The Widow and the Demon”, an inconsolable widow summons a demon, who pretends to be her revived husband. And in the movie *Lola rennt*, 1998, the hero himself

leaves the bag of money in the subway. In the black comedy *Pulp Fiction*, 1994, the main character's girlfriend leaves hero's watch in the apartment, making him to go back and get ambushed.

The special form of deception is a contract with a catch. Like, fairytale *Aladdin* agrees to come down in the dungeon, not suspecting that the evil sorcerer wants to abandon him there. And in the movie *The Big Lebowski*, 1998, the character is asked to hand over the ransom for the hostage, although there was no any kidnapping. Also, in the fantastic action movie *Predator*, 1987, the hero's squad goes for a mission without knowing its real purpose. There is also the classic example of this kind of function in the thriller *Devil's Advocate*, 1997. In this movie the main character gets a job without suspecting that his employer is the Devil himself.

The character is often forced to agree to that kind of deal, having found himself in the stalemate. Propp attributes this function to the separate category, similar to the "preliminary misfortune" function.

In spite of its anciency, this function works just fine in today's movies. For example, in the comedy *Police Academy*, 1984, the main character is offered to go to the police academy as the alternative to going to jail. He agrees willingly, thinking that he will be kicked out soon for his tricks. He doesn't know it is impossible.



villainy

– The Antagonist causes one of the family members harm or damage (definition – the **villainy**).

It is the major function, that is, the turning point and the key event in the screenplay first act. It precisely creates the plot movement of both fairy tale and a movie.

Many other functions can be neglected, but not this one. This one is obligatory for every fairy tale.

An absentation, a violation of an interdiction, a delivery and a trickery prepare this function, make it possible or just facilitate it. That is why the first seven functions can be considered as the preparatory part of a fairy tale.

Enemies can harm in a variety of ways.

- Kidnapping a bride, children, a wife.
- Kidnapping some magic substance.
- Stealing or spoiling crops or supplies.

- Stealing a light, the Moon or a warmth.
- Any other type of stealing.

Propp remarks, that all forms of stealing are very much alike and could've been united, however he describes separately the most common cases for the convenience.

- Bodily injury.

The interesting thing here is that in fairy tales (from the mythology point of view) it is a form of a stealing. Fairytale enemies can easily kidnap hero's heart and hide it in some secret place. The victim has to find what was stolen and to return it to its place.

- A sudden disappearance.

In this case, unlike in kidnapping, an enemy doesn't take anything for himself. Let's say, there's no antagonist in the comedy *The Hangover*, 2009. Characters make a "lacking" by themselves, forgetting where they have left the groom.

- An enemy demands and takes the victim away.

As a rule, it is a consequence of a deceptive contract.

- An Antagonist himself banishes someone from the house.

In the tale "The Three Little Pigs", the wolf just destroys heroes' houses. One more common theme is when a stepmother gets rid of her husband's children, like for example, in the tale "Hensel and Gretel".

– The villain can order the third party to banish someone from the house.

For example, to throw into the sea or leave in some deserted place.

11. The enemy bewitches the victim.

Propp specifically notices, that the antagonist often harms in several ways at the same time. For example, as in the tale of the sleeping princess. The princess, having pricked her finger, gets bewitched and falls asleep, which is one of the disappearance forms. The bewitchment form is rarely found by itself. The magic is usually used for some concrete purposes, not for the process itself. The same goes for some other forms, which Propp calls accompanying.

– The Antagonist makes a substitution.

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