



TASTE: YOUR MOST IMPORTANT ASSET

Lesson 3 Workbook

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will begin understanding why none of the storytelling tools in the world matter if you don't have taste. Taste should be developed over the course of your life, never compromised. Unfortunately, taste can't be taught -- it's up to you to watch, read and listen to stories with a discerning ear and eye -- asking why does this work or not?

OVERVIEW

Taste is one of those intangible qualities that's so important. Once you know how to build and construct a house -- you could have an amazing palace on your hands. But if you decide to cover it in some crappy material -- like stucco or bottle caps or Hershey's kisses -- then that's how it's remembered in its cultural context. The construction is how a structure has to stand -- it's the mechanics that don't necessarily have to come from or reflect your soul as a creator.

I often find creators who know the mechanics, like editors for example, but they don't watch enough work they love or at least question and ponder why something they love excites them or not. As a result, their work just doesn't quite connect or have a strong perspective.

It doesn't matter what your taste is. It comes down to actively consuming culture instead of passively -- keeping your mind on while you're watching or reading or listening to something to bookmark moments that speak to you more so that you can ask WHY something speaks to you. But what I've found is that the stronger someone's taste is -- meaning, how well they can find connections between their favorite creators and creations, even if they're seemingly disparate -- the better they are at discovering their own voice. As I said, it's an intangible but critical quality.

As I mentioned in the course, to get a job once, I was asked "*name one movie you love that everyone hates and why*". I had to answer that on the spot and my answer was "The Fall" by Tarsem Singh. I don't know if the world truly "hates" the movie, but it bombed at the box office and was a huge and costly disappointment that took Tarsem decades to make (sidenote: the story of how he made it is amazing).

I think the script is bad (I said so and why). I think the plotting takes some leaps (I said so and why). I said why I thought other people didn't like it (stiff acting, too whimsical without much backbone). But the reasons why I love it: the world is phenomenal -- the imagery is unprecedented, in my opinion, and the opening 2 minute scene of how they set up the premise, to me, is genius.

Before I go into why I answered this, just notice how many things already that I've revealed about my own taste just to answer this one question. It's not only shown that I can identify things that, to me at least, "work" or "don't", but also shows my understanding of other people's taste.



WRITING CHALLENGE:

THE FALL is an epic fantasy about a stunt man who gets permanently injured on a movie set - his entire world and career are ruined. And sitting in a hospital bed with his career and life over, the stuntman wants to kill himself but can't move to get himself enough pills to do so. So he ends up befriending a little girl who's recovering from a broken arm -- and tells her wild, fantastic tales in order to slowly win her over so that she can - little by little -- bring him enough pills so he can finally kill himself. I love the premise. (and bonus points if you noticed the "AND" "BUT" "THEREFORE" set up you learned in the lesson two workbook)

TASTE TEST:

How would you open this movie? What opening scene would set the stage for this epic tale?

Challenge yourself to answer the above question before reading on.

THE TASTE OF A VISIONARY STORYTELLER:

You give that premise to any writing student and I wonder what opening scene they'll script -- some huge explosion where a stuntman loses his legs. Or some crazy over the top "exciting" scenario that Hollywood would likely require us to do. No knock on any of those approaches, but look at how Tarsem handles opening THE FALL:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhARR-zmTCE>

To me, it's brilliant. Alluring. You don't know what's happening yet -- it's almost a bizarre ballet. And talk about tension -- you wonder what on earth they're all so concerned about. Then when they reveal what the hell they're hoisting up, it still leaves you with questions (tension!) and wanting to know more. It doesn't just spill out information for you, it beautifully unfolds a scene that isn't obvious.

It's one of many examples I love about this movie -- a movie that I openly admit is not even close to perfect. This movie represents a command of so many important aspects of taste -- from visuals (every frame could be hung on your wall), to music and pacing, to imagination -- it's unique to Tarsem. No one else could have made that scene but him. You may completely disagree with me, and that's okay. It's my taste. And I can justify it from my perspective.

Taste is a really hard thing to quantify, but you'll notice people who have strong taste typically create strong work that feels unique to them. Even Tarantino, who is known to borrow from so many films throughout history and is a walking cinema encyclopedia, does so and ends up creating his own brand, style, dark humor that's really fun to watch and isn't repetitive.

Basically, if your goal is to make movies -- watch them. If your goal is to write the best airport novel, read them. It doesn't mean you have to make derivative work, but knowing your landscape and developing the understanding of what aspects speak to your creative spirit will aid you throughout your storytelling life.

What's one of your favorite scenes? Why? What's the funniest movie you've ever seen? Why? What's the best character on television? Why?

Knowing what your answer is to questions like this is the first step of developing taste, but the real meat of it is in WHY this is your taste. "WHY" should be an ongoing question you pose to every story: "Why does this work?" "Why am I not interested in this book?" You'll begin sharpening your sword and developing strong taste.