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Introduction

Craig Batty

We have experienced what we might call a ‘screenwriting turn’ in the last five or so years. By this I mean that in the fields of screen and cultural studies, we have begun to both understand and appreciate the role of the screenwriter much more than we have in the past. We are finally, and thankfully, moving beyond a director-centric critical appraisal of screen texts, and are beginning to truly acknowledge the importance played by creators, writers, showrunners, storyliners and script editors in the conception, development and execution of film and television drama. This is in part related to the work of the Screenwriting Research Network, whose annual conferences and Journal of Screenwriting have shed significant light on the world of screenwriting. It is also in part related to the fact that screenwriting has become a growth area across colleges, universities and film schools around the world, where not only are students demanding content relevant to them, but where those teaching are becoming increasingly interested in research, keen to understand screenwriting practice within an academic context.

Recent books helping to define the ‘screenwriting turn’ include Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work (Murphy, 2007), Writing for the Screen: Creative and Critical Approaches (Batty and Waldeback, 2008), Screenwriting: History, Theory, and Practice (Maras, 2009), The Screenplay: Authorship, Theory and Criticism (Price, 2010), The Woman in the Story: Writing Memorable Female Characters (Jacey, 2010), Analysing the Screenplay (Nelmes, 2010), Movies That Move Us: Screenwriting and the Power of the Protagonist’s Journey (Batty, 2011), The Psychology of Screenwriting: Theory and Practice (Lee, 2013), The Screenwriter in British Cinema (Nelmes, 2013), Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea (Macdonald, 2013), Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From The Kingdom to The Killing (Redvall, 2013), A History of
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the Screenplay (Price, 2013) and Screenwriting: Creative Labour and Professional Practice (Conor, 2014). Along with articles found in, for example, the Journal of Screenwriting, the Journal of Media Practice, New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing, the Media Education Research Journal and TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, these works are quickly strengthening the presence of screenwriting in academia.

Hundreds more screenwriting books have been published throughout history, but they are almost exclusively ‘how to’ in nature. Screenwriting experts such as Syd Field, Linda Seger, Robert McKee, Christopher Vogler, Michael Hague and Linda Aronson have all written internationally successful guides to the practice of screenwriting, aimed predominantly at the emerging screenwriter market but also used frequently by more experienced writers and film and television development agencies. Even the BBC’s former Controller of Drama Production and New Talent, John Yorke, has joined this group of authors with his book, Into the Woods: A Five Act Journey into Story (2013). Many of these guides have come under attack by academics, who view them as restrictive, content thin and serving capitalistic modes of screen production. Most of these guides also have a one-voice approach, where scholarship is limited and the tendency is for the author to advocate their own methods only.

Arguments against the guides undoubtedly carry weight, but as a screenwriting author as well as an academic myself, I find I am in an interesting predicament. On the one hand, I understand that critical texts generally serve a different purpose to professional or mainstream texts, and that it is the responsibility of the academic to create and disseminate new knowledge based on research and analysis. On the other hand, for a field whose central concern is practice – the screenwriter writes, and screenplays are written for production – I find it somewhat disappointing that many academics quickly write off anything intended to aid writing practice. It seems that anything aimed at helping screenwriters with their screenplays is beneath academic value. This is particularly problematic at a time when we talk a lot about practice-based or practice-led research, where the aim is, or should be, not to theorise practice per se, but to interrogate and intellectualise practice in order to generate new knowledge and new ways to practice.

As Harper notes in relation to creative writing, practice-based research should create its own ‘site of knowledge’ that has its concerns in process and practice, not ‘post event’ speculation (2006: 3). Furthermore, such research should be
concerned with linking the individual (i.e. the understanding and approach of the individual writer) with the holistic (i.e. understanding of genre, form, convention, the market, the audience). There are similarities here between the post-event analysis of literature, film, theatre and other art forms, but the difference is plain enough: the critical understanding employed is used to assist the creative writer in the construction of a work at hand, and/or of their future work.

(Harper, 2007: 19)

This is where I see tensions arising between ‘how to’ books and what we might call ‘screenwriting studies’.¹ The word ‘studies’ might be seen to speak solely to an academic audience, just as ‘a guide to’ apparently speaks solely to a commercial audience. As Brien and Williamson argue, ‘many [concerns] are magnified when dealing with newer academic discipline areas such as the creative arts […] where] emergent research practice seeks to legitimise alternative forms of knowledge production that do not always sit comfortably alongside accepted norms of research’ (2009: 1–3). This is exactly what I see happening in screenwriting: a clash between not only what is and what is not research but also what is accepted and what is rejected by screenwriting academics.

Obviously it comes down to an individual’s position and what they want to achieve with their work. If, for example, an academic wants to be respected in the field of film and television studies for advancing theoretical knowledge about the practice of screenwriting, then this is one thing. If, on the other hand, an academic wants to speak to a wider audience, and wants his or her work to have an impact within the community of practice (screenwriters, script developers, script editors, etc.), then this is something quite different. In the end, it comes down to being honest about what one is trying to achieve, and for there to be mutual respect. Unfortunately, I have witnessed much snobbery towards academics who want their work to speak primarily to communities of practice.

In my view, it might be useful to reconfigure what we mean by screenwriting studies, to set it apart from film, television or cultural studies, for example. Screenwriting studies might be better thought of as being concerned with the act of writing and with the creative processes undertaken by the screenwriter. Screenwriting is an activity, not an end product, and so arguably it is more productive and more authentic to talk not just about practice, but also for practice. New knowledge should be generated alongside new methods of practice, where we do not merely understand a topic, but can offer practical insights to act on the
topic. There still exists in academia a dilemma around these issues, but with every dilemma comes an opportunity. Therefore, it is the intention of this book to respond to such a dilemma.

It was at the 2011 Screenwriting Research Network conference in Brussels when the idea for this edited collection came about. The distinction between theory and practice was stark, and although, as in many other disciplines, there had been much talk about practice, and an encouragement to integrate theory with practice, I was left feeling that many of the presentations did not fit comfortably in what could be an exciting and innovative discipline. I was drawn most to papers that promised to be about practice and, as stated above, was also in anticipation that they would be for practice. As has been my experience of many conferences over the last decade, papers that leant more towards this attracted very few questions and, in some cases, criticism for not being sufficiently academic. On the contrary, academic papers, whilst well developed and interesting, left me feeling underwhelmed and, in some cases, inadequate. I sat with this feeling for a few days before deciding to do something about it.

This resulting book, then, seeks to address a lack of material in screenwriting studies that is not just about practice, but that is for practice. A collection of 16 chapters and 17 authors, it aims to provide practical insights into screenwriting practice as well as intellectual discussions of it. The word ‘context’ was deliberate in the title, suggesting that the essays are not trying to theorise screenwriting, but are attempting to situate screenwriting practice in relevant frameworks. Whether these contexts are related to process, industry, critical reception, or otherwise, the point is that each chapter is about understanding an aspect of practice through an intellectual lens. This is similar to the approach offered by Jason Lee in his recent book, *The Psychology of Screenwriting: Theory and Practice*, where ‘screenwriting studies is combined […] with more general writing studies, philosophy, film and literary studies, enhancing reflective creative thinking and practice’ (2013: 2). This book is also about reflective creative thinking and practice, and by putting practice into a variety of relevant contexts, the chapters combine to create a collection that will be valued by both academics and practitioners.

There are three parts to this book: ‘Screenwriters and their Screenplays’, ‘Screenwriting and the Development Process’ and ‘Screenwriting and Authorship’. As well as this structure mirroring aspects of a screenplay’s journey – writing, development and reception – the structure was also dictated by the excellent topics proposed by the contributors. I initially thought it would be difficult to pull together a
collection like this, but it was fortuitous that the chapters offered made the task a relatively easy one.

The first part of the book is concerned with the specific act of writing for the screen, and brings together chapters that explore practices of telling a story that will move from the page to the screen. In their chapter on screenwriting and poetry, Elisabeth Lewis Corley and Joseph Megel argue that much can be felt and understood about a story by the way it is presented on the page, in terms of both language and layout. Ann Ingelstrom’s chapter dovetails neatly with this, wherein she examines the narrational voices at play in the screenplay. By exploring the specifics of language and point of view, she provides some exciting new insights into screenwriting practice. In his chapter about the relationship between theory and practice, Shaun Kimber uses the horror genre as a lens through which to argue that writers can benefit greatly from understanding their work in broader cultural and industrial contexts. His excellent study results in some very practical outcomes that can be employed by the screenwriter. This is followed by a chapter by Hester Joyce on New Zealand filmmaker Gaylene Preston. It focuses specifically on screenplays that are about real events and real people, suggesting that creative interpretations of history inevitably come into play, especially when the history being written is one’s own. My own chapter concludes this part of the book, and examines how the physicality of costume can be seen to represent the character arc. By offering a case study of the film *Connie and Carla* (2004) through the lens of the Hero’s Journey, it suggests ways in which screenwriters can usefully visualise emotional transformation.

The second part of the book presents a range of chapters concerned with aspects of script development, wherein the screenwriter negotiates both their own process and those imposed by others. Margot Nash’s chapter examines ‘the unknown’, arguing that writers and directors should be allowed to undertake an exploratory approach to development where the imagination can roam free and dramatic ‘gold’ might be found. In her chapter on the Irish Film Board, Dióg O’Connell highlights some of the important changes in script development policy that have benefited both the craft and the careers of local screenwriters. This is followed neatly by Susan Liddy’s study of Irish screenwriters who have had their first feature films produced. With insightful and entertaining interview material, her chapter illuminates both the challenges and the rewards experienced by new writers. Paul Wells then goes on to discuss the under-examined area of script editing, and in particular the role of the script editor in animation. By reflecting on both research and his own experiences in the industry, he provides rich material that
add to our knowledge in this area. This part of the book is concluded by a fascinating chapter by Peri Bradley, who compares recent scripted-reality television shows with the work of Mike Leigh, suggesting that there is much to be learned from improvisation in the context of ‘social realist’ texts.

The third and final part of the book asks questions about screenwriting and authorship, and whether there are practical ways for writers to influence how their screenplays and eventual produced screen texts are experienced. Alec McAulay’s chapter explores notions of authorship as experienced through the script development process. Drawing on his own struggles of writing a short film for a director, he offers some fascinating insights into the perils of collaboration. In her chapter on British screenwriter Sarah Phelps, Kate Iles draws on rich interview material to provide an extensive account of the authorial intentions of the successful television writer. This is followed by Eva Novrup Redvall’s discussion of writers’ rooms, in particular the writers’ room for Danish television series Borgen (2010–). Based on her ethnographic study, she is able to write convincingly about collaboration and authorship in what has traditionally been regarded a factory-like, mass-produced form.

Helen Jacey goes on to discuss screenwriting and gender, and in particular, representations of men in the bromance and bromedy genres. Drawing on both theoretical and practical material, she argues that the screenwriter has a duty to play in the formation of cultural discourse, one that is bound up with notions of authorial intent. Marilyn Tofler’s chapter also discusses screenwriting and gender, and uses Nancy Meyers’ screenplay Something’s Gotta Give (2003) to examine how a writer might construct the satirical female voice. She offers practical tools for the screenwriter who is interested in writing strong female protagonists. The book concludes with a chapter by Christopher Pullen, who uses the writing of Tennessee Williams and Gore Vidal, and Joe Orton and Clive Exton, to explore how contentious representations of homosexuals have been offered in the mainstream cultural domain. His detailed study offers potential for writers to indirectly reference the self in their screenplays, embracing notions of authorship to challenge dominant ideologies.

Overall, this book seeks to be innovative, fresh, lively and, most importantly, useful for screenwriting practice as well as academic debate. It is a distinctive collection of chapters from creative-critical academics who are passionate about screenwriting. With its focus on what screenwriters do and how they do it, the book aims to be thought
provoking, stimulating and an enabler of creative and professional practice.

Note

1. In relation to this, Palgrave Macmillan now has a book series called Studies in Screenwriting, developed by members of the Screenwriting Research Network and launched in 2013.

References


Introduction

Despite contrary and eminently reasonable claims of many prominent experts in the field of screenwriting, such as Syd Field, we side with those who take the position that screenwriting can be an art form in and of itself; and we argue that, if the writing is approached and practised as an art, immeasurable benefits accrue. This is not to say that the writing of the screenplay is an end in itself, but that the approach to the writing can have wide-ranging influence on the quality of a finished film.

One of the most powerful tools at the disposal of the screenwriter, we argue, is one seldom employed to the fullest in the haste to create formulaic screenplays that appeal to a wide audience: the careful contemplation of the implications of script format and the language used to create visual description. As with the formal requirements of poetic forms, from the sonnet to the sestina, the strictures of form and precision of language can have liberating effects and profound implications. Like most who have instructed beginning writers, we believe technical language that pulls the reader’s attention out of the story can largely be avoided by sophisticated use of the formatting norms already in place.

The aim of this chapter, then, is to discuss the potential of screenplay format and, very briefly, the language of its visual description to contribute to the creation of screenplays that are not simply read, but, as with poetry, are received on many levels. The ultimate goal of our focus on the format and language of the screenplay is to liberate the screenwriter to create something as polished and resonant as a well-crafted poem and in so doing to increase the presence of poetry in filmmaking.
The ‘spec’ screenplay as art

We are accustomed to hearing films described as cinematic poetry. For example, virtually everything written about Terrence Malick resorts to poetic equivalences at some point. A.O. Scott’s review of Malick’s *To the Wonder* (2013) in the *New York Times* asserts that the film ‘spins visual poetry not only out of prairies and creek beds but also out of less obviously sublime facts of the landscape’. Hearing films described as poetry is commonplace, but few expect poetry of the screenplay or regard the choices of the screenwriter as meaningful in the way we assume that the choices of poets are.

Most of the focus of our work has been on one form of writing for the screen: the creation of a ‘spec’ screenplay for a narrative, full-length feature film. The spec script, one written speculatively by a writer who chooses to do so other than at the behest of a studio or producer as a work for hire, is a distinct form of screenwriting and one perhaps most likely to be a starting point for those who have no meaningful connection with the industry. David Trottier’s *Dr. Format Answers Your Questions* offers clear distinctions between the norms of spec screenplay writing and the shooting script (2002: 67–69), primary among them the necessity to tell the story clearly, movingly, and to eschew anything that takes the reader out of the story. We do not need to hear about dolly moves if we can create a rhythm on the page that makes the film unspool in the mind of the reader as it does in the mind of the screenwriter. If it is difficult to find prominent examples of the kind of work for which we are advocating, it may be because so few spec screenplays are made into films; or, possibly, because most of the screenplays that are widely available are shooting scripts (Trottier, 2002: 18). Trottier also reminds us that industry norms change, albeit slowly, and formatting norms change (2002: 67–68). Change may accelerate as the means of making films move closer to the hands of the originating filmmakers. The 2012 independent film *King Kelly*, for example, was shot almost entirely on cellphone cameras (Holden, 2012).

In *The Screenwriter’s Workbook*, Syd Field recalls his mentor, the legendary filmmaker Jean Renoir, as having claimed that screenwriting cannot be considered an art because a film is not the work of one person. According to Field, Renoir said, ‘Art should offer the viewer the chance of merging with the creator’ (2006: 1–2). It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to take on the question of what constitutes art, but the notion that, to qualify as art, a work must be in some way tied to an individual’s private effort merged with a public audience seems
difficult to defend. Whilst many have spoken to the issue of process and the importance of process, no one has supported the view that art can be traced to any one process in particular. As poet and theorist of poesy Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes,

In every work of art there is reconcilement of the external with the internal; the conscious is so impressed on the unconscious as to appear in it; as compare mere letters inscribed on a tomb with figures themselves constituting the tomb. He who combines the two is the man of genius and for that reason he must partake of both. Hence there is in genius itself an unconscious activity; nay, that is the genius in the man of genius. And this is the true exposition of the rule that the artist must first eloign himself from nature in order to return to her with full effect. Why this? Because if he were to begin by mere painful copying, he would produce masks only, not forms breathing life.

(cited in Krasny, 2004: 38)

It is those ‘forms breathing life’ to which we rightly aspire, and too often what results from a formulaic process is more like masks. Coleridge is also speaking of the role of the unconscious in getting to a place where the writing feels alive. No one argues that the unconscious can be summoned but we do argue that there are ways, long established in the writing of poetry, that make its entry and influence more generative.

As Wallace Stevens writes in his essay, ‘The Irrational Element in Poetry’,

what I have in mind when I speak of the irrational element in poetry is the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from which poetry springs […] What interests us is a particular process in the rational mind which we recognize as irrational in the sense that it takes place unaccountably.

(1957: 216–218)

What we are looking for in seeking more attention to the language of visual description in screenplays, and more conscious, less mechanical, use of format in screenwriting, is a benefit to the end product of the screenplay: the film itself. We freely acknowledge that, whatever this benefit may be, the means of its arrival are unaccountable.

Throughout their book Writing for the Screen: Creative and Critical Approaches (2008), Craig Batty and Zara Waldeback refer to ‘the art of
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