Good Scripts

Learning the Craft of Screenwriting Through 25 of the BEST and WORST Films in History

Bad Scripts

THOMAS POPE

Here is an innovative yet practical approach to teaching the craft of screenplay writing that identifies the principles of good—and bad—movie scripts through a dynamic, entertaining critique of 25 of Hollywood's greatest hits—and most infamous disasters.

In *Good Scripts, Bad Scripts,* veteran screenwriter Thomas Pope lays bare the triumphs and follies of movie writing, revealing the ghost inside the machine of that mysterious, rarely examined occupation. Each chapter deals with a different component of the art of screenwriting—from character development to the nurturing of subplots to the fundamentals of good dialogue—and illustrates it through the virtues or mistakes of a particular film. The book encompasses the best and worst of films throughout the years, including *Citizen Kane, Chinatown, Singin' in the Rain, Pulp Fiction, The Bonfire of the Vanities, Fargo, Cutthroat Island,* and many others.

In addition to providing trenchant analyses, *Good Scripts, Bad Scripts* serves up engaging, behind-the-scenes anecdotes that shed light on how films are made, how the film industry really works, and, more significantly, the reasons films succeed or fail.

Equally devoted to good and bad films, *Good Scripts, Bad Scripts* is an invaluable guide for potential screenwriters and a rich resource for all film buffs.

THOMAS POPE's screenwriting credits include *The Lords of Discipline, The Manitou,* and *Hammett.* He has worked on *F/X, Someone to Watch Over Me,* and *Bad Boys,* and he has worked with Francis Ford Coppola, Penny Marshall, Wim Wenders, Barry Levinson, Frank Oz, and many other directors. He lives in Minneapolis and lectures on film at the University of Minnesota.

GOOD SCRIPTS, BAD SCRIPTS

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THOMAS POPE

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Preface

It all began at Harvard. Things weren't going well at the business school. Graduates armed with the latest theories of efficient management were sailing out into the marketplace and making postgraduate fools of themselves. All that they'd learned from their very expensive education turned out to be too theoretical, too pie-in-the-sky, too, well . . . Harvard. The best and the brightest turned out to be the lame and the halt. And from this debacle sprang the Harvard Case Study Method. Classes in theory were eliminated and replaced by those studying actual problems of management and production. Specific examples of both successful and troubled companies were cited and examined in depth. Not only that, but students were asked the most important question a teacher can ask of any student: "What would you do?" They asked that question because they'd learned that theory isn't enough.

I'll say that again: Theory isn't enough. Not in war, not in peace, not in the Harvard Business School, and certainly not in screenwriting. Unfortunately, virtually all the screenwriting books available are theoretical. And while some of these are splendid works and should be read by all aspiring screenwriters, or by anyone interested in the ghost in the machine of moviemaking, they are ultimately examples of principle without application, ideas without facts, words without deeds. I remember as a young screenwriting student wondering what exactly to do with advice such as "Keep your dialogue brief," "Express character through action," "Structure is everything," and so on. There were a million bits of wisdom like that, but I'd find myself thinking, How brief is brief? Must I always reveal character through action? And just what exactly does structure mean? I wanted examples to back up all those fine-sounding theories, but whenever examples were given, they were often of classic films I held in so much awe that I hesitated to apply what they had to teach. It was as if the Ten Commandments had been rolled out to demonstrate why I shouldn't rob from a five-and-dime.

I also found I was learning as much from the mistakes of bad films as from the triumphs of great ones. But when I asked why *The Jewel of the Nile* didn't work as well as the original, why *Falling in Love* fell on its face, why *Havana* was revolting, or why so many films simply didn't work, all I got was a shrug and a smile. The idea that as much could be learned from failure as from success, or that bad films should be studied in juxtaposition with good ones, was anathema to traditional teaching. Better to genuflect in the direction of *High Noon* than to roll up our sleeves over the miscalculations of, say, *The Bonfire of the Vanities.* This reverence for the canon of film classics just led to more theory; what I wanted were examples.

This book attempts to give such examples. It was born from a series of lectures I conducted through the Minneapolis-based Film in the Cities and through the University of Minnesota. It is the Harvard Business School gone Hollywood. Each film is chosen to illustrate a different problem of screenwriting. In general I won't include what would normally constitute a complete film analysis or review; any discussion of acting, directing, photography, editing, theme, or aesthetics will be in the context of screenwriting and how it helped or hurt the films in question. I've selected the successful films because an examination of what problems they overcame can be applied to other screenplays. The failed films I've selected give insights on how better to approach these same problems. They are also chosen because whatever flaws or virtues they possess are ones that the filmmakers could have reasonably known about and been responsible for before the cameras rolled. The films are roughly mixed in genre and period and include a grab bag of westerns and comedies, dramas and satires, taken from the golden age of movies up to the present day. I've also chosen them because their videotapes are available from most rental stores; I suggest you first see the film and then read the chapter discussing it. Similarly, the screenplays of the films discussed are available from bookstores or from several screenplay dealerships in the Los Angeles area, listed in the back of this book; if possible, the script should be read in juxtaposition with each chapter discussion. Most chapters contain a brief history of the film, and all contain a plot summary and an examination of its structure. "Good" scripts (I use that word advisedly, because the judgment is my own) and "bad" scripts (I use that judgment with even more trepidation) are about equally represented, and I mix things up. Too many bad scripts in a row could drive us all to artistic impotence, and too many good scripts could drive us, frustrated, to suicide. Nor is there a strict division between "good" and "bad": *The Searchers,* surely one of the great scripts, has a nearly fatal flaw, and *The Usual Suspects,* a wonderful script, is filled with problems; similarly, *The Bonfire of the Vanities,* which is a greatly miscalculated script, nevertheless contains some very fine writing. As for the table of contents, while I've placed the scripts in the two areas "Structure" and "Character," in fact there is tremendous overlap within each chapter, and this organization is a guide of the loosest and roughest nature.

A quick warning: Filmmaking is a mysterious process and one finally hidden, even for the filmmakers themselves. Ask a great filmmaker how some wonderful film moment came about, and often as not the answer will be (especially if it's an honest answer), "Damned if I know; we just sort of got together and thought it up; I don't remember who first came up with it." Also, memory is elusive at best and usually self-serving. I'll mention anecdotes that, while as accurate as film histories can make them, should be taken with a Buick-size grain of salt. Maybe it happened that way, maybe it didn't.

The same goes for credits. They'll state that someone directed a film, but the real creative force may have been the cinematographer, the editor, or (heaven forbid) the screenwriter. Screenwriting credits themselves are derived from a process called arbitration, wherein the scripts of all the (often numerous) screenwriters involved on a film are submitted to a panel of professional screenwriters, who wade through the material and try to come up with whoever is largely responsible. A calculus of credit has been invented, a rough guideline by which the panel can ascribe credit. But in the process, important contributions often go uncredited. And equally important ideas, conceived on the production floor, are given to a screenwriter who had nothing to do with them. So when I mention So-and-so as having written a wonderful or terrible script, So-and-so may in fact have had nothing to do with it. I have to use a name, so I use the name on the credits, but that person may be completely innocent of the deed.

However, before I can begin the main body of this book, I find I'm forced to discuss exactly what I wrote this book to avoid: I have to talk about theory. I have to define the rules, terms, and ideas that I'll use to examine our films. But first a warning: There are no rules. In fact, that may be the single most important idea to come from this entire book. There are guidelines, there are accepted means of approach, there are theoretical constructs, all of which may help in understanding the amazingly difficult and glorious craft of screenwriting; but the only rule is that the script must work, and if it works by breaking all the accepted rules, then more power to it. As an example, take a look at *Singin' in the Rain.* Better yet, take many looks.

But first, on to the theory.

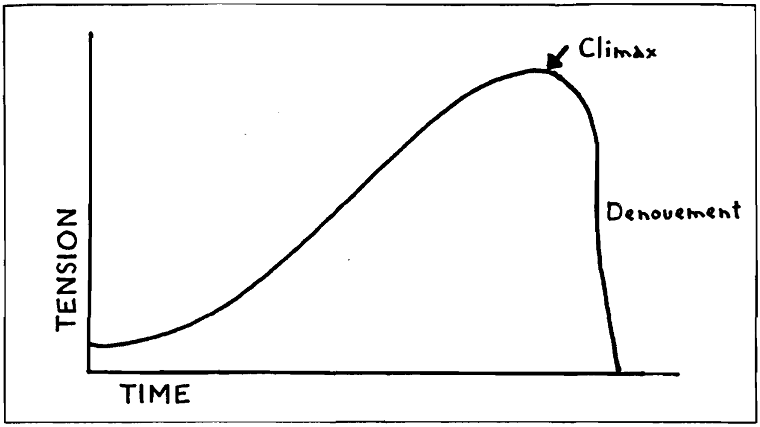
Introduction

The Theory

Many books are devoted to the fundamentals of screenwriting. The works of Irwin Blacker, William Froug, and many others hold valuable insights. This book is intended to complement rather than compete with them. Nevertheless, just to make sure we're starting on the same page, here's a brief outline of the ground rules under which we'll be working.

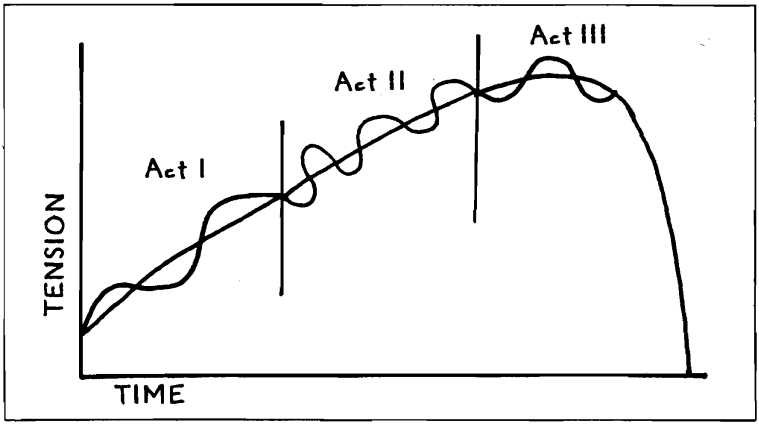
If case analysis begins at Harvard, then dramatic theory begins with Aristotle. His *Poetics* was the first attempt to make sense of why one play succeeds while another fails. And while some of his thinking on aesthetics is outdated—his belief in the unity of time and space, for example, or his placing of major action offstage—a great deal remains that is of value. In particular, there's much to be gained from his belief that a drama begins when a problem begins and ends when the problem is resolved. Stated this way, his belief may sound simple, or even simpleminded, yet it's the basis of all drama.

Here's a graph that illustrates Aristotle's idea: the bottom line represents time and the vertical line a rising force of tension, whether physical or psychological or both. Since a problem by its very nature contains some level of tension, a drama can't begin at the exact bottom left, as that's a point of no tension. But neither should we start at the top of the tension line, because that would mean we'd have nowhere to go for the rest of the story except straight ahead or down, either of which is guaranteed to alienate the audience. So we begin just a few points above the bottom. Ideally each succeeding scene should increase in tension, building gradually until it reaches its point of highest tension at the climax. From there, with our problem resolved, we get out of the story as fast as possible, in the denouement:



Theory Chart #1

This elegant curve is the basis of all drama. However, it's complicated by the fact that all dramas contain both external and internal problems. That is, when bad guys ride into town gunning for the sheriff, as they do in the classic western *High Noon,* they are a purely external problem since they represent a purely physical threat. A psychological or internal problem is introduced when the sheriff admits his fear that his fighting will cost him the love of his wife. Ideally these internal and external problems will resolve themselves at the same point of highest tension. To resolve them at separate times would mean we'd have two climaxes: one for the external and another for the internal. Two climaxes mean two resolutions, which means a story that can't make up its mind when to end, and that means an angry audience. These internal and external problems thread through the main tension line of a story, in a hemstitch fashion, thus:



Theory Chart #2

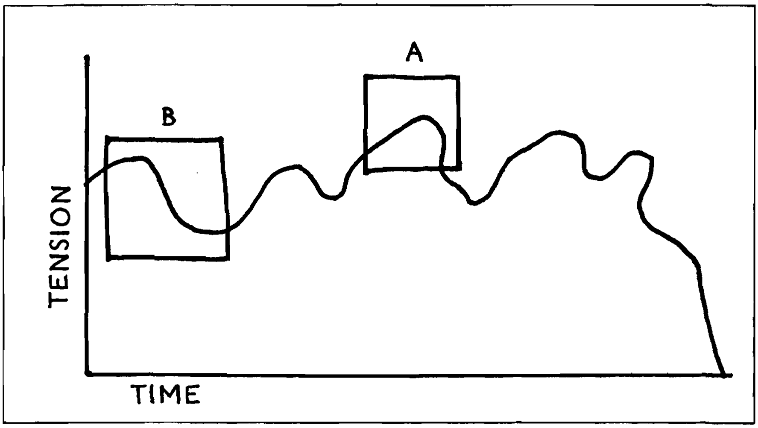
Notice that this curve also breaks down into three segments, called acts. Over time, this three-act structure has become the mortar and brick of drama. The old saying goes that in the first act you get your hero up a tree (that is, you create an initial problem), in the second act you throw things at him (you complicate the initial problem), and in the third act you get him out of the tree (you resolve the initial problem).

Location of act breaks is tricky. Typically the first act is the shortest, beginning with the introduction of the initial problem and major characters and ending with the protagonist's decision to grapple with the initial problem. In a way, the first act tells the audience, "Here's what the movie's about, and here's whom we'll be dealing with." The first act is the "play fair" act, which lays out the ground rules of style, the internal and external problems, and the nature of the characters. It often ends at a point of moral conflict for the protagonist, or hero. In *High Noon* it ends when the sheriff decides to return to town to fight the bad guys. If he had decided to run—that is, if he'd decided to morally abdicate the challenge placed before him—there'd be no further story. The bad guys would have had no good guy to fight, and the hero would have ethically damned himself. End of first act and end of story. The decision to fight, whether as a physical action or as an existential choice, propels both the internal as well as the external problem of the first act and takes it to a higher level. It takes it, in other words, to the second act.

But if the sheriff simply fights and kills the bad guys, then our first act is resolved too quickly. The first act runs into the third, without a pit stop in between. The second act must complicate the initial problem and serve as the playing field on which the characters reach for a dramatic arc of change or catharsis, and in which action is initiated by, and in turn serves to catalyze, the characters. It is, typically, the longest act, usually running for at least half the length of the film.

The third act generally begins at a physical and psychological low point for the protagonist. Again in *High Noon,* the sheriff, abandoned by his wife and friends in the second act and left to die, writes his last will and testament. It's then, in his darkest moment, that the train whistle blows, announcing the arrival of the noon train carrying the final antagonist. At the point when all seems lost, the hero walks out of his office and into the third act, where he will resolve the external and internal crises generated in the first act.

Now a brief word about reality: This elegant form, so perfect a vehicle for relating dramatic collisions and revealing the deepest parts of the human soul, has little to do with real life. Let's chart a typical real life:



Theory Chart #3