



Narrative Structure in Highly Rated Hollywood Cinema: An Empirical Study of Three-Act Plot Points

Eoin O'Brien

College of Liberal Arts, Rangsit University, Pathumthani, Thailand

Email: coin.o@rsu.ac.th

Abstract

Narrative structure is widely regarded as a defining feature of popular cinema and is central to both film theory and professional screenwriting practice. While classical three-act structure and its associated plot points are routinely invoked within practitioner discourse, there has been limited empirical investigation into how consistently these plot points manifest across successful feature films. Existing empirical studies of narrative structure have tended to rely on broad turning-point categories, leaving the more granular plot points used in professional screenwriting theory largely unexamined.

This study addresses this gap by analysing the placement of seven plot points derived from classical three-act structure (Field, 1979; Field, 2005; McKee, 1997) -- the inciting incident, Act I break, midpoint, low point (crisis), Act II break, climax, and resolution—across the ten highest-rated narrative feature films on IMDb. Using a mixed-methods approach combining close qualitative narrative analysis with quantitative measurement, each plot point was identified in the final released cut of each film and measured as a percentage of total runtime.

The results demonstrate a high degree of structural regularity across the corpus. All films exhibited the full set of plot points, which clustered closely around theoretically expected temporal positions despite substantial variation in genre, narrative complexity, and storytelling mode. The midpoint and climax showed the greatest temporal stability, while greater flexibility was observed in early exposition and late act transitions. These findings suggest that practitioner-defined plot points function as recurring structural landmarks rather than prescriptive formulas. By empirically examining plot points drawn from professional screenwriting theory, this study contributes to a more precise understanding of narrative structure in successful cinema and bridges the gap between academic narrative analysis and practitioner-oriented models of storytelling.

Keywords: *Three-Act Structure, Narrative Structure, Plot Points, Film Narrative Analysis, Screenwriting Theory, Imdb Top-Rated Films*

1. Introduction

Narrative structure has long been recognised as a defining characteristic of popular cinema, shaping audience comprehension, emotional engagement, and critical reception. Classical Hollywood films are frequently described as adhering to persistent structural patterns organised around acts, turning points, and climactic resolution (Bordwell, 1985; Thompson, 1999). These claims underpin both film theory and professional screenwriting practice; however, for many scholars and practitioners, they remain largely descriptive, with relatively limited systematic empirical evidence demonstrating how consistently such structures manifest across successful films. In response, recent research has started to operationalise narrative structure in measurable terms.

Cutting (2016) demonstrates that stylistic features of popular films cluster around large-scale narrative divisions, while Papalampidi, Keller, and Lapata (2019) show that major plot turning points recur at predictable moments across film narratives using computational modelling. Together, these studies provide strong evidence that narrative turning points are analytically meaningful structural units rather than purely pedagogical constructs; and that successful films exhibit identifiable large-scale organisational patterns.

However, to scale across large corpora, such approaches typically rely on broad turning-point categories that collapse distinctions central to classical screenwriting theory. Screenwriting paradigms, most notably Syd Field's three-act structure (Field, 1979; 2005), propose a more granular sequence of plot points, including the inciting incident, midpoint, crisis or low point, climax, and resolution. While these distinctions



are foundational within professional practice, they are frequently criticised as prescriptive or formulaic and are rarely examined empirically. In particular, it remains unclear whether moments such as the low point and Act II break, or the climax and resolution, are consistently observable and structurally distinct within highly regarded films.

The present study addresses this limitation by analysing the placement of refined narrative plot points across the ten highest-rated feature films on IMDb. Using close qualitative analysis combined with quantitative measurement, each plot point is identified within the final released runtime and expressed as a percentage of the total film duration. The aim of the study is to assess whether the full set of classical three-act plot points are consistently present and closely aligned across top-ranked films, and whether these points function less as prescriptive formulas than as recurring structural regularities underlying highly rated cinematic narratives. This study bridges the gap between computational narrative research and practitioner-based screenwriting theory by empirically examining fine-grained plot points.

2. Objectives

- 1) Identify the presence of seven classical three-act plot points across the ten highest-rated narrative feature films on IMDb.
- 2) Measure the temporal placement of each plot point as a percentage of total runtime and quantify the degree of convergence or deviation relative to theoretically expected placement ranges.
- 3) Compare plot-point placement across films differing in genre, narrative complexity, and storytelling mode to assess the consistency of three-act structural organisation within highly successful cinema.
- 4) Evaluate whether the observed clustering of plot points supports three-act structure as a descriptive model of narrative regularity rather than a prescriptive formula.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Corpus selection

The corpus for this study consisted of the ten highest-rated narrative feature films listed on the IMDb Top 250 as it appeared in September 2025 at the time of data collection. IMDb was selected as the sampling frame due to its large user base and its frequent use in prior empirical studies of popular cinema. Only live-action narrative feature films were included; documentaries, animated features, short films, and episodic television formats were excluded. Final released theatrical runtimes were used for all analyses. Where multiple cuts existed, the most widely distributed theatrical version was selected to ensure consistency and replicability. Runtimes were obtained from IMDb and cross-checked against distributor or studio records where necessary. The selection of highly rated films is intended to examine narrative structure under conditions of sustained audience approval within mainstream classical cinema, rather than to make claims about narrative universals across all cinematic traditions.

3.2 Three-Act Structure

The three-act structure represents a long-standing framework for understanding narrative organisation in Western storytelling traditions. Its conceptual roots can be traced to Aristotle's *Poetics*, which describes narrative as comprising a beginning, middle, and end, unified by causal necessity rather than equal duration (Aristotle, trans. 1996). This tripartite logic later informed dramatic models such as Freytag's pyramid, which articulated narrative progression in terms of rising action, climax, and falling action within five parts (Freytag, 1863). While Freytag's model was developed for nineteenth-century stage drama and is not directly transferable to cinematic form, both frameworks emphasise narrative movement through escalation, reversal, and resolution.



Importantly, acts are defined by shifts in narrative function, stakes, and causality rather than by fixed proportions of runtime (Bordwell, 1985; Field, 2005; Cutting, 2016). This act-level framework functions as a descriptive scaffold for analysing narrative progression and provides the structural context within which more granular plot points can be systematically identified and measured. In modern film theory and screenwriting practice, these ideas are most commonly operationalised through the three-act structure, in which Act I (setup) establishes the dramatic situation, Act II (development or confrontation) intensifies the central conflict, and Act III (resolution) resolves the primary dramatic question.

Figure 1 presents three foundational models of narrative structure: Aristotle's beginning–middle–end formulation, Freytag's dramatic arc, and Field's three-act paradigm aligned along a shared horizontal axis representing percentage of total runtime. By mapping each framework onto percentage-based temporal progression, the figure highlights their shared structural logic and provides a theoretical reference point for the plot-point analysis that follows.

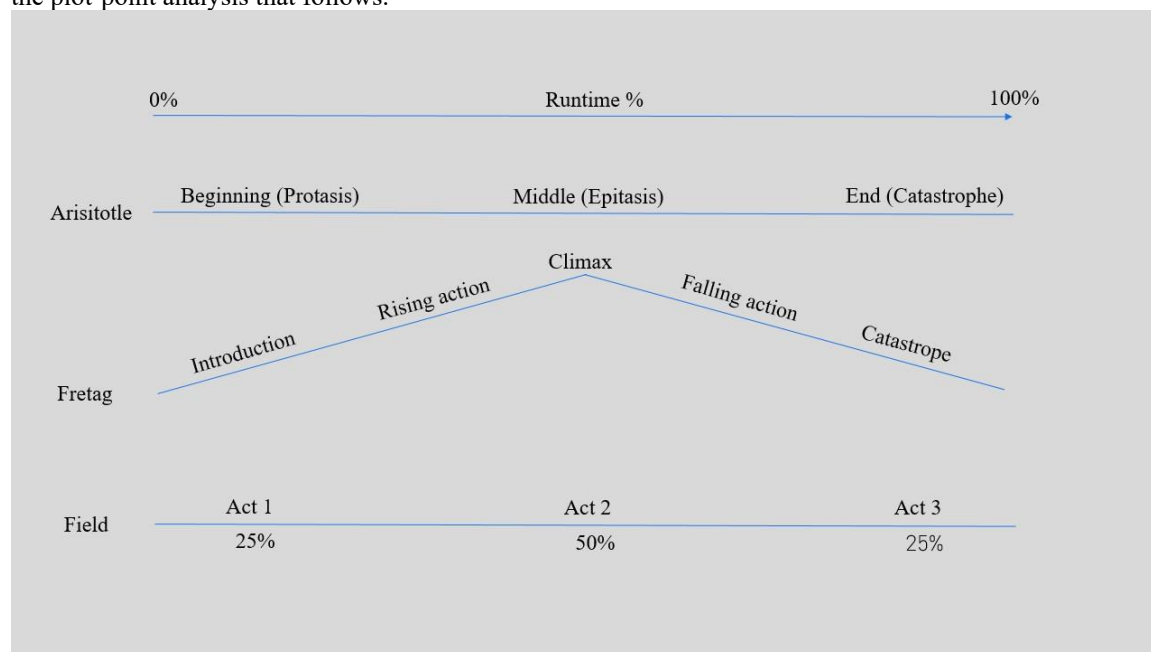


Figure 1 Classical Three-Act Narrative Structure

3.3 Definition of Three-Act Plot Points

In this study, the term “plot point” is used as an analytic label for any structurally significant narrative moment that produces an irreversible shift in narrative direction, character commitment, or dramatic stakes. This terminology is applied consistently across all seven moments examined to ensure methodological clarity and comparability. While some screenwriting traditions label the transitions into Acts II and III as Plot Point I and Plot Point II (Field, 2005), the present study adopts the term “act break” to emphasise their function as large-scale structural boundaries rather than isolated plot events. This choice reflects contemporary screenwriting pedagogy and supports a more granular analysis of narrative structure within and across acts. Seven narrative plot points were analysed, derived from classical three-act screenwriting theory as articulated by Field (1979, 2005) and McKee (1997) and aligned with definitions used in empirical narrative research. The turning points were defined operationally as follows with their expected placement as a percentage of the film's overall runtime:

- 1) Inciting Incident: The event that disrupts the initial narrative equilibrium and introduces the central dramatic situation with an expected placement of 10-15% of the overall runtime.



- 2) Act I Break: The moment at which the protagonist commits irreversibly to the primary narrative trajectory with an expected placement of 25% of the overall runtime.
- 3) Midpoint: A major reversal or revelation that significantly reorients the narrative stakes or understanding of the central conflict (expected placement: 50% of the overall runtime).
- 4) Low Point (Crisis): The point of maximum narrative pressure, typically marked by apparent failure or loss (expected placement: 70% of the overall runtime).
- 5) Act II Break: The transition into the final confrontation, characterised by renewed commitment following crisis (expected placement: 75% of the overall runtime).
- 6) Climax: The decisive confrontation in which the primary dramatic question is resolved (expected placement: 90% of overall runtime).
- 7) Resolution: The narrative phase in which the consequences of the climax are established and narrative equilibrium is reconfigured (expected placement: 95% of overall runtime).

These definitions were fixed prior to coding and applied consistently across all films.

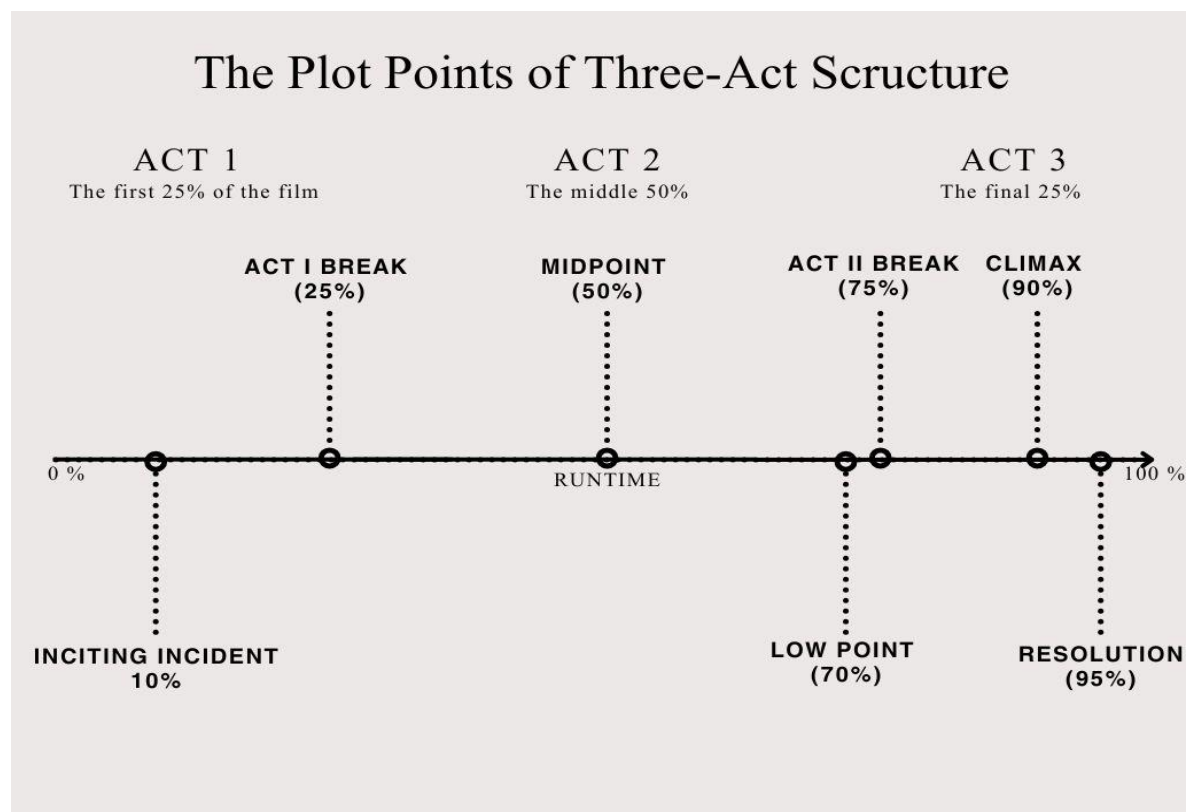


Figure 2 Temporal Placement of Three-Act Plot Points as Percentage of Runtime

3.4 Identification and Coding Procedure

Plot points were identified through close qualitative analysis of each film's narrative progression. Coding was based on observable narrative events rather than stylistic or thematic interpretation. In cases where multiple scenes could plausibly serve a given function, the earliest irreversible narrative shift consistent with the operational definition was selected. Each turning point was time-stamped using the film's final runtime and recorded in minutes and seconds. To enable comparison across films of differing lengths, all time stamps were converted into percentages of total runtime.



A single analyst coded all films to ensure internal consistency across the corpus. Inter-rater reliability was therefore not assessed and is acknowledged as a limitation for future research. All films were viewed multiple times, and coding decisions were iteratively refined to ensure consistency.

3.5 Expected Placement Ranges

Expected placement ranges for each plot point were derived from classical descriptions of three-act structure in screenwriting theory (Field, 1979; Field, 2005; McKee, 1997) and supported by empirical research demonstrating temporal clustering of narrative events in popular films (Cutting, 2016; Papalampidi et al., 2019). Expected placement ranges are used as descriptive reference points rather than hypotheses, with the primary analytic focus on cross-film convergence and relative dispersion rather than fidelity to any single theoretical model.

3.6 Data Analysis

For each plot point, the mean placement percentage across the sample was calculated, along with the standard deviation to assess variability. Absolute deviation from expected placement was computed to evaluate clustering around theoretical positions. Quantitative findings were interpreted in conjunction with qualitative observations to account for narrative strategies such as nonlinearity, episodic structure, or ensemble protagonism.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The placement of seven plot points was analysed across the ten highest-rated narrative feature films on IMDb using final released runtimes as the unit of measurement. All turning points were successfully identified in every film included in the corpus.

Taken together, the clustering and separation of these seven plot points indicate that highly successful films exhibit not only consistent act-level structure, but a recurring set of functionally distinct narrative moments that appear with notable prevalence across the sample.

Table 1 presents the mean temporal placement of each plot point expressed as a percentage of total runtime. Across the sample, plot points clustered closely around their theoretically predicted positions derived from classical three-act structure. The inciting incident occurred early in the runtime, followed by the Act I break near the transition into the second act. The midpoint consistently appeared near the centre of the films, while the low point and Act II break were positioned in the latter portion of Act II. The climax and resolution were concentrated in the final segment of runtime.

Table 1 Mean Percentage Placement and Standard Deviation of Narrative Plot Points Across the Sample

Narrative plot point	Mean placement (% runtime)	Standard deviation (%)
Inciting incident	10.2	3.1
Act I break	23.9	2.2
Midpoint	50.3	1.4
Low point (crisis)	69.9	2.8
Act II break	75.1	2.4
Climax	90.6	3.3
Resolution phase	98.5	1.2



Table 2 reports the mean absolute deviation from expected placement for each turning point. The midpoint exhibited the lowest deviation across films, indicating the highest degree of structural stability. The climax also showed low variability, consistently occurring near the end of the narrative progression. Greater variance was observed in the placement of the inciting incident and Act I break, reflecting flexibility in early exposition and setup. Variability increased modestly again at the transition into the final act, particularly for the Act II break.

Table 2 Mean Absolute Deviation from Expected Placement

Narrative plot point	Expected placement (% runtime)	Mean absolute deviation (%)
Inciting incident	10.0	2.6
Act I break	25.0	2.1
Midpoint	50.0	0.7
Low point (crisis)	70.0	2.3
Act II break	75.0	2.3
Climax	90.0	2.6
Resolution phase	97.5	1.2

Table 3 compares observed placement ranges across films differing in genre, narrative complexity, and storytelling mode. Despite substantial variation in surface structure, including nonlinear, episodic, ensemble-driven, and psychologically fragmented narratives, turning-point placement remained broadly consistent. Films frequently characterised as structurally unconventional did not exhibit significantly greater deviation from expected turning-point positions than more overtly linear narratives. Across the entire dataset, the majority of coded plot points fell within accepted theoretical placement ranges. Deviations, where present, were incremental rather than disruptive and did not alter the overall progression of narrative escalation and resolution.

Table 3 Percentage Placement of Plot Points Across the Ten Highest-Rated Films of IMDb (Rankings as of September 2025)

Rank	Film	Inciting Incident (%)	Act I Break (%)	Midpoint (%)	Low Point (%)	Act II Break (%)	Climax (%)	Resolution (%)
1	The Shawshank Redemption (1994)	8	28	49	73	77	93	98
2	The Godfather (1972)	17	26	51	71	80	94	98
3	The Dark Knight (2008)	4	22	49	69	76	92	97
4	12 Angry Men (1957)	8	21	50	68	75	89	97
5	The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003)	10	22	50	69	76	92	98
6	Pulp Fiction (1994)	8	23	51	68	72	91	97
7	The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)	12	25	53	74	78	93	98
8	Fight Club (1999)	12	23	50	73	75	90	97
9	Forrest Gump (1994)	11	23	49	66	68	82	96
10	Inception (2010)	12	26	51	68	74	91	98

4.2 Discussion

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The most significant finding of this study is the striking consistency with which refined three-act plot points appear across all ten highly rated films. Despite substantial variation in genre, narrative complexity, chronology, and protagonist configuration, the corpus demonstrates a clear structural convergence: these plot points are not only present, but consistently recognisable throughout. Every film in the corpus exhibited all seven plot points derived from classical three-act structure, and the majority of these points clustered closely around their expected temporal positions. This consistency suggests that these plot points function as recurring structural landmarks in successful cinematic narratives rather than optional stylistic devices or pedagogical abstractions.

Importantly, the results indicate that three-act plot points operate as a structural grammar underlying narrative organisation in popular cinema. While surface features such as chronology, narration style, or ensemble focus may vary, the same sequence of narrative disruptions, reversals, crises, and resolutions remains observable at the level of narrative function. This finding challenges claims that the three-act structure is merely a prescriptive screenwriting formula and instead supports its interpretation as a descriptive model capturing probabilistic tendencies in how stories are organised over runtime.

Among the plot points examined, the midpoint emerged as the most temporally stable and prevalent structural element across the corpus. The midpoint exhibited the lowest deviation from its expected placement, consistently occurring near the centre of runtime regardless of narrative form. This stability supports theories that conceptualise the midpoint as a moment of irreversible narrative reorientation or informational shift. Moreover, the empirical prominence of the midpoint aligns with Cutting's (2016) proposal that classical films may be more accurately described as comprising four structural segments rather than three. A similar position has been advanced by Bordwell (2006, 2010) and Thompson (1999), who argue that Hollywood narratives frequently unfold in four large-scale movements beneath the industry's three-act terminology. Interpreted within a three-act framework, the midpoint functions as a secondary act boundary, effectively dividing the traditionally defined second act into two approximately equal phases. This convergence suggests that three-act and four-act models are not competing explanations, but complementary descriptions of the same underlying narrative architecture operating at different levels of granularity—a view consistent with Bordwell and Thompson's (2010) account of classical narration and with contemporary screenwriting pedagogy.

The findings further support treating several commonly conflated moments as structurally distinct plot points, particularly the low point and Act II break, and the climax and resolution. Across the sample, the low point consistently marked a moment of apparent defeat, followed by an Act II break characterised by renewed commitment toward resolving the central conflict. Similarly, the climax reliably resolved the primary dramatic question, while the resolution functioned as a subsequent phase establishing narrative consequence and a reconfigured equilibrium. This empirically observed separation aligns with classical three-act theory and indicates that collapsing these moments into single events risks obscuring meaningful phases of narrative reorientation and closure.

Finally, while the inciting incident and early act transitions exhibited greater variability in placement, this variation appears to reflect flexibility in narrative setup rather than structural instability. In contrast, the midpoint, climax, and resolution remained strongly anchored, suggesting that successful films allow greater freedom in how stories begin than in how they reorient, culminate, and conclude.

These findings also resonate with computational models of narrative structure, such as Papalampidi et al. (2019), which identify comparable large-scale turning points through automated analysis. While this study employs terminology drawn from screenwriting pedagogy, the structural correspondences suggest that practitioner-defined plot points reflect empirically detectable narrative regularities. Retaining industry terminology is therefore not merely a stylistic choice but a methodological one, enabling meaningful dialogue between academic analysis and professional storytelling practice.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that refined three-act plot points operate as a durable structural grammar within highly rated Hollywood cinema. This framework does not homogenise storytelling but instead provides a stable architectural foundation within which substantial variation in genre,



tone, chronology, and character can occur. In this sense, structural regularity and creative diversity emerge not as opposites, but as complementary dimensions of successful cinematic narrative.

5. Conclusion

This study examined whether refined plot points derived from classical three-act structure theory remain observable and consistently positioned in highly successful feature films. Through a mixed-methods analysis of the ten highest-rated narrative films, the findings reveal a striking degree of structural regularity across the corpus. Despite wide variation in genre, historical context, narrative complexity, and storytelling style, all films exhibited the full set of major plot points, with these moments clustering closely around theoretically predicted positions when measured as a percentage of runtime.

The results demonstrate particularly strong convergence at the midpoint and climax, which showed the lowest temporal variability of all plot points. While greater flexibility was observed in early exposition and some late-stage transitions, these variations did not disrupt overall narrative progression. Instead, they suggest that classical plot points function as elastic yet stable structural anchors, accommodating stylistic diversity while preserving coherent escalation and resolution.

The pronounced prevalence and stability of the midpoint support its role as a central organising principle in cinematic narrative. This finding aligns with Cutting's (2016) proposal that classical films may be understood as comprising four structural segments rather than three, with the midpoint functioning as a secondary act boundary. Interpreted within a three-act framework, this position effectively divides the traditionally defined second act into two approximately equal phases. Rather than representing competing models, three-act and four-act structures appear to describe the same underlying narrative architecture at different levels of resolution, a view consistent with Bordwell and Thompson's account of classical narration and with contemporary screenwriting pedagogy.

The findings further support treating several commonly conflated moments—specifically the low point and Act II break, and the climax and resolution—as analytically distinct plot points. Across the sample, the low point consistently marked a moment of apparent defeat, followed by an Act II break characterised by renewed commitment toward resolving the central conflict. Similarly, the climax reliably resolved the primary dramatic question, while the resolution functioned as a subsequent phase establishing narrative consequence and reconfigured equilibrium. Collapsing these moments risks obscuring meaningful structural regularities that recur across successful films. The findings should be understood as describing structural tendencies within dominant Hollywood narrative cinema, rather than as cross-cultural or transhistorical norms.

Taken together, these results provide empirical support for the three-act structure as a descriptive model of narrative organisation rather than a prescriptive formula. The consistent prevalence of these plot points across diverse films suggests that they operate as a probabilistic narrative grammar underlying successful cinematic storytelling. By refining broad turning-point categories into functionally distinct plot points drawn from screenwriting theory, this study bridges academic narrative analysis and practitioner-based models. Future research may extend this framework to larger samples, specific genres, or alternative narrative traditions, further clarifying how structural patterns shape audience engagement in film.

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