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Kerrigan, Susan; Batty, Craig "Re-conceptualising screenwriting for the academy: the social, cultural and creative practice of developing a screenplay". Published in *New Writing* Vol. 13, Issue 1, p. 130-144 (2016)

Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2015.1134580>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *New Writing* on 30/01/16, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14790726.2015.1134580>.

Accessed from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1340707>

Re-conceptualizing screenwriting for the academy: the social, cultural and creative practice of developing a screenplay

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Abstract

In the last decade screenwriting as a profession has changed significantly, with the writing of a screen idea no longer a singular individual pursuit (Macdonald, 2004). Screenwriting has become a truly collaborative practice, and even though the screenplay is considered by some as being ‘authorless’ (Conor 2014) or a ‘signpost not a destination’ (Harper 2015), it is also an activity that inherently recognizes writers as the creators of novel and original content.

This re-examination of screenwriting situates the practice inside the academy as a place where future practitioners can understand the industry they aspire to work in, and the contexts within which it operates. To this end, the screenwriter steeped in the traditions of creative writing can become more creatively responsive to the industrial and economic factors driving the processes of screen production. By re-conceptualizing the screenwriter as a creative and conditioned agent who plays a specific part in the realities of the contemporary screen industry, we can better prepare students for professional practice scenarios that will enable them to make creative contributions that shape and change the industry.

Key words

Screenwriting; screenplay; script development; screen production; creative practice; collaboration

Introduction

Screenwriting can be understood as a form of creative writing, yet one that is usually – and for some, crucially¹ – bound up with the concerns of the screen industry, which

¹ Here we might consider those who write because to them, writing is in their blood; and those who write because they want to make films, television or online drama. Though these types are not mutually exclusive, there does exist a subtle difference. The writer-director or writer-producer might provide a clear example of the latter.

provides the apparatus for turning words on a page into images and sounds on a screen. So while we might consider screenwriting an important practice in and of itself – scholarly² or creative/professional – it is also a practice that relies on other practices and practitioners to enact its intentions. As Harper jokes in response to creative writing departments who pay little attention to screenwriting, ‘screenplays are not literary. [...] Screenplay writing is about writing a template for another art form [...] a signpost not a destination’ (2015, p. 111). This echoes various views of the screenplay as a blueprint, found in both scholarly writing (Maras, 2009; Price, 2010) and most practice-focused discourse (Macdonald 2004).

In order to fully contextualise the relationship that screenwriting has with creative writing and screen production, an argument might be mounted that current approaches to screenwriting need to move beyond the romantic notion of a writer and a blank page (Zolberg, 1990). The writing of a screen idea is no longer a singular individual pursuit, as Macdonald argues: ‘in screenwriting the process is multiplied by the collective involvement of many in the process of development’ (2004, p 265). This is the same argument that has been mounted about songwriting and songwriters, which confirms that ‘creativity cannot be fully explained solely by singular characteristics of individuals, as there are too many variables involved’ (McIntyre 2008, p. 50). Creativity theorist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi argues that ‘one must internalise the rules of the domain and the opinions of the field, so that one can choose the most promising ideas to work on, and do so in a way that will be acceptable to one’s peers’ (1999, p. 332). When an individual practitioner embodies and internalizes particular rules and the opinions of specialists, they can be described as a *conditioned agent*: someone who is recognized as being creative (McIntyre 2008; 2010; 2012; Kerrigan 2013; 2016). By re-conceptualizing the screenwriter as a conditioned agent, that is a practitioner who draws on their antecedence through creative writing and screen production, it is possible to situate them inside a social and cultural creative process where their work – the screenplay – meets the expectations of their peers. This approach is similar to Kerrigan’s creative documentary practitioner research (see Kerrigan 2011; 2013; 2016).

Sociological debates outlining the social production of culture (Wolff 1981; Becker 1989; Bourdieu 1993; Alexander 2003) will be employed here to theoretically

² See Baker 2013; Baker, Batty, Beattie and Davis 2015; Batty and McAulay, 2016; and Lee, Lomdahl, Sawtell, Taylor and Sculley, this issue.

support these key arguments, arising out of observations of the relationship between screenwriting and creative writing at one end of the spectrum, and screenwriting and screen production at the other. Screenwriting practice is the activity that generates this spectrum, which highlights that a traditionalist view of authorship from screen studies perpetuates ‘the rise and continued ubiquity of auteur theory and text-based film studies, and the scattered ways in which screenwriting and screenplays have been analyzed as authored or “authorless”’ (Conor 2014, p. 56). This theoretical idea connects back to the concept of the ‘Death of the Author’ (Barthes 1977), in which the readers understanding of a text became more important than the author’s creation of a text. The death of the author was once a useful argument but it is now outdated. We reject the concept of an authorless screenplay, as does Conor (2014) in her book, *Screenwriting: Creative labour and professional practice* and Macdonald in his thesis *The presentation of the screen idea in narrative film-making* (2004). Instead, we support research that acknowledges the conditioned agency of a creative practitioner, in this case a screenwriter. As sociologist Janet Wolff argues, ‘the “birth of the reader” may not necessarily signify the death of the author, but it certainly restricts further his or her “authority”’ (1981, p. 120-121).

Thus by positioning the screenwriter as the ‘first person to fix meaning, which will of course subsequently be subject to redefinition and fixing by all future readers’ (Wolff 1981, p. 136), we situate the role of the screenwriter as a sociological construct, a conditioned agent or a cultural intermediary. Working on this issue from the perspective of the screenwriter, Macdonald (2004, p. 280) suggests that: ‘Barthes’ distinction between “readerly” and “writerly” texts is helpful in understanding the process of screenplay development as one in which writerly activity is directed towards the production of a readerly text’.

By theoretically examining the differences between the “reader” of a screenplay and the “writer” of a screenplay, we are able to focus on issues which arise when these terms are conflated, as they often have been when examining screenwriting through the lens of screen theory (Bordwell, 2005). By separating the writer from the reader, it is possible to see how Barthes’ “reader” contributes to the development of a screenplay. Macdonald (2004, p. 280) lists a number of ways that this occurs:

in understanding the collaborative process that creates and shapes the screen idea, in locating the screen idea as a shared concept within that process (and regarding the screenplay as a partial record of that), in observing and considering the elements that make up that process of collaborative development, and in understanding that process as a dynamic and complex one during which meaning is explored, shared and created.

Macdonald's argument endorses that made by Wolff; that is, future screenplay readers will fix their own meaning to a screenplay, and it is possible, even likely that this may be different to the fixed meaning originally intended by the author of the work. From this position, script development provides a unique opportunity to contest the meaning of a screen idea and the exchanges that occur between different perspectives, be those fixed or fluid, between reader and writer. Script development is the site where the exchange between the reader and the writer occurs and this is also the site where creativity occurs. Understanding how to create opportunities where this sort of exchange can exist, so that a screen idea can be improved, is important for the academy. Educators in the academy need to understand how to exploit opportunities to improve screenwriting practice, as this should better prepare screenwriters for work in a critically demanding industry.

In the academy the *practice* of screenwriting exists between creative writing courses and filmmaking courses, somewhere between these two disciplines exists a site where the screenplay can undergo *development* through screen production (Batty 2015, p. 4). We argue that creative writing and screen production exist on a spectrum that values the role of the screenwriter and the processes they undertake, and also the industrial filmmaking contexts within which they operate. Usefully, script development can be seen as the social process where the creative activities of writing and production intersect. As outlined below, this is a process in which ideas, emotions and personalities combine with the practicalities, policies and movements of the industry to create, refine and tell a story in the best way possible and under the circumstances at the time.

Script development can be seen as a collaborative process that often functions 'according to how both the power held and the control wielded by specific participants work against the extent to which parties are willing to collaborate and extend trust to each other' (Macdonald 2013, p. 77). Here, Macdonald pinpoints a site

in which some might argue creative compromise occurs, but in fact he also argues goes on to argue that this site enables the collaborative creation of the screen idea:

The screen idea is created not by an individual working to some sort of universal principles, but by a set of assumptions working through a field, which is both created and changed by the agents who work in that field. (Macdonald 2004, p. 286)

Identifying the social and cultural positioning of agents, where novelty – also known as creativity – is recognised, selected and transmitted, is paramount in understanding how creativity occurs as a practice (Kerrigan 2013; 2016). So, by examining the site in which novelty is accepted or rejected, in this case script development, we can consider both a screenwriter's practice and the screenplay's relationship with screen production. Our intention is to re-conceptualize and provide other understandings of the rational process of the creativity of screenwriting; specifically, how script development is a social, cultural and individual process where screenwriting connects with the practical activities of screen production, and to which the academy can respond accordingly.

To begin, let us explore sociological debates that describe the mediated processes of the social production of art.

The social production of screenplays

Theoretical debates about the social production of art (Wolff 1981; Becker 1989; Bourdieu 1993; Alexander 2003) are useful when unpacking the mediated processes that take place during the production of a screenplay. One of the key arguments to be applied to this exploration of screenwriting is that 'cultural objects are filtered through – and affected by – the people and systems that create and distribute them' (Alexander 2003, p. 68). Essentially, 'Art is communication. Art has to get from the people who create it to the people who consume it' (Alexander 2003, 62). This concept is explained through the Modified Cultural Diamond (Alexander 2003, p. 62), which has Creators sitting opposite Consumers on the two horizontal points, and Art opposite Society on the two vertical points. Sparkling in the middle of the cultural diamond are Distributors. Alexander argued that placing Distributors between Creators and Consumers 'allows us to see that the layers intervening between artist and consumption can be many' (Alexander 2003, p.62). Macdonald (2004, p. 271)

explains how this theoretical notion occurs as a screen idea moves from a screenplay to being made into a film. The process occurs where

readers gain access to the text through whatever ‘entrance’ seems appropriate – as director, producer, actor and so on. It is as if development and production, as a writerly process, has been grafted on to a readerly (or proto-readerly) text.

By accepting there are many mediated layers in which filmmaking agents have opportunities to intervene between a screenwriter and the audience consuming the completed work, it becomes possible to accept that social, cultural and industrial processes shape and create the screen work. As Macdonald (2004, p. 272) states:

If the screenplay as a document in its partiality and instructional appearance (particularly as it develops into a shooting script) seems overt and writerly, the process of development itself appears conventionally to move a screen idea towards a screenwork which can be consumed and accessed easily – an industrial process of shaping a writerly text into a readerly one.

Macdonald locates screen production as the industrial process that shapes a text into a film, which will be ‘read’ by future ‘readers’ or ‘spectators’. The screenwriter usually works at the conceptualization and development end of this process comprised of four stages: ‘conceptualisation, development, production and reception’ (Batty, 2015, p. 112). In this sense, ‘the process of screenplay development is overt and thus observable, unlike the production of a novel’ (Macdonald 2004, p. 280). Furthermore the processes of screen production have become so complex that sociologists argue television screenwriters are deeply embedded in the distribution system, whereas practitioners such as novelists have managed to distinguish themselves from the distribution system (Alexander 2003, p.62). For example, whereas writer-producers used to manage the writers’ room, today they are called ‘showrunners’ who manage the writers’ room *and* the actual production (Mann 2009, p 100). Mann (2009, p. 103) argues that the showrunner is

often celebrated as a singular author is in fact notoriously buffeted by conflicting obligations to his/her own creative compass and to the many corporate players involved in maintaining the commercials engine and bureaucratic constraints of the network television industry as a whole.

This echoes the earlier mention of the authorless screenplay, where because of the many layers of cultural production the artist or creator of the work has, to some extent, become invisible. Though as Wolff (1981, p. 136) argues, it is possible to reconstitute the position of the screenwriter as author, by acknowledging that

the author, now understood as constituted in language, ideology, and social relations, retains a central relevance, both in relation to the meaning of the text [the author being the first person to fix meaning, which will of course subsequently be subject to redefinition and fixing by all future readers].

The screenwriter is thus deeply positioned, both literally and theoretically, as an embedded and conditioned agent inside a cultural production and creative system, practically known as a screen production and distribution system. This conceptual approach emphasizes the social and cultural processes of mediation, in so far as 'links between art and society can never be direct, as they are mediated by the creators of art on the one hand, and the receivers of it on the other side' (sic)(Alexander 2003, p. 62).

By endorsing the position made by sociologist Janet Wolff, we are stipulating that 'for the ordinary reader the author is unimportant' (1981 p. 175). This is because the reader is concerned with understanding the meaning embedded in the *creative product* that they as an audience member engage with, be that a completed film or a screenplay. The "reader" of the screenplay or "spectator" of the film is not overtly concerned with the *creative processes* of the practitioners who conceptualized, developed and/or created the work; as consumers of the medium they are only interested in their experience of its diegesis³. This leads us back to creativity research, which points out there are six Ps of creativity: process, products, personality, places, persuasion and potential (Kozbelt et.al. 2010, p.24-25).

Acknowledging that creative processes are different to creative products allows us to theoretically examine the processes of screenwriting in the first instance, and then to situate the screenplay as a product that is culturally mediated (Hesmondhalgh, 2006 p. 227) through a screen production process (Macdonald 2004, p. 287-288). Operating inside the screen production process is an isolated and discrete creative process that relies on the screenplay as 'blueprint' to be used to drive the mediated creation process. Inside this process, screenplays have great worth: they are culturally and economically valuable, and their worth resides in the potential screen work to be made. Hollywood film producers consider producible screenplays to be a 'godsend' (Lee and Gillen 2011, p. 199), and argue that producers are working daily on 'developing or optioning a script that fulfills the creative demands and that is business feasible and ready for production' (Lee and Gillen 2011, p. 199). Here the

³ Here the rise of fandom needs to be acknowledged and emergence of the 'behind the scenes' films/DVD that are made to show fans the filmmakers' creative processes.

roles of the writer and producer become blurred, both seeking a screenplay that is ready for funding yet one coming from a writing background and the other from production. Screen producers are therefore key stakeholders who assess the potential worth of screenplays, meaning that those screenplays have little cultural or economic worth outside of the screen production process and opportunities for commoditization or monetization are significantly diminished. McIntyre (2010, p. 10) sees this scenario as intriguing, highlighting that: 'This situation points to the degree of subtlety needed in setting out the precise relationship between producers of media content and the dynamic structures and contexts this creative activity occurs within'.

Through the lens of screen production, then a screenplay can be valued through its role in activating a systemic production and distribution process which results in the culturally and socially mediated creation of a screen work. As Macdonald (2004, p. 286) argues:

The screen idea is created not by an individual working to some sort of universal principles, but by a set of assumptions working through a field, which is both created and changed by the agents who work in that field.

To further elaborate on the industrial purpose of the screenplay, we look to the script development process to understand its significance and the role it plays in and for screen production.

The screenplay's role in script development

Script development is a process that is often overlooked. As a site of creative practice itself, it can easily be misunderstood because the craft and process of writing a screenplay is often conflated with the result of that process: a completed screenplay. There are different examples of the screenwriting form, forms that exist in both fiction and non-fiction (Morgan 2006, Kerrigan 2011), but here we focus on script development for fictional forms. Each fictional screenplay or form has a slightly different script development processes. For example, television is different to film, especially under serialised conditions where storyliners and story editors play a large role (see Grace 2014; Redvall 2014); developing scripts for animation is even more different, where a 'script' might exist but in quite a different format (see Wells 2010; 2014). For the purposes of this article and our concerns with bringing together writing

practice and the apparatus of production, we draw from Bloore (2012, p. 9) who, writing about the independent feature film industry, sees script development as:

the creative and industrial collaborative process in which a story idea (either an original idea or an adaptation of an existing idea, such as a play, novel, or real life event) is turned into a script; and is then repeatedly rewritten to reach a stage when it is attractive to a suitable director, actors and relevant film production funders; so that enough money can be raised to get the film made.

From this perspective script development ‘should be a collaborative journey to make the story as good as it can possibly be’ (Bloore 2012, p. 11), yet also residing at the heart of development is ‘the thorny question of when do you agree to compromise on your vision to ‘get the film made’? And when precisely does collaboration become compromise?’ (Bloore 2012, p. 4). Within the independent feature film industry the idea of artistic compromise is often a grave concern, but creativity theorists argue collaboration should not be seen as a compromise because acceptance of one’s peers is the ultimate creative accomplishment (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, p. 332). Staiger has also moved beyond the notion of collaboration as compromise. In her examination of the script as blueprint, she cautions ‘that studying the context for the creation of a screenplay is crucial in locating what pertains to the system and what relates to the individual’ (Staiger 2012, p. 76). She further elaborates that: ‘No script has ever been without multiple causes for its form and style, no event of writing pure and simple, and studies of script authorship are important for understanding the complex creative process of film-making’ (Staiger 2012, p.76).

The practice of script development ranges from readers’ reports on drafts and competition entries at the emerging/aspiring end of the market, to intensive face-to-face workshopping with script development personnel on commissioned work. These aspects give script development a strong sense of not only industrialization, but also emotion whereby constant negotiations are made between the self (ideas, visions, feedback) and the commercial product (structures, formulas, symbolic codes and conventions). Added to this is the reality that script development may sometimes be paid work/labour, but can also be unpaid (see Conor 2014, pp. 31-33).

Taking a slightly different view that situates screenplays as part of the creative economics of screen production, Staiger points out that the primary functions of innovation in screenwriting ‘are for the purposes of saving costs and controlling quality’ (Staiger 2012, p.85). This insinuates that one of the purposes of script

development is to improve the quality of the narrative and reduce production costs. If script development is looked at only from this point of view, it is possible to see why creative compromise becomes such an issue for screenwriters (see Bloore 2012; MacDonald 2013). Though as described by screenwriter themselves, this situation can occur often in television series. Tara Bennett (2014, p. 69), in her book *Showrunners*, explains how the creative flow of a television episode is shaped by advertising:

The three-act structure has expanded over the last 50 years to include an increase of commercial breaks (up to six in some hour-long shows) in both comedy and drama script, even though the allocated screen times has not changed (either 60 minutes or an hour).

Bennett goes on to point out that HBO shows are funded by subscriber fees and not by advertising, which allows showrunners and writers to ‘still craft episodic stories in the three-act structure’ (2014, p. 69). She then points out that it is the network on which shows air that dictates the length of ‘acts’ and ad breaks for broadcast and basic cable television shows. For example, when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was written, Jane Espenson was writing to three ad breaks, therefore used a four-act structure (in Bennett 2014, p. 71). *The Good Wife* uses a five-act structure, its showrunner Robert King declaring that the networks are moving to add another act which for him ‘will destroy storytelling’ (in Bennett 2014, p. 71). These commercial and monetizing structures are certainly impacting the craft of screenwriting, and it is these sites of contestation where new forms of creative practice and innovation can emerge. In line with these developments of format are creative labour arguments that maintain that ‘screenwriting is often viewed as the least creative form of writing’ (Conor 2014, p. 129). Conor provides a number of reasons for this: the how-to manuals present prescriptions and formulae; the commercial obligations often mean writers just say ‘yes’; the collective nature of the craft and medium denies individual creative authorship; and the invisibility of the writer compared to other writers or filmmakers (Conor 2014, p.129). Conor’s perspective supports the idea that form, format and commercial obligation restrict screenwriters, but arguing from a contrary position is Macdonald. He recognizes that understanding screenwriting conventions benefits writers and is necessary to ‘recognise that part of the convention is the search for ‘originality’ or at least novelty, which appears to come from nowhere except the individual genius of the writer’ (2004, p. 288). Understanding that novelty and

originality can in fact emerge from convention is important for emerging screenwriters who enter the academy.

Screenwriting is part of a complex system at work; a system that is much larger than the individual screenwriter. By embracing these attitudes through curriculum design and pedagogical interventions the screenwriting student can better understand how to internalize the rules of the domain and the opinions of the field to enable a creative screenwriting practice.

Script development as a collaborative and creative practice

McIntyre raised similar concerns for the songwriter in his research into the creative songwriting process for the contemporary Western popular music industry. In an article in the *Creativity Research Journal* (McIntyre 2008, p. 49), he argues that

it is the social organization that decides whether a song is a song in the first place and, second, how closely that song adheres to or departs from the tradition of contemporary Western popular music. The field decides how a song fits in relation to all other songs. Songwriters draw on the specific domain of songs and songwriting and rearrange it in unique and novel ways. Contemporary Western songwriters, as choice-making agents, therefore work within a structured system that shapes and governs their creativity while they contribute to and alter that system.

Taking this approach it is possible to identify screenwriting processes as part of the creative and systemic process of filmmaking (Kerrigan 2013; Kerrigan and McIntyre 2010). This means it is possible to situate screenwriting as part of an iterative and recursive creative processes (Wallas 1976; Csikszentmihalyi 1996; Bastick 1982). Viewed practically, the screen production process is also a staged process of project development – pre-production, production, post-production and distribution (Ayers et al. 1992, p. 5; Cohen et al. 2009, p. 95) – which is non-linear, or recursive and iterative, and which serves the purpose of layering a story with visual and aural properties to give it a life beyond the page. Within this, the practices of script development and writing occur mainly during the first two stages: the working up of a project until it is ready for realisation and interpretation by agents such as director, cinematographer, costume designer, editor and actor. Maras (2009, p. 185) also writes about this separation of stages, using the terms ‘conception’ and ‘execution’.

This means that the screenwriter as creative practitioner can be theoretically situated in a creative system that ‘seeks to move the concept of creativity from the plane of purely individual (subjective) recognition to a social (intersubjective) arena’

(Hooker et. al. in Paulus and Nijstad 2003, p. 230). By seeing the individual creative practitioner or ‘self’ as a screenwriting agent, engaged in a process through which screenplays or ‘commercial products’ are made and identified within the system as being novel examples that are created collaboratively, this processes acknowledges the social production of screenplays that are derived from individual agents. Their value and worth is judged through a field of experts or peers – other screenwriters, script producers, directors, and so on – who first select their work for script development and then, if they survive that stage, may be selected for production. This explanation aligns with the systems model of creative practice (see Kerrigan 2013; 2016) in which a screenplay can be seen as the result – or creative output – of the practice of screenwriting, which then leads to a more iterative and recursive process of script development. In turn, another iterative and recursive process that leads on from this is the production of a screen work.

Sometimes script development can occur alongside the production process, where script changes are made during the making of the work; and in some cases, in post-production, where those with power over the script are brought into the edit room to try and solve a story problem (see Seger in Batty 2012, p. 242). Based on her research into the working of the writers’ room of Danish television series *Borgen*, Redvall (2014, p. 135) writes that:

A vast number of people, amongst them directors, cinematographers and actors, are important to the process, and whilst writers are presented as where it all starts we can argue that the vision for the services truly comes alive through the context, the creative space and the collaborations of the writers’ room.

On this long-running television series, writers are physically situated in the film production studio and near the post-production suites, which allows the writers to become deeply involved in all stages of production: no longer invisible.

Script development and its part in screen production research

Television production has given the screenwriter visibility in the screen production process. The recent global and commercial success of the serial form is permitting the screenwriter and the writers’ room to be researched and contextualized, because it is a physical site where researchers are able to examine ethnographically the script development process. It is a little more difficult for an ethnographic researcher to

enter the internalized world of an individual screenwriter, thought some researchers as practitioners have managed this (McIntyre 2008). By entering the physical world of the writers' room, it is possible to research the collaborative process of screenwriting to understand how the screenplay is first conceptualized and then actually written as a screenplay for screen production. Literature is now emerging that is able to acknowledge this, for example 'Television screenwriting – continuity and change' was recently published as a special issue in the *Journal of Screenwriting* (Redvall and Cook 2015). This means in both practice and theory that screenwriting is being re-conceptualized as part of the screen production process. This is new and innovative research and indeed screen production has similarly struggled to be recognized as a creative activity in its own right, historically overshadowed by film studies and film theory. As Duncan Petrie (1991, p. 13) argues:

The general thrust in film studies has been to move away from the notion of the film-maker as an author standing behind the film, and toward the idea of cinema as a process of spectating in which the film maker becomes merely one element.

Petrie is pointing out similar arguments to those made by Conor, in regard to rejecting the notion of the 'authorless' screenplay. These arguments arise from the same conceptual place, which conflates the creative process with the creative product. Screenwriting has suffered this fate because of auteur theory, which privileges the director over the writer. One might imagine that a filmmaker would endorse auteur theory, but as Petrie points out, the logistics of the filmmaking process 'render it impossible for a sole individual to make a film' (1991, p. 23). This has led to the 'abandonment of the creative principles and the neglect of film-making practices' (Petrie 1991, p. 14). So too with the ever expanding script development process, because of Hollywood's extended funding process (Lee and Gillian 2011) and the rise of the longer form television serial, it is becoming increasingly difficult for a sole writer to claim that all the ideas in the screenplay belong to one individual.

This approach will challenge screenwriting research that focuses on the practitioner working in isolation from a field of social experts and a cultural domain of knowledge, one that divorces the screenwriting practitioner from a creative environment. These approaches reinforce romantic concepts of the creative genius (Sternberg and Lubart 1999), which conveniently overlook the conscious process through which a screenplay is developed, in order to elevate the activity of writing to

that of something mystical, or that comes from a ‘muse’ (Plato 1971). By identifying the conditioned agency of a screenwriter, developed through their idiosyncratic background, it becomes possible to connect the craft of creative writing with screen production. Part of re-conceptualizing these understandings of screenwriting means that screenwriting students need to be encouraged to turn away from Plato and to embrace Aristotle, if you will, where the distinction between creative product and creative process has been identified rationally. As Aristotle argued, ‘whatever comes to be is generated by the agency of something, out of something, and comes to be something’ (Aristotle 1960, p. 142). As Rotherberg and Hausman argue, Aristotle’s work emphasises ‘the resources with which the artist begins as both necessary *and* sufficient to account for all that is found in the created product’ (1976, p. 28). Therefore, if the screenwriting product is examined alongside an account of the screenwriter’s antecedence – that is their craft skills, internalization of the rules of the domain and embodiment of the field’s opinions – then according to Aristotle and creativity literature, such an examination should be sufficient to reveal the process of screenwriting as a creative practice.

Script development in the academy

In the academy, a lot of what we might conceive of script development is facilitated through well-known screenwriting manuals and other practice-focussed texts. These include a heavy focus on plot and story structure (Aronson 2010; Field 2003; Vogler 1999); work on developing believable characters (Horton 2000; Davis 2004); understanding screen-specific narrative properties such as genre and visual storytelling (Duncan 2008; McKee 1999; Seger 1994), and refining work through the lens of theme (Batty 2015; Egri 2004). While understanding these core elements of screenwriting craft is essential for writing a good screenplay, it can only go so far in helping a screenwriter to negotiate processes of script development in ‘real life’, industry situations. For example, deep knowledge of character, theme and plot certainly underpins a screen idea, but how much will it help to negotiate situations where screenplays are optioned, story bibles are created, and trailers and teasers are created to accompany funding applications?

A screenwriting student needs to internalize the rules of the domain of screenwriting as laid out in these screenwriting manuals, but they also need to do more than this. For their creative contribution to be selected as being novel in a

creative system, they need to understand how the field of screen production operates.⁴ As Csikszentmihalyi argues, fields are powerful agencies that ‘will differ in the stringency of their selective mechanisms, the sensitivity of their gatekeepers, and the dynamics of their inner organizations’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 331). Screenwriting in the academy needs to provide an education about how to embody the opinions of the field in order to understand how the medium and the industry can shape their work. This is not a simple process, and the professional practice has for some decades been moving away from the specialization of being just a screenwriter, to that of a multi-skilled screenwriter who can also operate as a writer-producer or writer-director.

Recently, things have become even more complex with new roles emerging for screenwriters, such as that of the showrunners. These industrial and professional changes point to the increasing levels and layers of complexity that now exist in the screen production system, of which screenwriting and script development clearly play a significant part. For the academy, therefore, it becomes increasingly important to adhere to what creativity theory tells us: that ‘one must internalise the rules of the domain and the opinions of the field, so that one can choose the most promising ideas to work on, and do so in a way that will be acceptable to one’s peers’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1999, p. 332). If the academy seeks to be relevant to the industry, and if it wants to graduate screenwriting students that can make significant contributions to the domain of screen production, each of the aspects discussed above need to be addressed thorough curriculum and pedagogic developments, and enhanced research methodologies that acknowledge the creative, collaborative and industrial systems in which screenwriting (usually) operates.

Conclusion

Concepts such as collaborative authorship, which explores how screenwriting involves ‘multiple forms of both writing and filmmaking’ (Conor 2014, p. 54), can be understood as important contemporary creative practices. This is something the academy can and should bring to the table in order that future generations of screenwriters are made aware of practical – and *useful* – approaches to writing for the

⁴ The ability for this to happen can often be determined by the placing of screenwriting teaching within an institution. For example, sometimes it is part of a film or media department, and sometimes it is part of a creative writing and communication department.’

screen. It is here that creative writing and screen production are joined through script development.

All parts of the filmmaking process serve a purpose in communicating an idea; a socially constructed idea that is realized through both craft and medium specificity. Spectators, readers, writers, directors, cinematographers, sound recordists, actors, editors, composers and so on all play a role as creative and conditioned agents in screen production, sharing the social and cultural construction of audiovisual meaning. Spectators and readers make meaning out of the creative product, and screen practitioners (screenwriters included) make meaning through their creative processes. To argue that one part of that process has supremacy is neither rational nor accurate, and it denies some agents their creative contribution to what is a highly complex creative system.

If the theories argued here, representing sociology and creativity are accurate, then screenwriters improve their craft by engaging in script development, and filmmakers improve their work by agreeing to collaborate on screenplays that have been revisited many times by practitioners who believe in the story on the page and who have been supported by their network of peers to make the screenplay a reality. Screenwriting in this sense is a social, cultural and creative practice that can be re-conceptualized in and by the academy. The practice of script development confirms that the process of screenwriting is a complex screen production system that could be taught practically in the academy as a social and cultural process, one that produces the creative product we know as a screen work.

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