

Armature:

The central idea that dictates the emotional direction and actions within a story or screenplay. AKA theme, spine, or central idea.

Every good film has a spine. Think of this visually, like an armature in a piece of sculpture. It's not something you always see, it's the little bundle of wire that gets balled up and covered with clay. It's the steadfast center that supports the working material. It gives you parameters within which to work. Each character, each scene, is in some way either helping to illuminate or disprove the armature of the piece.

Sydney Pollack determines the armature for every script he directs. He asks a simple question: What is the story? He's looking for a template, a spine, a central idea: a simple thematic pattern that he can use to gauge each character, each scene, each setting, each action, each wardrobe item, each line of dialogue.

Pollack recommends asking yourself, "What's the guideline for every scene?" By posing this question, you can guide your scenes in a manner that escalates the story and develops character truths, without fluff or distraction. Without knowing the armature, each scene is arbitrary and done for and of itself, without concern for the story as a whole.

Generally hidden within the craft of screenwriting, the armature consciously surfaces from time to time. Early in Spielberg's film *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, Elliot's older brother gets angry at Elliot's insensitivity and yells, "Damn it, when are you going to grow up and learn how other people feel for a change?" – revealing the film's armature in a line of dialog. Dialog also poignantly reveals the armature in the Polish period piece, *Ida*, about a young woman soon to take her Catholic vows. Ida's aunt poses this question to her, "Do you have sinful thoughts (about carnal love)? You should try... otherwise what sort of sacrifice are these vows of yours?" And later, "Come on, you won't stop being a nun. Your Jesus didn't hide in a cave with books, but went out into the world."

Pollack summed up the armature of *Three Days of the Condor* in a single word: "suspicion". He spelled out the armature of *Tootsie* in a simple statement of theme: "A man dresses up as a woman and thereby learns to be a better man".

Once you've found the right armature, it dictates and determines everything, including the film's visual style. If you can't use the armature to create a visual style, then you haven't yet found the right armature -- you're still dealing with the story on an intellectual basis, rather than it's emotional core.

For fiction writers, the armature is a prism you hold up, an acid test for each part of your tale. The armature determines what stays and what goes. Pollack states that the armature creates a "connection between scenes and a sense of closure and unity at the end". It will lead everybody home to emotional truth.

With excerpts from:

NEW Conversations at the American Film Institute with the Great Moviemakers: The Next Generation.

By George Stevens, Jr.

And *Making Tootsie: A Film Study with Dustin Hoffman and Sydney Pollack.*

By Susan Dworkin