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On "synopsis"

Off all the stages of a script development, the synopsis is the shortest text; at the same time, it is the most often used instrument in the writers' toolkit for the big and small screen, although it is less used for the latter. This concept is widely used throughout the entire literature, more or less "serious", academic writings or DIY-type ones that one can find everywhere in online or offline bookstores, in various texts, from journalistic approaches to essays and PhD theses. It seems one of those words that everyone is supposed to know, so much so that one is almost embarrassed to ask "what does it mean?"

A word with Greek origins – or course! – that has entered the language via Latin, this noun which, due to the aliteration of the consonant "s", sounds like a short hissing, means a great deal, or, better said, everything: "everything that can be seen in a brief look". It is, in itself, a word like a lesson in everything classicism is about: simplicity, concision, straight lines, net distinction, rigor, clarity. Everything that can be seen in a brief look – so simple and concise! In a single word, Greek synthesized that which we need so

many other words to say! *Synopsis* means the summary of a subject; that's the secret of Polichinelle – but what subject and how summarized?

The synopsis is the summary of the film subject in all its stages of existence – from the narrative premises of a future screenplay, the synthesis of one which is already written, in development or in the stage of review, rewriting or script doctoring, to the summary of a finalised screenplay in the pre-production stage, of a film in the “work in progress” or post-production net distinction or even finalized, before or after a critic or festival jury screening and finally, before a public screening.

So the first characteristic that one can notice is the versatile nature of the text called synopsis. It has various forms (although it has fewer formats – this dichotomy is explained below) in terms of shapes it takes, stylistics and even different structures, depending on

1. The context
2. The subject development stage that it represents in that moment
3. The reader(s) it is aimed at
4. Its purpose

In terms of purpose, the fundamental functions of a synopsis are

1. cognitive
2. persuasive

The *cognitive function* has to do the informative mission of the text – to present the plot, the essential points of the narrative scaffold, from the beginning to the end, but with-

out excessive details of the narrative arc between the two main points – the narrative premises and the resolution; the latter is not mandatory, depending on the context of the presentation.

On the other hand, *the persuasive function* has the role to tease, to raise the interest in a possible further development of the story. The text only partially unveils some details of the subject, creating suspense and teasing by omitting others. In other words, the two fundamental functions of the synopsis are paradoxically antagonistic, and the value and effectiveness of the text results from the interplay between them. Briefly, writing a synopsis is somehow like striptease – the writer decides what and how much to show, depending on the context, aim, reader, etc. It is obvious, for example, that the cognitive function will prevail when the text is written for a co-producer pitch, while a premier poster will focus on the persuasive function.

From a stylistic standpoint, the synopsis should be a simple – but not simplistic – text, clear and coherent, a summary of the subject, with no dialogue, with no narrative and descriptive details; it requires certain mastery in writing short texts. Even when the main purpose of the presentation is to raise interest, rhetorical questions are not recommended; of course, there may be exceptions, but generally, using this device points out to the author's lack of experience. Rhetorical formulae, be they questions or concluding assertions, are more appropriate for what is called the *log line* – the most contracted form of synopsis. The *log line* is a simple or a complex sentence that resumes the story in an inciting, even symbolic manner: “Whoever wins, we lose” (Alien vs. Predator); “Hamlet for furries”

(Lion King).

The synopsis format varies depending on the context, but in particular depending on the culture and on the region. The American synopsis is half-page, one page at most, while the European format can have up to three pages. Germans even have an extended synopsis format, which they have given the French name of *exposé*, which is actually an intermediate form between synopsis and *treatment*.

We recommend using the American format, the briefest possible; a well-written synopsis shows that the author knows the plot, and the theme very well, which is paramount to a coherent, organic development of the script. Last but not least, the format doesn't only concern the length of the text, but the manner of presenting it. Apart from being a written text, the synopsis can undergo an oral presentation - the famous verbal pitch, frequently mentioned in literature and not only - the scene in the beginning of Robert Altman's *The Player* is a good example.

To conclude, the synopsis is one of the most difficult tests of the film writer, one they get to take throughout their entire career. Writing a synopsis is perhaps equally difficult to writing the entire script, as the text has to contain, in a nutshell, the entire subject and the author's complete vision; it requires a certain economy of means, which, for some, can be a source of frustration, and for others - the measure of their talent.

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