Communication, Creativity and Consilience in Cinema

A comparative study of the Top 20 Return-on-Investment (RoI) Movies and the Doxa of Screenwriting

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PREFACE

Twenty years of immersion in the domains and fields of movie screenwriting led me to the research questions in this thesis. Studying for a Bachelor of Arts in Communication (Screenwriting major) at the University of Newcastle from 1991 to 1993 resulted in a professional screenwriting job in television in 1993 while doing a Professional Placement subject for my undergraduate degree. I then worked as a Technical Officer in the Film & Video Department at the University of Newcastle in 1994. My grounding in Screenwriting and Production from UoN and subsequent work in film, television, videogames and theatre led to studying Screenwriting and Screen Production at AFTRS in 1995-6. While studying at AFTRS, as a personal side project I summarized all the books on screenwriting I could find on the AFTRS library shelves - thus becoming very familiar with the 808.23 (screenwriting) Dewey decimal system section; a literature survey published as *The Feature Film Screenwriters' Workbook* (Velikovsky 1995, 4th Edn 2011). I discovered that the act of summarizing and comparing the various screenwriting manuals in 1995 led me to wonder about the guidelines in the orthodoxy of screenwriting, raising many questions which - over the next 20 years while working as a screenwriter, story analyst (screen reader), film crew member, actor, filmmaker, script editor, script doctor, and judge for the Australian Writers Guild and Australian Directors Guild - became deeper questions about the subdomains of movie creation. As the National Videogames Market Analyst for Australia in 1999-2000 I became involved in statistical qualitative and quantitative analysis, which may also partly explain the approach of this PhD research project in comparing movie success to failure. It is possible that comparing the extreme tail-ends of any parameter of any biocultural artifacts as a whole set (whether in movies, novels, songs, games, poems, or indeed any media) can reveal illuminating results. The work in this dissertation is thus a result of around 20 years of seeking answers to those various questions about: the movie domain, creativity, communication, story, screenwriting - and how it all works.

Ideally this research provides some satisfactory new answers to some of these questions, and new research findings which hopefully may be of benefit to screenwriters, screenwriting instructors, teachers, filmmakers, casts and crews - and the movie audiences for their creative works. In short, this thesis is dedicated to: The 99%.
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ABSTRACT

Within the discipline of Communication - and the domain of movie-creation, including movie screenwriting - this study explores aspects of the problem-situation around accurate guidelines for movie success. Movie performance research reveals that 70% of movies do not ‘break even’ or recoup their production budget in cinema release (Vogel 1990, 2014) and that 98% of screenplays presented to producers go unmade (Macdonald 2004, 2013). Successful (thus, creative) screenplays and movies are rare.

In order to illuminate this problem-situation in ways that may be useful to both screenwriters and screenwriting instructors, this study examines fifteen key guidelines of the screenwriting orthodoxy, derived from a set of four contemporary screenwriting manuals: guidelines which partly-comprise the current ‘doxa’ or how screenwriting is often taught. In this study these movie story-creation guidelines are then compared to the relevant observed story traits of the 20 highest, and also to the 20 lowest Return-on-Investment movies (with RoI defined as: ‘audience-reach / production-budget’) in order to test these fifteen (15) guidelines of the current screenwriting orthodoxy.

The Theoretical Perspective of the study is Evolutionary Systems Theory, including the Systems Model of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1988-2014) and Bourdieus’s practice theory (Bourdieu 1977-1996) to examine, understand and explain key aspects of movie-creation by screen storytellers, and movie-reception by audiences. The research perspective also draws on David Bordwell’s neo-formalist film poetics (1997-2013), Macdonald’s screenwriting poetics (2004, 2013) and scholarship in the domain of Evocriticism (Boyd 2009, 2010, Carroll 1995, Gottschall 2012) and Evolutionary Psychology (Buss 2012), influenced by E. O. Wilson’s (1998) vision of consilience.

As a result of this comparative analysis of ‘the screenwriting orthodoxy versus movie RoI’ it is demonstrated that certain of the screenwriting-manual guidelines are contradicted by the empirical evidence, and thus some revised and additional screenplay guidelines are presented, also noting suggested areas for further research.

[300 words]
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

The work in this thesis has generated the following publications:

**Book chapters**


Conference papers (refereed)


Articles


Velikovsky, J. T. (2012-2016), StoryAlity PhD research weblog, (130 weblog posts; 170,000 site visits as at October 2016), Storyality.wordpress.com, Sydney.

(https://storyality.wordpress.com/)

For the URLs of these publications see Appendix section 10.24 –Abstracts of Research Outputs.