

THE CELLULOID PAPER TRAIL

IDENTIFICATION AND DESCRIPTION OF
TWENTIETH CENTURY FILM SCRIPTS

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FOREWORD

For decades, I've been a very serious collector: first editions of 20th century American literature.

I started when I was much younger. I didn't know much about the field when I began, but I learned (often the hard way) and, over the years, it could be said that I became something of an expert in that pursuit.

But I made one big mistake. I should have collected film scripts too.

20th century scripts are major contenders for *the* rare paper of the 21st century. How could I not have known it? I mean, here I was, living and working for fifty years on film sets. I was reading scripts long before movies were (or were not) made from them. I was reading scripts while movies were in production, and sometimes even after the movies were made. I could have picked them out of trash cans, scooped them up after rehearsals and table-reads. I could have asked the writers, stars, directors, and executives to send them my way. Too late.

Is there a rarer 20th century *avis* than a film script? Even in their original, revised and final draft forms, scripts number only in the hundreds at most; before the Xerox era, often only in dozens of copies. Unlike books, screenplays were expected to disappear after a few months. (Some were locked up or even put to death intentionally by secretive directors like Stanley Kubrick, Richard Brooks, Woody Allen, and others.)

I've never made a movie from a book. They've all been original screenplays, and often the first one written by their authors: Paul Schrader, Terrence Malick, Rob Thompson, John Patrick Shanley. The closest I came was in the late 1960s when I heard about a forgotten writer, Jim Thompson, who lived in the Hollywood Hills. I tracked him down, only to learn that he owned none of the books he had written—they had been published as paperback originals and, just like the few scripts he'd written, disappeared. All he had left was a Xerox of one of them, *The Getaway*. I introduced him to my agent and, well, you probably know the rest. It saved Jim's life.

If only I had read this book you now hold, which, of course, didn't exist then. And even now, it's the only one of its kind.

Perhaps even more than books, films are a record of our times. No one will ever really know how Fitzgerald crafted, modified, or rewrote *The Great Gatsby*. But the great films of our time each have a secret behind their creation. It's called a screenplay. The receptacle of many secrets, it contains the hints, the directions, and the possibilities of the finished film.

Great books might change the course of literature, and might sometimes affect the way people reference their lives. But no one ever worried about getting into the water after reading *Jaws*—not so for the millions who saw the movie. No one talks about William Randolph Hearst, but millions know Charles Foster Kane. Movies change our lives, get us talking. They live in our memory and define our generations.

The screenplays you'll see examined in this book represent the spectrum of the form, dating back over 100 years. It's remarkable that some of them exist at all, and they offer a unique and new form of scholarship and research: the cultural, aesthetic, and geographic opportunity to see and hear the people, places, and politics of their times. And because movies are such a collaborative medium, it's rarely a single voice that's there to be studied and understood, but a chorus.

If you're reading this introduction, you likely already have a serious interest in rare books and paper. You'll benefit enormously by reading on, and the guidance you find will serve you well.

And there won't be a quiz.

Tony Bill
Los Angeles
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PREFACE

For nearly two years in the early 2000s, a script for the 1969 British film *Performance* sat at the corner of my desk, daring me to catalog it. I had found it on the dusty bottom shelf of a dealer's booth at a regional fair, unpriced. I was a fan of the film, and leafing through it while standing in the booth, I determined pretty quickly that the script and the film I was assuming to have been made from it were a match—but not much else. I didn't know where the script fit into the film's development timeline, I didn't know whether it was vintage or some later knockoff, nor did I understand how it had been duplicated.

I bought it from the dealer, who was so happy to sell it that he very nearly gave it to me. I brought it home, and there it sat, like Kryptonite. Every time I pulled it near to me and leafed through it, my excitement returned, then dampened when I came up against the same wall.

At the time I was a bookseller who dealt primarily with 20th century books and occasionally manuscripts. The school of hard knocks had already taught me that cataloging something I didn't understand was a bad plan, and while I knew two dozen booksellers who could gladly and ably give me advice about a first edition, I didn't know even one who had dealt with film scripts. And while I was a cinephile to the core, all my knowledge was about the movies themselves, not about the paper used to create them.

What little instinct I had at the time was to work my way in from the outside, and carefully. But owing to the fact that there were certainly no books on the subject, nor any kind of published methodology, I very badly needed a guide.

I found an online dealer, then unknown to me, who carried a number of scripts and described them well enough that I felt good about ordering a few inexpensive ones related to films I felt strongly about.

That process, as is often the case with booksellers, led to a dialogue and a friendship with that dealer, who though modest had a vast knowledge of film scripts, really even beyond what he betrayed in his descriptions. The dialogue we began led to other dialogues with a few other savants he knew who had been pursuing scripts for some twenty years, and in the old oral tradition I now had someone to answer my questions. Even more importantly, I had a small group of people with perspective who could tell me what questions still remained unanswered. And best of all, they were enthusiastic, unpretentious, and generous with their knowledge. Over time I began to separate speculation from fact, and assumption from substantiation.

Because scripts have so many more moving parts than their 20th century counterparts in the book world, I developed a template for cataloging, so as not to overlook details essential to a thorough description. As interest in scripts grew, I also found that I needed a means for catalogers in my shop to be able to write a description properly, and with a well-defined style. The template met that need, and was improved upon over time. That was the first wave. The second wave was learning the power of pagination, and how it was the rock on which the rest of my description could be built, as well as the means by which I could later determine whether one draft of a script was different from another.

The intended audience for *The Celluloid Paper Trail* is the experienced bookseller, collector, or cataloger of 20th century rare books and manuscripts. It is written in the 20th century bookseller's vernacular, and assumes a fair amount of resident knowledge common to that framework.

I am not a librarian, nor do I pretend to be, but the terminology and methodology of rare book cataloging has much in common with the library world. And while a book or a paper translating this book's content into the language of library science remains a merited future publication, I do believe librarians can still find value in the content of this volume.

In "Canon Fodder," Paul Schrader's seminal 2006 essay in *Film Comment* on the notion of a 20th century cinema "canon," Schrader notes:

"Movies have owned the 20th century. It will not be so in the 21st century. Cultural and technological forces are at work that will change the concept of 'movies' as we have known them. I don't know if there will be a dominant art form in this century, and I'm not sure what form audiovisual media will take, but I am certain movies will never regain the prominence they enjoyed in the last century."

In a remarkably similar way, the methodology used in the creation of 20th century film scripts is something that will always belong to the 20th century, as the blinding speed of digital technology has relegated the printed film script to second chair, if not rendering it altogether obsolete.

Accordingly, this volume focuses exclusively on the 20th century, and more specifically the 1920s to the late 1980s, when cinema was born and raged, and the creation of a film gave birth to a big, beautiful, paper wonderland.