

WRITING ESSENTIALS IN STYLE & COMPOSITION

Week 13: Film Script, Part 1

This is A TWO WEEK ASSIGNMENT. You will write approximately 2,000 words the first week, and approximately 2,000 words the second week to make 4,000 - 4,300 words total. The first half will not be graded, but it will be discussed in our tutorial. Then you can edit what you have written in the first half before submitting the completed assignment. You can write in any genre (tragedy, comedy, etc.), and it can be based on material that is familiar, (historical, literary, mythical, Biblical, etc.) material you have written about before or something new and original. Your words must be your own.

Before we begin writing we will read and discuss a commentary on the film, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and then an excerpt from the screenplay of this film. As you read, think about what makes a good film? Especially think about the script - What makes a compelling script? Good dialogue? What makes strong and rich characters?

Next week we will discuss the six elements of a good story according to Aristotle. As you read, think about what order of importance you would put them in: Thought, Song, Character, Diction, Plot, Spectacle.

Reading 1: “Commentary on The Grapes of Wrath” by William Beard

(source: http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/william_beard/Grapes%20of%20Wrath.htm)

Tonight’s John Ford movie is *The Grapes of Wrath*, released in 1940 and not only the most famous of Ford’s films, but one of the most celebrated of all Hollywood movies. It tells the story of a family of dirt - farming sharecroppers from Oklahoma during the Depression, pushed off their land by the drought and the banks, and migrating to California to try to find work. John Steinbeck had published the novel just the year before, and it was a bestseller. The movie version went on to be a big success, both critically and at the box office, and to win Ford one of his four Oscars for Best Direction. But this is one case where the personal stamp of a strong filmmaker is not as important a factor as others in determining the character of the resulting film. Ford’s stamp is there, all right. But even stronger is the stamp of Steinbeck’s novel and Nunnally Johnson’s screenplay—and above all the story’s extremely vivid and even inflammatory treatment of its social problem.

The story here is a story of people oppressed and ground down under social pressures that are not supposed to exist in America. The Depression had thrown millions out of work and put a severe strain on the whole financial structure of the country. But it was in the rural areas, where parched earth and dust - storms caused nature itself to fail and drove people off the land, that Depression

hardships met hand - in - hand with populist ideology. The Joad family has lived on their land for generations, and it's taken the economic and agricultural upheaval of the 1930s to demonstrate that, as sharecroppers renting their land, they have no more right to it than city - dwellers do to their apartments if they can't pay the rent. The whole gruelling story is then built up on the basis of this principle of ownership, sacred to a capitalist society but now creating terrible problems. When the half - crazed, dispossessed farmer Muley says that what creates ownership of the land is living and dying on it, that's a viewpoint every viewer will agree with emotionally—but it's also an idea that runs directly counter to principles of purchase and fiscal ownership.

Later on, as the family treks along Highway 66 through Arizona and into California, they run into lots of other things that aren't supposed to exist in America. So we see the prejudice of gas - pump jockeys, the militant suspicion of state inspectors, and the hostility of local residents to the desperately poor and hungry back - country migrants coming into areas that have their own troubles coping with the Depression. Even more disturbingly, we also see the brutally exploitative policies of employers and their hand - in - glove relationships with local police agencies who are quite happy to act as their enforcers, and the whole climate of violence that surrounds people in desperate need. Even though the film version softens the fate of the family and goes for a measure of uplift at the end, there's still plenty of food for thought in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and almost all of that thought is about how the economic and social structures of America are far from being fair and equitable.

For the most part, the movie is a superlative piece of work. Ford's contribution is to emphasize family structure and the ideal order of a miniature society underlying it, and to bring vividly to life the individual characters of the story. The Joads are made up essentially of three generations: the crusty grandparents, the already - grizzled parents who are now past fifty, and the children who range in age from pre - teenagers to grown men and women. The central character is Tom, the eldest child, played one can only say tremendously by Henry Fonda. What's so impressive about this character and this performance is not the moral fervour and sense of integrity—you expect that from Fonda, it's one of his most indelible qualities, nobody was ever better at it than him. No—it's this quality in combination with a set of other qualities you don't expect to find in Henry Fonda: toughness, anger, steely hardness, even murderous violence. In the memorable opening scenes of the movie he's just getting back to the farm from a four - year prison sentence for homicide—he killed a guy in a bar fight and is out on parole. His discovery that his family has been kicked off “its own land,” and his subsequent run - ins with officials, hired thugs and corrupt cops, don't do anything to improve his disposition. In fact one way of describing the action of the film is as a growth in Tom's understanding of the forces that are oppressing him—he goes from being a hard - case poor sharecropper to being someone with a dawning political understanding.

Surrounding this rock - solid central figure are a host of others. Jane Darwell as the indomitable mother won an Oscar here, but that award could have gone to so many others—to John Carradine’s strange and luminous ex - preacher, for example, or to Charley Grapewin’s querulous Grandpa, or to John Qualen’s febrile, emotionally - broken Muley.

Another star of the show is the great cinematographer Gregg Toland, who endows shot after shot with wonderfully poetic composition and treatment of light, and who after this would go on to revolutionize movie photography with his work on *Citizen Kane*. Building on Steinbeck’s novel, Nunnally Johnson’s screenplay has far less speechifying, and far more simple weatherbeaten plain - speaking, than you’d expect in such a socially - conscious project. And of course one can’t forget Ford, whose understated lyrical setups and terrific direction of actors give the movie eloquence and depth. The first shot of the movie, a combined triumph of Ford and Toland, tells you what to expect here. Altogether, this is one of the great Hollywood movies, just as its reputation would suggest.

There are a lot of astonishing things about *The Grapes of Wrath*, but to my mind the most astonishing of all is that it got made in this fashion at all. Critics from the left have complained over the years that Steinbeck’s novel was sanitized in the movie. For example, the dismal, prison - like Peach - Farm camp originally came after the idyllic government camp—and simply flip - flopping the two converted a downward spiral into a progression towards hope and possible solutions. At the end of the book the Joads are living destitutely in a barn, picking cotton for starvation wages. Rosasharn’s baby—who at a certain point just disappears from the movie—is born dead in the novel, and Rosasharn uses her milk to breastfeed a starving old man instead. In the movie Tom has been driven into hiding and the family broken up, but these disasters are to some extent covered by Tom’s farewell speech to his mother, where he says he’ll be everywhere men are struggling for freedom, and by Ma’s own final “we are the people” speech. Again, these changes are all made to provide some uplift at the end of the movie, to avoid presenting simply a picture of abject defeat and the crushing of human beings.

But Steinbeck approved the final script, and the movie still packs a punch that’s amazing even today. As I was suggesting before the film, the very basis of property rights comes under attack in this movie. The banks own the land, but they don’t work it, they just take the profits of other people’s work—and if the profits aren’t big enough, they take the land away. The landowners in California do work their land, or at least they’re directly involved in farming it, but for the most part their behaviour is equally predatory. The elucidations of how they drive wages down, and enlist the police or hired tough - guys to enforce their oppressive behaviour, is a pretty ringing denunciation of business practices. The idea that the law, and especially the police, are basically tools of owners and rich guys, is shown in a dozen different forms in the movie. Likewise as soon as you see somebody in a big car, you know he’s going to do something ugly.

Any simple solutions to the problem are deflated in the speech of the man from the sheriff's office in the first part of the film: you can't shoot him, he's just doing his job; you can't shoot the district bank supervisor, he's just taking orders; you can't shoot anybody. The problem isn't a problem of good guys and bad guys; it's a systemic problem. In fact there is one good guy, so to speak, in the film. It's the government agency that sets up the dream-camp the Joads finally discover, the camp that gives them decent living conditions and self-government, and defends them from the aggression of local business people and their tame police. Of course this is Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal government—and Grant Mitchell, as the camp guardian with rimless spectacles and hearty reassuring manner, almost looks like a little Roosevelt.

But wait a minute. Aren't these notions of resistance to market-based economic forces, and power to the people who do the work, and government regulation and guarantees of minimum acceptable living conditions—isn't all this, um, communism? Or at least serious socialism? You bet it is. The structure of self-rule in the government camp, with its committees and representatives, is actually an exact replica of a Russian soviet. The idea of the law as an instrument of oppression, to be used by the powerful when it suits them and ignored when it suits them, and the idea that you can't simply fix the local bad guys because the whole system is the problem, is actually revolutionary. Its revolutionariness is disguised by the down-home American nature of everything in the movie, by the fact that rural culture has always had a deeply conservative aspect, and by the fact that nobody has even remotely heard of Karl Marx. One of the nicest moments in the movie is Henry Fonda asking, "Who is these reds, anyways?" Of course at the end of the movie he's going off to be a labour agitator.

All of this is simply amazing. How could this stuff have gotten into a Hollywood movie? The producer Darryl Zanuck, who was more responsible than anyone for bringing it to the screen, was a lifelong Republican. Ford always had a very strong conservative streak. But both of them were populists, and that rurally-based ideology could be very radical without any influence of city-based socialist ideas. And rural populism can be right-oriented or left-oriented or even both at the same time—just look at the respective politics of Alberta and Saskatchewan. In the 1930s, of course, this kind of radical politics was in the air, and the Depression had caused a very widespread rethinking of mainstream conservative political traditions. But even in 1940 there was a hue and cry from the right when *The Grapes of Wrath* was released, and calls for a boycott from some business interests.

My point, though, is that in the 1980s or 1990s such a movie would never get made at all—or if it did it would be as some fringe independent production, not as a major studio release. We should be so lucky as to get a film like this nowadays.

Reading 2: "THE GRAPES OF WRATH" Screenplay by Nunnally Johnson

Based on the Novel "The Grapes Of Wrath" By John Steinbeck

(source: https://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/grapes_of_wrath.html)

AN OKLAHOMA PAVED HIGHWAY in daylight. At some distance, hoofing down the highway, comes Tom Joad. He wears a new stiff suit of clothes, ill-fitting, and a stiff new cap, which he gradually manages to break down into something comfortable. He comes down the left side of the road, the better to watch the cars that pass him. As he approaches, the scene changes to a roadside short-order RESTAURANT on the right side of the road. From it comes the sound of a phonograph playing a 1939 popular song. In front of the eatery is a huge Diesel truck labeled: OKLAHOMA CITY TRANSPORT COMPANY. The driver, a heavy man with army breeches and high- laced boots, comes out of the restaurant, the screen door slamming behind him. He is chewing on a toothpick. A waitress appears at the door, behind the screen.

WAITRESS When you be back?

DRIVER Couple a weeks. Don't do nothin' you wouldn't want me to hear about!

We see him climbing into the cab of the truck from the right side. Getting behind the wheel, he is releasing the handbrake when Tom appears at the driver's seat window.

TOM How about a lift, mister?

DRIVER Can't you see that sticker?

He indicates a "No Riders" sticker on the windshield.

TOM Sure I see it. But a good guy don't pay no attention to what some heel makes him stick on his truck.

After a moment of hesitation the driver releases the brake.

DRIVER Scrunch down on the running board till we get around the bend.

As Tom scrunches down on the running board the driver throws the truck into gear and it moves. The scene dissolves to the CAB OF THE TRUCK. It is day, and Tom is seated beside the driver, who is surreptitiously eyeing him, trying to confirm some suspicion--an inspection which Tom ignores at first.

DRIVER Goin' far?

TOM (*shaking his head*) Just a few miles. I'd a walked her if my dogs wasn't pooped out.

DRIVER Lookin' for a job?

TOM No, my old man got a place, forty acres. He's a sharecropper, but we been there a long time.

DRIVER (*after a curious glance*) Oh!

Cautiously, the driver's eyes drop to Tom's feet. We see TOM'S SHOES. They are prison shoes--new, stiff and bulky. Curiosity is in the eyes of the DRIVER as they shoot a swift glance at Tom. TOM is looking straight ahead, with the deadpan look that prisoners get when they are trying to conceal something. The DRIVER'S eyes take in Tom's hands and the stiff coat.

DRIVER Been doin' a job?

TOM Yeah.

DRIVER I seen your hands. You been swinging a pick or a sledge--that shines up your hands. I notice little things like that all the time. (After a pause) Got a trade?

TOM (evenly) Why don't you get to it, buddy?

DRIVER (uneasily) Get to what?

TOM You know what I mean. You been givin' me a goin' over ever since I got in. Whyn't you go on and ask me where I been?

DRIVER I don't stick my nose in nobody's business.

TOM Naw--not much!

DRIVER (a little frightened) I stay in my own yard.

TOM (without emotion) Listen. That big nose of yours been goin' over me like a sheep in a vegetable patch. But I ain't keepin' it a secret. I been in the penitentiary. Been there four years. Like to know anything else?

DRIVER You ain't got to get sore.

TOM (coldly) Go ahead. Ask me anything you want.

DRIVER I didn't mean nothing.

TOM Me neither. I'm just tryin' to get along without shovin' anybody around, that's all. (After a pause) See that road up ahead?

DRIVER Yeah.

TOM That's where I get off.

With a sigh of relief the driver puts his foot on the brake. The TRUCK stops and Tom gets out. He look at the uneasy driver contemptuously.

TOM You're about to bust to know what I done, ain't you? Well, I ain't a guy to let you down. (Confidentially) Homicide!

The driver throws the truck into gear. He doesn't like this at all.

DRIVER I never asked you!

TOM (as the truck moves away) Sure, but you'd a throwed a fit if I hadn't tol' you.

He looks indifferently after the truck and then starts on foot down the dirt crossroad. A wind has begun to blow. The scene dissolves to the roadside under a WILLOW TREE in daylight. The wind is still blowing. Sitting on the ground, his back against the tree, Casy, a long, lean man in overalls, blue shirt, and one sneaker, is fixing something on the other dirty sneaker. To the tune of "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" he is absent-mindedly singing.

CASY Mmmmm he's my saviour. Mmmmm my saviour, Mmmmmmmmmmm my saviour now. (Looking up as Tom comes down the road) Howdy, friend.

Carrying his coat under his arm, TOM wipes his face with his cap as he cuts off the road to acknowledge the greeting.

TOM Howdy. He stops, grateful for the momentary relief of the shade.

CASY Say, ain't you young Tom Joad--ol' Tom's boy?

TOM (surprised) Yeah. On my way home now.

CASY Well, I do declare! (Grinning) I baptized you, son.

TOM (staring) Why, you're the preacher!

CASY **Used** to be. Not no more. I lost the call. (Reminiscently) But boy, I sure **used** to have it! I'd get an irrigation ditch so squirmen' full of repented sinners I pretty near **drowned** half of 'em! (Sighing) But not no more. I lost the sperit.

TOM (with a grin) Pa always said you was never cut out to be a preacher.

CASY I got nothin' to preach about no more--that's all. I ain't so sure o' things.

TOM Maybe you should a got yourself a wife.

CASY (shakes his head sadly) At my meetin's I used to get the girls glory-shoutin' till they about passed out. Then, I'd go to comfort 'em--and always end up by lovin' 'em. I'd feel bad, an' pray, an' pray, but it didn't do no good. Next time, do it again. I figgered there just wasn't no hope for me.

TOM I never let one go by me when I could catch her.

CASY But you wasn't a preacher. A girl was just a girl to you. But to me they was holy vessels. I was savin' their souls. (Fervently) I ast myself--what **is** this call, the Holy Sperit? Maybe **that's** love. Why, I love everybody so much I'm fit to bust sometimes! So maybe there ain't no sin an' there ain't no virtue. There's just what people do. Some things folks do is nice, and some ain't so nice. But that's as far as any man's got a right to say.

TOM (after a moment, figuring there is no percentage in continuing this philosophical discussion, pulls out a flask, which he extends) Have a little snort?

CASY (holding the flask) Course I'll say grace if somebody sets out the food-- (shaking his head) --but my heart ain't in it. (He takes a long pull) Nice drinkin' liquor.

TOM Ought to be. That's fact'ry liquor. Cost me a buck.

CASY (handing back the flask) Been out travelin' around?

TOM Didn't you hear? It was in the papers.

CASY No, I never. What?

TOM I been in the penitentiary for four years. (He drinks)

CASY Excuse me for asking.

TOM I don't mind any more. I'd do what I done again. I killed a guy at a dance. We was drunk. He got a knife in me and I laid him out with a shovel. Knocked his head plumb to squash.

CASY And you ain't ashamed?

TOM (shaking his head) He had a knife in me. That's why they only gave me seven years. Got out in four--parole.

CASY Ain't you seen your folks since then? TOM (putting on his coat) No, but I aim to before sundown. Gettin' kind of excited about it, too. Which way you going?

CASY (putting on his sneaker) It don't matter. Ever since I lost the sperit it looks like I just as soon go one way as the other. (Rising) I'll go your way.

They pause at the edge of the shade, squint up at the sky, and then move off. The scene dissolves to the SURFACE OF A DIRT ROAD by daylight. Leaves are scuttling across it. The top soil begins to fly up. It is not a hard wind as yet, but it is steady and persistent. Tom's and Casy's feet walk into sight.

TOM Maybe Ma'll have pork for supper. I ain't had pork but four times in four years--every Christmas.

CASY I'll be glad to see you pa. Last time I seen him was at a baptizin', an' he had one a the bigges' doses of the Holy Sperit I ever seen. He go to jumpin' over bushes, howlin' like a dog-

wolf in moon-time. Fin'ly he picks hisself out a bush big as a piana an' he let out a squawk an' took a run at that bush. Well, sir, he cleared her but he bust his leg snap in two. They was a travellin' dentist there and he set her, an' I give her a prayin' over, but they wasn't no more Holy Sperit in your pa after that.

TOM (worriedly) Lissen. This wind's fixin't to *do* somepin'!

CASY Shore it is. It always is, this time a year.

Tom, holding his cap on his head with his hand, looks up... The TOPS OF THE TREES are bending before the wind. TOM AND CASY continue walking.

CASY Is it fur?

TOM (still looking back) Just around that next bend.

TOM AND CASY are almost being blown along and dust is rising from the road.

CASY (lifting his voice above the wind) Your granma was a great one, too. The third time she got religion she go it so powerful she knocked down a full-growed deacon with her fist.

TOM (pointing ahead) That's our place.

The JOAD CABIN is an ancient, bleak, sway-backed building. There is neither sign of life or habitation about it.

CASY (looking back) And it ain't any too close, either! We better run!

A DUST STORM, like a black wall, rises into the sky, moving forward. TOM AND CASY are running, but looking back over their shoulders as the DUST STORM nears. Dust rises from the ground to join and thicken the black wall. TOM AND CASY are seen racing down the road to the cabin, the wind whipping up the dust. The two men smack open the door and slam it shut after them. The screen begins to grow dark as the storm sweeps over the land. It becomes black. In THE CABIN, it is black too, but the sound is different. In addition to the sound of the wind there is the soft hissing of sand against the house.

TOM'S VOICE Ma?... Pa?... Ain't nobody here? (After a long silence) Somepin's happened.

CASY'S VOICE You got a match?

TOM'S VOICE There was some pieces of candle always on a shelf.

Presently, after shuffling about, he has found them and lights one. He holds it up, lighting the room. A couple of wooden boxes are on the floor, a few miserable discarded things, and that's all. Tom's eyes are bewildered.

TOM They're all gone--or dead.

CASY They never wrote you nothing?

TOM No. They wasn't people to write.

From the floor he picks up a woman's high button shoe, curled up at the toe and broken over the instep.

TOM This was Ma's. Had 'em for years.

Dropping the shoe, he picks up a battered felt hat.

TOM This used to be mine. I give it to Grampa when I went away. (To Casy) You reckon they could be dead?

CASY I never heard nothin' about it.

Dropping the hat, he moves with the candle toward the door to the back, the only other room of the cabin. He stands in the doorway, holding the candle high. In the BACK ROOM the scene moves from Tom at the door across the room to the shadows, where a skinny little man sits motionless, wide-eyed, staring at Tom. His name is Muley.

MULEY Tommy?

TOM (entering) Muley! Where's my folks, Muley?

MULEY (dully) They gone.

TOM (irritated) I know that! But *where* they gone? Muley does not reply. He is looking up at Casy as he enters.

TOM (to Casy) This is Muley Graves. (To Muley) You remember the preacher, don't you?

CASY I ain't no preacher anymore.

TOM (impatiently) All right, you remember the *man* then.

MULEY AND CASY Glad to see you again. Glad to see you.

TOM (angrily) Now where is my folks?

MULEY Gone-- (hastily) --over to your Uncle John's. The whole crowd of 'em, two weeks ago. But they can't stay there either, because John's got *his* notice to get off.

TOM (bewildered) But what's happened? How come they got to get off? We been here fifty years--same place.

MULEY Ever'body got to get off. Ever'body leavin', goin' to California. My folks, your folks, ever'body's folks. (After a pause) Ever'body but me. I ain't gettin' off.

Assignment:

- Write approximately 2,000 words in the form of a film script.
- In a film, unlike a book, you cannot describe thoughts, emotions, and background information. You are strictly limited to what you can show on a screen, so your script should not mention any details which cannot be shown on a screen.
- Follow the examples below to format it correctly.
- Focus primarily on character development, scene description and writing excellent dialogue.
- You may take a famous event in history, a story from great literature or from the Bible, the life of a famous person or saint, or even a real episode from your life and turn it into a film script. Or, you may use an original story.
- Carefully outline the plot BEFORE you begin writing the script. If the story is already written, you will be able to focus entirely on the script.

Basic Format of a Film Script

Your film script will be broken up into scenes, or environments, where something occurs. In between each scene, you must have a transition.

Describing a Scene

Example: *INT. KITCHEN - DAY*

This means that the scene is interior (as opposed to EXT. - exterior), it takes place in a kitchen, and it is during the day. Usually, you begin a scene by briefly describing what is seen on the screen, or heard. *All descriptions of setting, action, etc should be in italics so it is clearly distinguished from the dialogue.*

Dialogue

The dialogue is separated from the rest of the script by a space, with the name of the person speaking in capital letters.

Example (from Batman Begins):

WAYNE Rachel, all that...that's not me, inside I'm...different. I'm—

RACHEL The same great little kid you used to be? Bruce, deep down, your friends out there are great, too. It's not who you are underneath... (*pokes his chest*) But what you do that defines you.

Tips on Writing Dialogue:

- Should be easy to understand (using common speech)

- Occasionally extraordinary and thought-provoking (using a metaphor or analogy)
- Easy to pronounce (it should roll off the tongue)
- Occasionally interrupted by others
- Change pace as the dialogue switches between characters
- Be as clear and as intelligible as possible. Even if some of your characters do not speak with perfect grammar, you must use proper punctuation.
- Each character should be consistent in the way that he or she speaks; therefore, if your sentence structure is not very strict for the first time that a character speaks, it should be that way for the entire screenplay.

Tips on Developing a Compelling Plot & Dynamic Characters:

- Follow the standard plot outline to include exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution.
- Develop a clear protagonist involved in a conflict - possibly between man and himself, man and society, or man and God.
- Build your story around a larger theme reflecting a timeless and meaningful topic. Maintain good pacing by moving smoothly through the plot outline.
- Add interest with unexpected action, humor, suspense, tension, etc.

Invention:

What is the setting of the film? What are we seeing and hearing?

Exposition: Introduce the scene and the characters. How does your story begin?

Rising Action: What is the conflict in the story? Could be: man vs. man, man vs. the world/society or man vs. himself. How does the action and tension begin to unfold?

Climax: What is the plot reversal? Change of fortune?

Falling Action: What is the action that leads toward the ending catharsis?

End: What is the catharsis? What event causes the release of emotion and tension?
