

WRITING ESSENTIALS IN STYLE & COMPOSITION

Week 14: Film Script, Part 2

Reading 1: Excerpts from *The Poetics* by Aristotle

(source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1974/1974-h/1974-h.htm>)

... Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song.

1. Plot

... But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. ... The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy...

2. Character

Character holds the second place. A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colours, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait. Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action.

3. Thought

Third in order is Thought,—that is, the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances. In the case of oratory, this is the function of the Political art and of the art of rhetoric: and so indeed the older poets make their characters speak the language of civic life; the poets of our time, the language of the rhetoricians. Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest, or in which the speaker does not choose or avoid anything whatever, are not expressive of character. Thought, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be, or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.

4. Diction

Fourth among the elements enumerated comes Diction; by which I mean, as has been already said, the expression of the meaning in words; and its essence is the same both in verse and prose.

5. Song

Of the remaining elements Song holds the chief place among the embellishments.

6. Spectacle

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.

Reading 2: Aristotle: On Tragedy (Entertainment and Education) By Ron Perry

(source: <http://www.nashvillegreatbooks.com/2015/07/>)

Why do we go to movies? [Perhaps it is because] it keeps life from being blah. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud said “Life is too hard for us.” So according to Freud we go to movies [as a form of] psychological escapism. We use any means we can find to escape from real life. Modern Man is constantly seeking relief from the psychological stress and meaninglessness of modern civilization. Freud put it this way: “The question of the purpose of human life has been raised countless times; it has never yet received a satisfactory answer and perhaps does not admit of one.” Aristotle thinks that’s just plain nonsense. According to him “the good which we have been seeking is a human good and the happiness a human happiness.” Most people don’t go to movies to escape from real life. We go because it’s a very human thing to do. We go to be entertained and, in a looser sense of the term, to become educated. We learn about the world around us by seeing life through the eyes of the director and rest of the film crew.

But as Hamlet says “all the world’s a stage.” So why can’t we just go get entertained and become educated by watching “real life” on a street corner somewhere? Because we’re not Shakespeare or Aristotle or Sophocles or Euripides. To rise to the level of art real life has to be filtered through carefully chosen words and images. A total experience, what

Aristotle calls “a complete whole,” must be condensed into a story lasting no more than two or three hours. Condensing a story requires the precision of a good artist. In this section Aristotle shows four ways the good artist portrays a well-defined Character. First, “All the characters should be good.” This sounds a little [unrealistic]. There are lots of modern movies with bad guys. There were lots of plays in his own day with bad guys. So what can he mean by this? Aristotle says “goodness is possible in every type of person.” We don’t go to movies to become worse people. We don’t necessarily go to movies to become better people either. But Aristotle says “Tragedy is an imitation of persons better than the average man.” We assume then that most people (average people) go to a movie to see performers acting better than they themselves could do (either literally on the stage or figuratively in the plot). That’s the entertainment part. And we learn by imitating (either consciously or subconsciously) the actors. That’s the education part.

Whether art (movies, music, painting, poetry, etc.) can make us better people is not Aristotle’s focus in this selection. That would be the subject of Ethics. He’s really just evaluating the technical details of Tragedy; what makes it either good or bad. And that’s more in the realm of Aesthetics. Aristotle thinks every subject can only be as precise as that subject allows. Obviously Tragedy is not Mathematics but he still thinks we can deduce common characteristics from the many dramatic performances we’ve seen. Here are the three other rules Aristotle would use in delineating Character. “All the characters should be appropriate.” “All the characters should be like the original.” “All characters should remain consistent throughout the play.” Each one of these rules takes some serious thinking to determine exactly what Aristotle means. But they’re well worth the effort. It’s all part of Aristotle’s method of educating the theater- (or movie-) goer about how to distinguish between good art and bad art. Obviously our world is much different than the world Aristotle lived in. Or is it? The question is still the same. What’s the difference between entertainment and education? Aristotle thought those two activities could converge through art. Good art can be entertaining even as it educates us to become better people. Surely (despite Freud) this is a message that can still resonate in the modern world.

Reading 3: Aristotle: On Tragedy (Watching Movies With Aristotle) By Ron Perry

(source: <http://www.nashvillegreatbooks.com/2015/06/>)

Imagine going to a movie with Aristotle. He says things like ... “Every tragedy (movie) must contain six (and only six) parts which determine its quality. They are Spectacle, Melody, Diction, Character, Thought and Plot.” Wow. Aristotle has very clear notions about what he expects. But he goes even further and ranks them in order. “Plot is the first essential; the very soul, as it were, of (Tragedy) a movie. Character comes second... third comes Thought... fourth among the literary elements is Diction... As for the remaining parts, Melody is the greatest of the pleasurable accessories. Spectacle is certainly an attraction, but it is the least artistic of all the parts and has least connection with the art of poetry.” There you have it. All you need to know to analyze a movie. How does this theory actually work with a modern film? Let’s try one and see.

O Brother, Where Art Thou would be a good movie to take Aristotle to. The plot is based loosely on Homer’s Odyssey and is a story he would be familiar with. The “hero” of O Brother is Ulysses Everett T. McGill and like the ancient Greek hero Ulysses, Everett is trying to get back home to his wife and children. The plot is summed up this way on IMDb: “Along the way, they meet a contriving one-eyed Bible salesman, a blind prophet, a trio of ... sirens, and a man who sold his soul to the devil. In their race to reach the treasure before it's flooded, they end up crashing a Ku Klux Klan lynch mob, help a sensitive Baby Face Nelson rob three banks in two hours, and even have enough time to put out a best-selling record as The Soggy Bottom Boys.” That’s the basic plot.

How about the second part, Character? Everett, again like the Greek Ulysses, is a slick talker but unlike Ulysses “He is chained to two other prisoners, slow-witted Delmar and hot-tempered Pete.” Aristotle says we come to know an actor’s Character by the way he acts and the things he says. We know Delmar is slow-witted and Pete is hot-tempered by watching what they do and listening to what they say. Thought is the third part of Aristotle’s dramatic theory and we get a pretty good notion of what Everett, Delmar and Pete are thinking by listening to what they say. Diction is the fourth part of Aristotle’s theory and Delmar and Pete talk the way we would expect men to talk in Mississippi in the 1930s. Everett speaks with an eloquence that would be unusual in any age. But so did Ulysses. So Aristotle would think this is entirely appropriate for the movie. He would argue “Diction” should fit the time and place for the story. The fifth part of Aristotle’s theory is Melody. “Melody” in modern films consists mostly of the soundtrack. The music is there primarily to support the story, not the other way around.

In opera music takes center stage. In most films music is there to set the background for the action on the screen. It just so happens in *O Brother* that music is an integral part of the story. But these characters don't suddenly burst out with arias from a Verdi opera. That would be inappropriate. The Soggy Bottom Boys sing (appropriate) gospel music. The final part of Aristotle's theory is Spectacle. Modern special effects would dazzle Aristotle, as they do us. But his question would be do they enhance the three main parts; Plot, Character, and Thought? Reading Aristotle won't turn us into professional film critics. But it's always interesting to take his theory out to the movies with us.

Assignment:

Finish writing your film script. The finished product should be about 4,000 words.

Refer to Week 13's assignment instructions.