Writing a Dystopia

Introduction to dystopian stories

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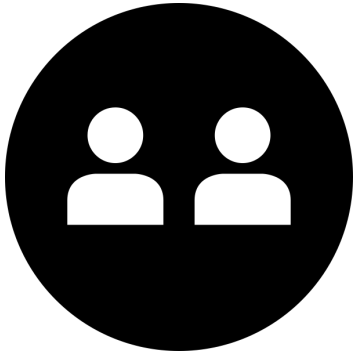

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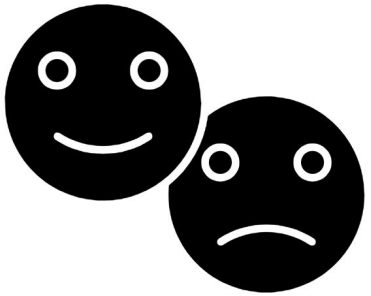

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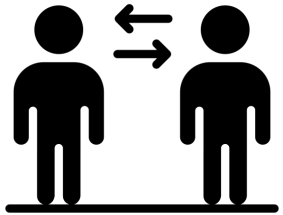

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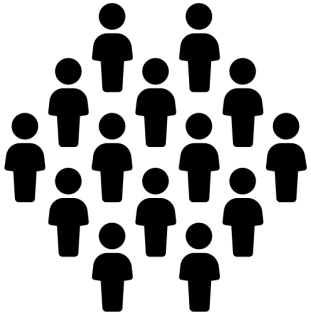

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Feel free to interrupt!

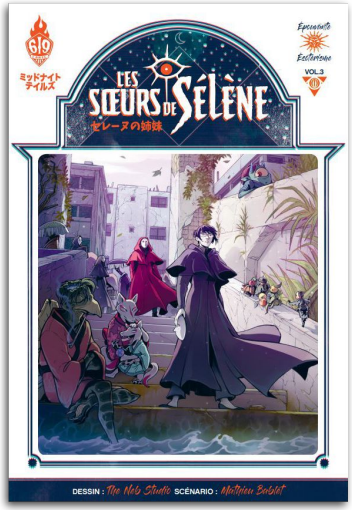
Questions, examples or discussions are welcome

Diane Ranville

writer

Comic books

LA VALISE
AKILEOS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Ongoing projects

Dystopia 101

Definition

What is a dystopia?

Dystopia comes from the greek δυσ/*dys* (bad) and τόπος/*topos* (place).

As opposed to **utopia**, with the prefix οὐ- (none) OR εὖ (good).

Definition

What is a dystopia?

A counter-model society.

A **literary/cinematographic genre** describing such a society, design as criticism of the present, or a warning for the future.

A short history

Dystopias’ origins

- *Utopia*, book by Thomas Moore (1516)
- *“Cacotopia”*, coined by Jeremy Bentham, 1818
- “*dystopian*”, John Stuart Mill, in a 1868 political speech
- USSR and nazism
- *Brave new world*, Aldous Huxley
- *1984*, George Orwell

⇒ It’s a SciFi genre but also a highly political concept

Sci-Fi genres

The (un)happy family of dystopias

Dystopias are usually associated to close science-fiction genres:

- Anticipation
- Cyberpunk
- Solarpunk
- Apocalyptic
- Post-apocalyptic

From the rise to the fall

Dystopian timing

Fictions dealing with dystopia can take place at different times of the life of the dystopian society:

- **At its beginning**, when a society is about to fall into dystopia
- **In the middle**, when the dystopian society is strong and unquestionable
- **At the end**, when forces begin to question the dystopian society and overthrow it
- **Post-dystopian**, after the fall of the dystopia

Latest discussions

In the literary field

It is now widely admitted that **fiction influences people's imagination**.

Sci-fi authors have noticed that dystopia tends to create **self-realizing prophecies**.

In response, there is a current in SciFi trying to **revive utopia**. BUT utopia is harder (less dramatic conflict).

⇒ Authors have their own ethical dilemmas!

See: *The Ministry for the future* by K. S. Robinson, *Les Furtifs* by Alain Damasio

Storytelling basics

What if?

Stories and science start from the same curiosity.

Building before writing

Just like a scientific paper, a story needs an **outline**.

Preparatory work focuses on the **key components of a fiction**:

- Worldbuilding and arena
- Characters
- Theme
- Structure

Core concept

Your story's DNA

A "core concept" is the **key idea** behind a story.

SciFi loves ***high concept*** scenarios. Eg. the Force in Star Wars, the matrix…

The core concept usually **irrigates every aspect of the story world** (tech, economy, politics, society…).

Worldbuilding

Define your arena

Define the rules of your world by writing a “universe bible” about:

- **Environment**
- **People**
- **Technologies**

/!\ Beware of getting lost, focus on your **arena** (= the space where your story happens).

Characters

The story’s vector

Three aspects:

- **Caracterisation** (identity)
- **Network** (protagonist(s), antagonist(s), allies…)
- **Evolution** (arch, values)

Theme and moral debate

Ethics in every story

In the end, every story is asking: **how should one act in such a situation?**

- The “moral debate” is the dilemma at the heart of a story, fueled by **opposing values**
- Different characters have **different views** on the dilemma, giving the story its depth
- Moral debate is closely connected to **character evolution**

The way you treat your story theme reflects **your view of the world**.

Structure

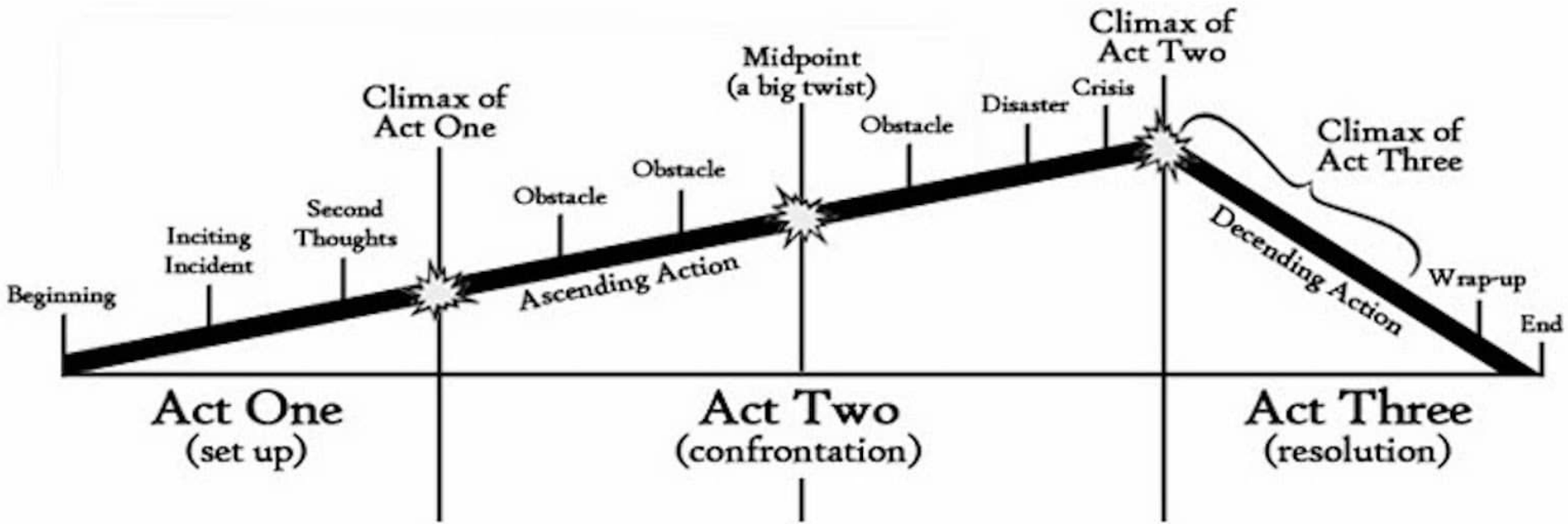
Rythm and meaning

A story basically has 3 surprising parts:

- **Beginning**
- **Middle**
- **End**

⇒ rythm and meanging emerges from **where you start and end your story**

The 3 act structure



Story and dystopia

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3 main patterns:

- A hero failing to prevent a dystopia from happening, or even precipitates it = **a tragedy**

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Story and dystopia

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- A hero failing to prevent a dystopia from happening, or even precipitates it = **a tragedy**
- A hero realizing they live in a dystopia and overthrowing it = **initiatory story, adventure**
- A hero struggling with their life in a dystopian world = **a drama**

Scenario tips

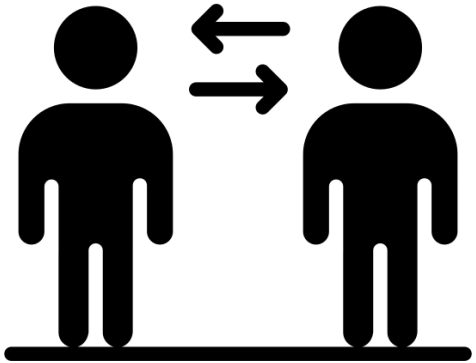
Write what you know

And know what you write

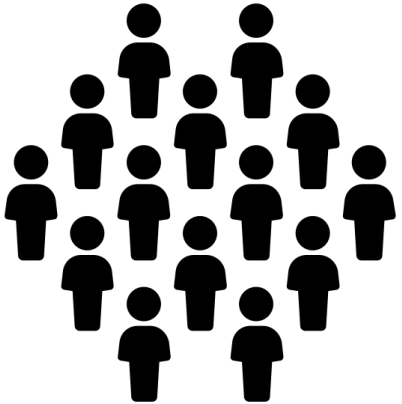
- Tap into your knowledge and experience for solidity and sincerity
- Check your biases
- Look for documentation

Levels of conflict

internal



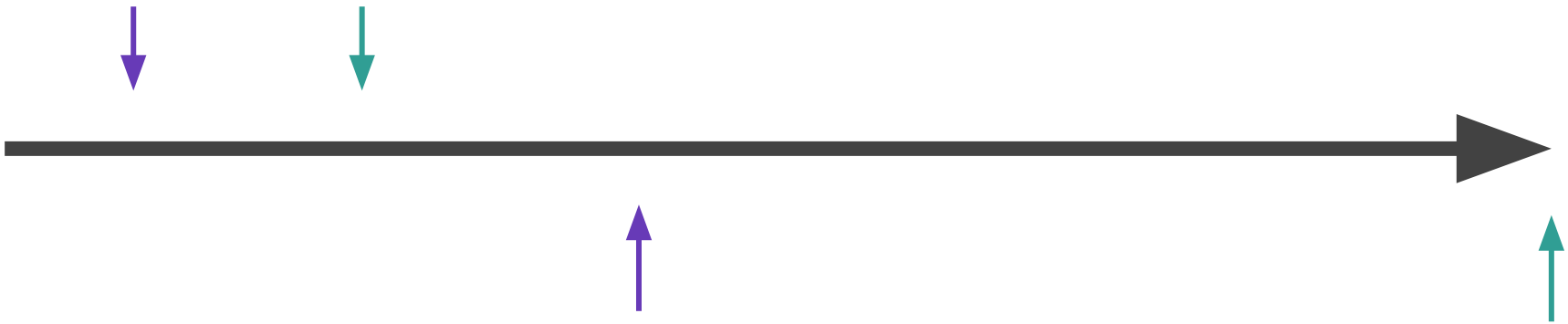
interpersonal



societal

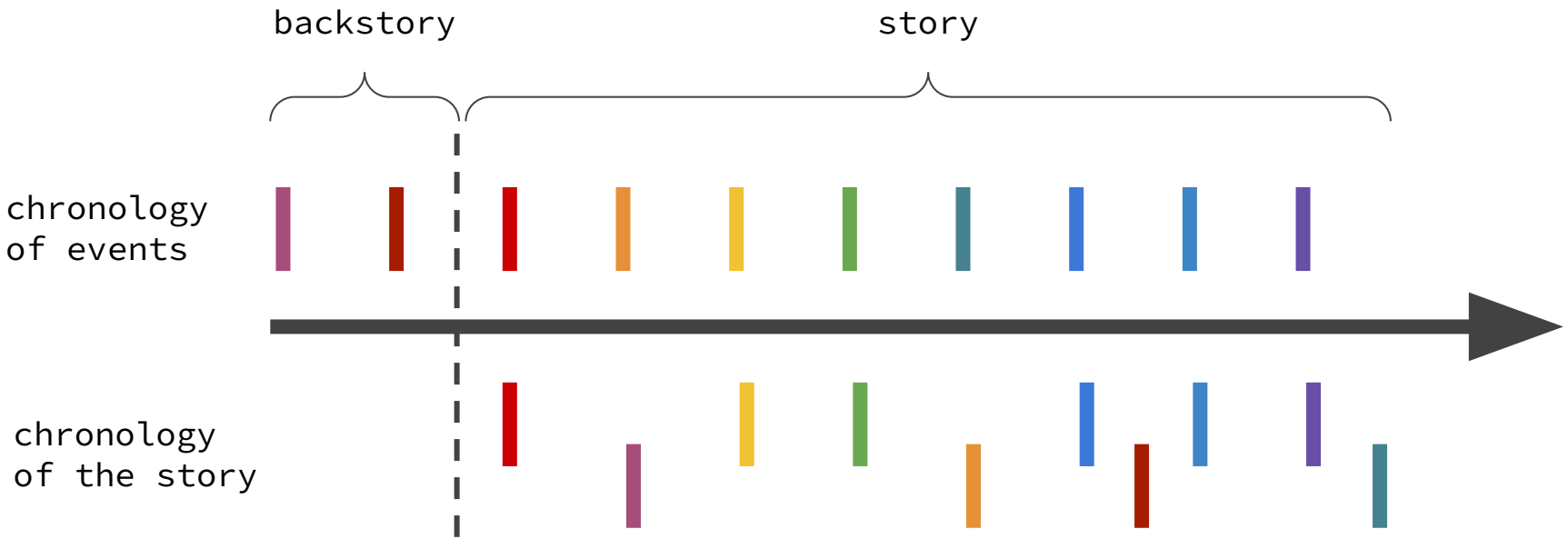
Some genres specialize in a type of conflict.
The best stories have a bit of each at different levels.

Set up and pay off



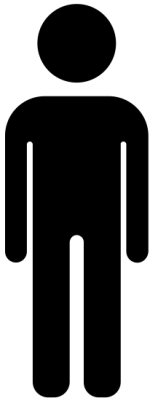
Chekhov's gun
principle

Revelations



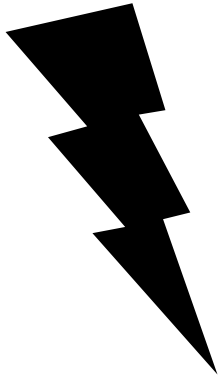
Characters have **different levels of information**.
Discovering a new information can be an event in itself.

In short

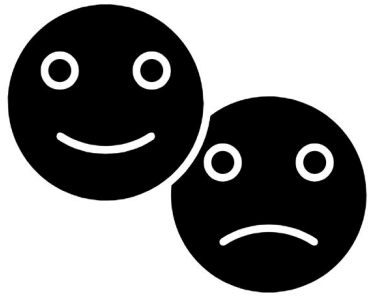


a protagonist

a goal



obstacles
(antagonists)



an end

Program today

- **Morning:** build your bible (world and characters) and your outline. *Use documents as prompts to unlock ideas.*

Program today

- **Morning:** build your bible (world and characters) and your outline. *Use documents as prompts to unlock ideas.*
- **Afternoon:** write! Form is free. You can write prose, dialogues, internal monologues, poetry, or even include illustrations!

  ⇒ goal is ~1 to 2 pages

THANK YOU!

Contact
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