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**THE FIVE BEATS OF
INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING**
Pauline Clague

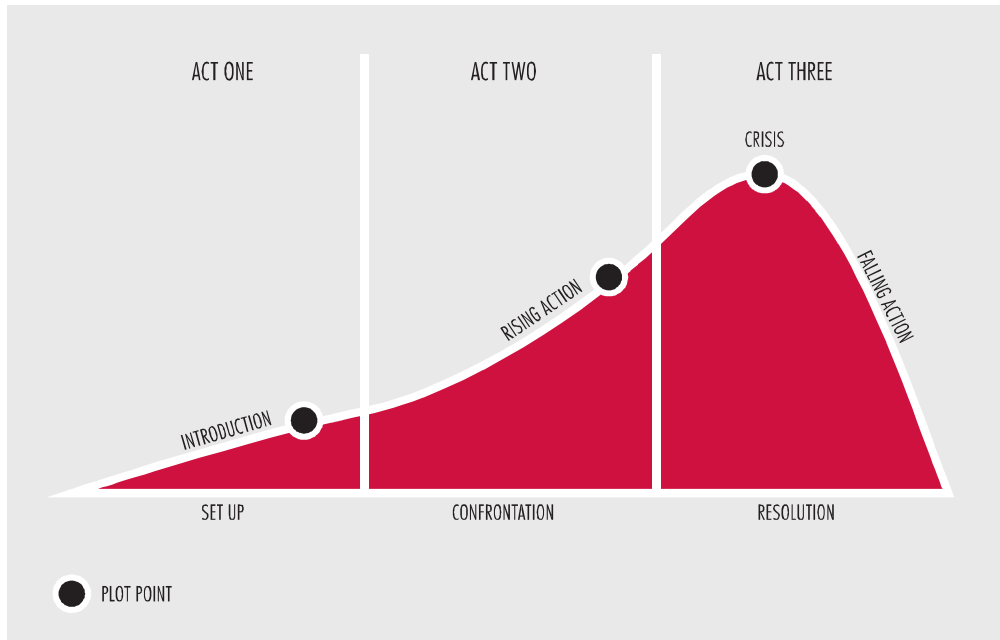
Pauline Clague is from the Yaegl nation of the Far North Coast of New South Wales. She has produced ten short films and various documentaries. Pauline runs Core Films with fellow filmmaker Rima Tamou and together they have produced *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning, 'sa Black Thing, First Contact* and *When Colin met Joyce*.

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The Three Act Structure — with ‘Act One’ being the set up, ‘Act Two’ the confrontation and ‘Act Three’ the resolution — is widely known and very commonly used in the film and television industry.

I am often asked, “How does structure differ in Indigenous films?” For me, analysing and assessing our own work and our oral histories of creation stories, and the like, shows that Indigenous storytelling can in some way have its own unique formulas to follow when Indigenous filmmakers put their stories onto the page or the screen.

THE TRADITIONAL THREE ACT STRUCTURE



During my time as Indigenous Training Officer at AFTRS, I have spent time talking with writers, both in Australia and overseas, trying to understand how story beats work and asking how do we, as Indigenous filmmakers, train audiences to see our stories through a different eye with regards to the beats of the story.

Storytelling in many communities in Australia is more than just one layer. There is the oral story, the dance, the song and the paintings that all feed the layers of a story and strengthen the recall of details and patterns. When we as Indigenous filmmakers put these stories onto paper and then on screen we layer them up with differing patterns; what I like to call *The Five Beats Of Indigenous Storytelling*.

Our stories are told to us more than once when we are young. Often our creation stories hold a lesson or a lore for the next generation, as they are connected to the land, to the animals and us, as caretakers of that story. These lessons are passed down from subsequent generations via the stories, which aid understanding about lore, rules, morals and spirituality.

Storytelling traditions can and do vary all over the world. As the technological world grows, it is allowing us to share our stories faster and wider than ever before. As viewers we often have to learn 'how to' decipher the ways in which different

nations tell their stories. For my own part I have found a way to study the writings and films of Indigenous filmmakers, that has allowed me to teach a non-westernised viewpoint of interpreting Indigenous films.

When I read scripts by Aboriginal filmmakers I see a different kind of storytelling going on. The Three Acts are in play in our writing, but so too are two additional beats — one at the front and the other at the end.

As a producer and writer I have been observing, writing and critiquing work to interrogate the differences. Maybe it is this very difference that explains why some audiences don't quite understand the beats of our stories and why Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islanders and Indigenous audiences, intrinsically understand the beats — because they are a part of our upbringing and oral history.

HISTORY OF THE FIVE BEAT STRUCTURE

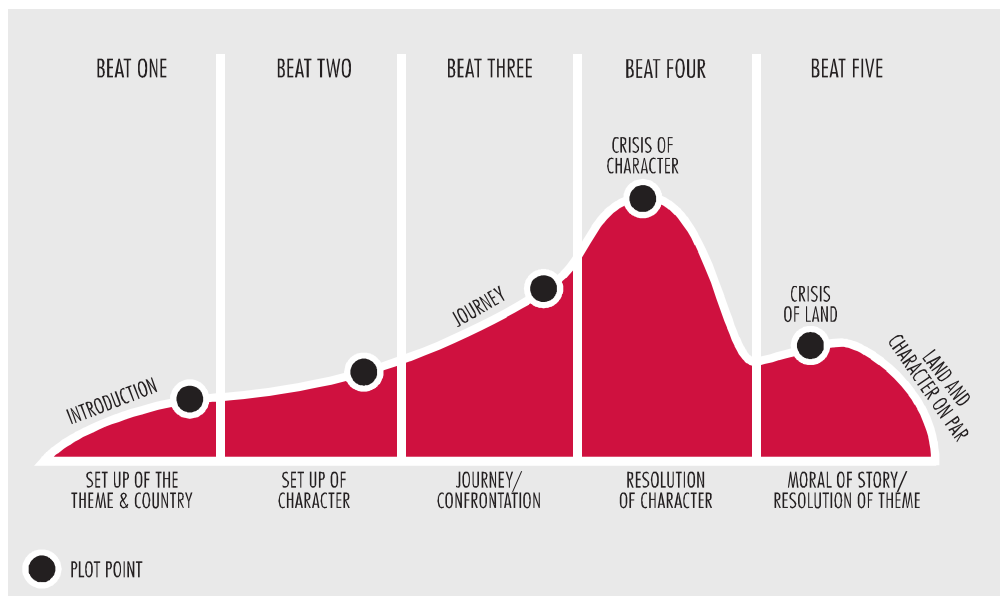
For me, it starts from an understanding of the beats of 'traditional oral history stories'. A lot of our stories are told to us, when we are growing up in communities, by our grandparents, aunties and uncles, parents and other mob. I am unsure if the 'five' beats come from the ideas or the instinct to tell stories — the way we do in our traditional oral history stories— or the rhythm of our music, which often holds five beats to a bar, or from the five seasons that some of our traditional cultures live by. These beats tell communities where the food is, where to move to and when to look after certain parts of country.

Taking time to look at the Indigenous storytelling techniques in our oral history, I developed a curiosity to see if a similar style existed in the western world. I found a non-Indigenous storytelling technique in the Fable genre that sets up a 'moral to a story' at the front and finished with 'what the character learnt from their experience' at the end. Interestingly this style of telling stories slowly shifted as societies moved away from 'oral history' as they started to add visual aids to engage their audience and create stories that were more about entertainment rather than morals and teachings.

If you look at Fables and old myths they are told through a Five Act structure. Over time the 'front' Act and the 'back' Act have been removed or have merged into the Three Act structure to become the plays and scripts that we now see today. If you

look closely at those old structures, the way they worked, could be due to the fact that we all originally come from an oral history and therefore have an archetypal instinct to pass on lessons to our children, the next generation or our peers.

THE BREAKDOWN



THE FIVE BEATS OF INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING

- BEAT ONE:** Set up of the theme or the journey you are going on and which country and law you are playing to.
- BEAT TWO:** The introduction of the main character within the story
- BEAT THREE:** The journey of the character
- BEAT FOUR:** The resolution of the character's story
- BEAT FIVE:** The message and resolution of the theme. Where character and land are in balance with one another.

When looking at the differences between Indigenous films and the Three Act structure I also looked at reviews of Indigenous films (films written and directed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander filmmakers). I noticed that reviewers would say such things as “ ... it has an eerie beauty” “ ... unfolding action ...”, “ ... still ...”,

“... simple and quiet composition ...”, “ ... tender ... ” which is often the difference of five beats requiring a longer introduction and a placement of land as an ongoing theme within the five beats.

.. LAND AS THE PROTAGONIST

“Indigenous philosophy and its relationship with land are very different to western ideology for Indigenous people acknowledge that the land is alive, an entity and a being that requires respect.”

Dr Romaine Moreton

The major shift in understanding Indigenous films, after understanding the beats, is recognising that Indigenous writers will make Mother Earth a protagonist. I have heard comments that Indigenous films are slower or have more shots of the landscape in them. Part of film technique is to set up/show ‘country’, but country often acts as a force that propels the character to another level. My research shows audience members/reviewers have stated that ‘Land is a Theme’. In actual fact, as a point of difference, I think of land as a character that feeds the plot and choices that the main character makes.

For example in Warwick Thornton’s *Samson & Delilah* (2009) it is when Samson sees Delilah on the ground, getting covered up and ‘hugged’ by the dirt she covers herself with, that he makes a new choice.

A filmmaker who has crafted a very strong path based on this understanding is Ivan Sen. Sen uses the land to portray the unbalanced, uneasy sense of identity of his characters through shots of electric lines in the air that slowly, as the character come to link themselves to who they are, pan down to ‘earthed’ land shots.

In his film *Beneath Clouds* (2002) he juxtaposes Vaughn’s dislike or distrust of non-Indigenous people with the metaphor of a Kangaroo lying on the side of the road. The native animal is on the ground, dead, next to a wide man-made road, but later in the film when we see the fox strung over a signpost we understand that the ‘native’ animal is still connected to the land, but the introduced one is not.

As we enter into a new phase of Indigenous filmmaking where Indigenous filmmakers are taking their craft to a new level do we need to look at how

audiences are seeing our work? What should the next generation be taught about the uniqueness of Indigenous filmmaking?

With technology making it possible for filmmakers to tell stories cheaply and get them out into the public domain in multiple ways, do we need to maintain a 'different' voice for our storytelling or do we adopt and absorb westernised formulas?

I would like to think that the world is opening up more now and that audiences will look at and view films and stories from differing cultures and backgrounds with open eyes and hearts.

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