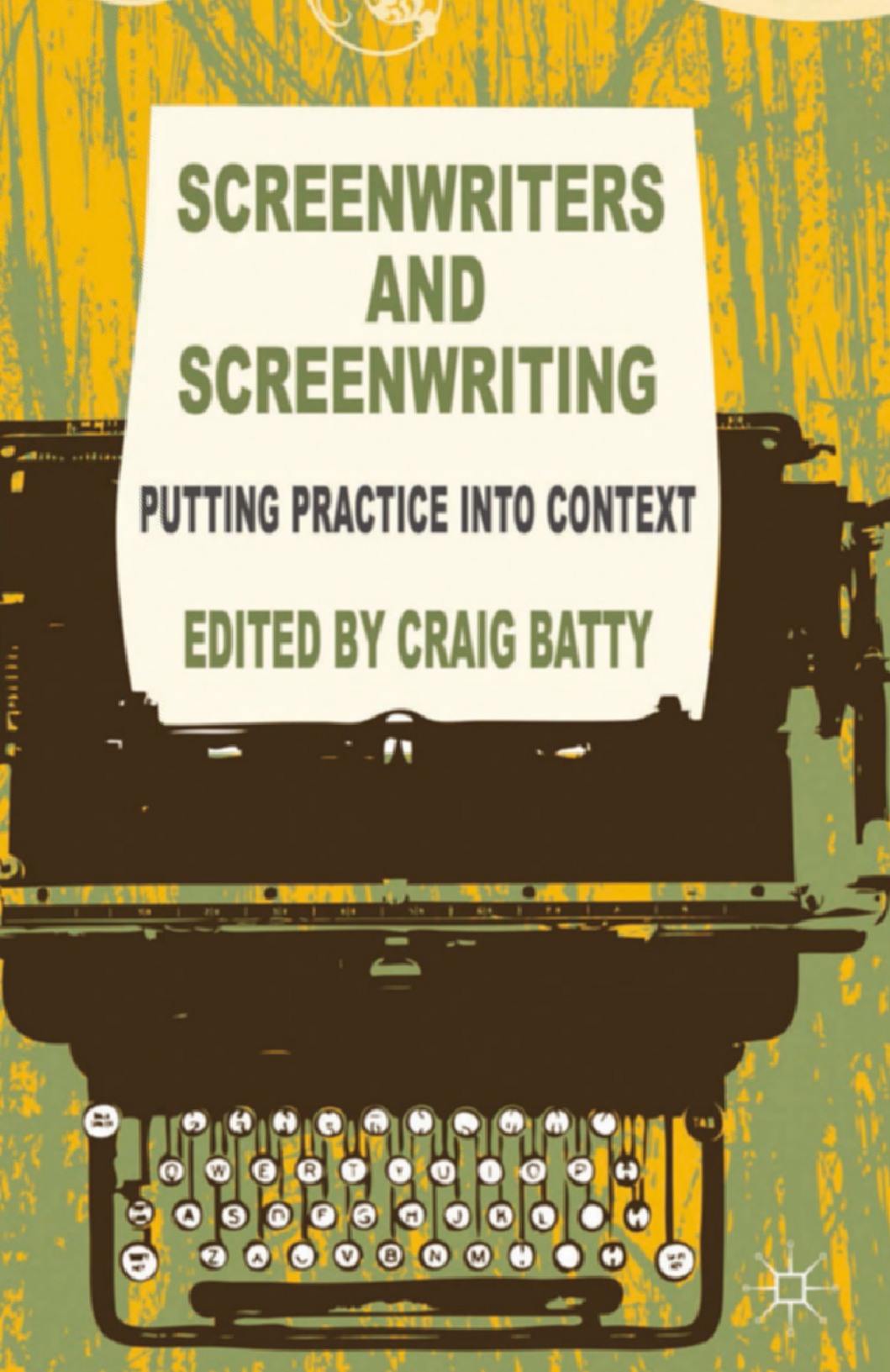




SCREENWRITERS AND SCREENWRITING

PUTTING PRACTICE INTO CONTEXT

EDITED BY CRAIG BATTY



Screenwriters and Screenwriting

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Screenwriters and Screenwriting

Putting Practice into Context

Edited by

Craig Batty

School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Australia

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Foreword

INT. SOMEWHERE – DAY OR MAYBE NIGHT

Late. Friday night. That clock on the television says 12.14. Actually, I guess that makes it Saturday morning. I'd just finished watching a movie and fell asleep here on the sofa. I could tell you the name of the movie but, try as I might, I don't recall who wrote it.

Come to think on it, maybe that's wrong. Maybe it's not night at all. Maybe I'm daydreaming. Maybe I've been reading this book, *Screenwriters and Screenwriting*, and here I am inside it, both writing this and written into this book, like a character. Weird, especially as two guys to the left seem to be filming me writing this, while three, four, maybe five people – a couple of women I recognise from the university bookshop, a guy I think is Craig Batty – are contemplating me as I write this, while the cinematographer behind a shimmering gold 35mm-film spool (What?! It's possible! Hey, it's my daydream!) seems perplexed by my choice of costume. I don't see why: I'm dressed as a combination of Mark Zuckerberg, Salvador Dali and Warren Buffet, as surely befits a book about writing for the screen.

Screen art is a kind of dream. Or, according to enthusiastic anecdotal record and earnest scientific studies, a dream is a kind of screen art. On the one hand, what a wonderful opportunity for any writer to be empowered to write a dream. What dream would you write? For my part, I appear to have opted for writing one involving a foreword to a book entitled *Screenwriters and Screenwriting*. On the other hand, if screen art is a dream, then it is a dream that might involve the complex commercial world of the mass media or the aesthetic commitments of the experimental artist, or perhaps some combination of these. As a writing project that isn't unusual: all writers have to navigate the territories of audience interest and the writer's personal intention and belief. All of us think at some point about our actions and the potential reactions when someone reads, or watches, something we have (largely) created. Why and how and to what effect we make creative compositional decisions remains an area of research requiring much more investigation. But we know we make them, and it seems at very least that if we start with the actions of writing themselves

and move then to the texts those actions of writing produce, we get closest to the decisions made, nearest to our creative and critical knowledge.

When speaking about *creative* writing, screenwriting has not always found a home as easily in the community of creative and critical writing discussion as poetry or prose writing has found such a home. This fact has as much to do with the origins, history and location of the formal study of creative writing as with any differences between screenwriting and the writing of a poem or, indeed, between the screenplay and a novel, for example. *Screenwriters and Screenwriting* demonstrates well why such an historical lack of attention to writing for the screen has been to the detriment of those creative writing discussions. Whether with regard to structure and form, individuals within/associating with a culture, or the interactions between creators and receivers of final works, writers gain from explorations that are not limited by post-writing critical determinations – which were what previously limited how screenwriting was received in what can broadly be called ‘literary’ circles.

By ‘post-writing critical determinations’ I am, of course, referring to aspects of critical study that begin by addressing the existence of a written text. A writer cannot begin that way, because all creative and critical determinations a writer must make are brought about by the pragmatics of having to create a piece of writing in the first place. While questions of whether we create or recreate texts as audiences are about more than simple semantics, the literal and situational logic of a creative writer’s formational role is nevertheless undeniable. The contributors to *Screenwriters and Screenwriting* recognise that fact. That’s one of the reasons why this book should be read and read again. It’s also interesting that while the writers’ references bear clear evidence of the distinctiveness of writing for the screen, it is also true that they draw from a wider range of influences, from ideas defined not by post-writing territorial lines but by writerly preference, usefulness, thought and need.

When we discuss creative writing by focusing on the actions of writing, and discussion of the many results of those actions follows this, we are discussing what best informs during composition. Placing critical understanding in the position of informing how writers respond to the actions of writing resituates any final texts by reconfirming they are part of an evidential trail created by the writer in such a personal compositional history. These texts incorporate understanding and bear individual creative writer’s knowledge in multiple ways; but they also represent the imagination, fortuitousness, cultural influence and

individual belief. The writers in *Screenwriters and Screenwriting* show an engaged understanding of this.

I recall clearly that I began writing for the screen for two reasons. Firstly, it seemed exotic. The more I found out, the more exotic it became, with what seemed like secret codes of presentation and an alternative view of words where the final result was a guide to creating another art form, but equally had a written identity of its own. Writing for the screen asked for distinctive writing skills, as well as a willingness to see creative writing as innately about collaborative human exchange. This seemed immediately valuable but had largely been untaught in the educational places I had been to that point. Secondly, I began writing for the screen in my mid-twenties because if there was any other form of art and mode of communication I seemed immersed in, other than creative writing itself, it was film and television. Simply, I was watching a whole lot of it! After publishing my first novel, and because of winning an award for it, I ended up funded onto a short scriptwriting course for new, published novelists at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), from which a number of notable international film and television directors had graduated. At the very first script workshop I found that anything I thought I knew about writing, based that is on my fiction writing, was barely adequate to address screenwriting. The workshop leader verbally and thoroughly shredded my first effort. From that point I was both intrigued by what I didn't know and, in a word, hooked.

Had I read a book like *Screenwriters and Screenwriting*, my first scriptwriting efforts would have been more successful. Had I at least had access to such a book, I might not have begun the activities of scriptwriting with so very little understanding of what those activities entailed, or of how I might develop a creative and critical knowledge of them. But, as Craig Batty points out in his Introduction, until the last five years or so maybe such a book wouldn't have found someone willing to publish it. 'How to' books all but monopolised the writing for screen market for so many years. Actually, and worse still, they all but monopolised how we were encouraged to understand and receive writing for the screen. It is only relatively recently that a wider and deeper consideration of the screenwriter and screenwriting has taken place.

Screenwriters and Screenwriting makes a wonderful contribution to the evolution of a field of practice and critical investigation. It is a book in the emerging tradition of talking about creative writing from the point of view of the actions of creative writers themselves, where creative and

critical knowledge is applied to writerly situations and in that application ideas about writing are formed and reformed. We find in this book evidence that we have reached a point where the slugline can read INT. SCREENWRITERS AND SCREENWRITING and the scene is now truly about exactly that.

Graeme Harper

Contributors

Craig Batty is Creative Practice Research Leader in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, Australia. He is a writer and script consultant, and has worked on various short film, feature film, television and online projects. He is co-author of the books *Writing for the Screen: Creative and Critical Approaches* (2008), *Media Writing: A Practical Introduction* (2010) and *The Creative Screenwriter: Exercises to Expand Your Craft* (2012), and author of the books *Movies That Move Us: Screenwriting and the Power of the Protagonist's Journey* (2011) and *Screenplays: How to Write and Sell Them* (2012).

Peri Bradley is Lecturer in Media Theory at Bournemouth University, UK. She was part of the 1970s British Film project group at the University of Portsmouth and co-organiser of the 2008 international conference, British Culture and Society in the 1970s. She has chapters included in *Dark Reflections, Monstrous Reflections: Essays on the Monster in Culture; Don't Look Now? British Cinema in the 1970s; Culture and Society in 1970s Britain: The Lost Decade; LGBT Identity in Non-Western Worlds; and Queer Love in Film and Television*. She has also contributed a significant piece of research to *British Film Culture in the 1970s: The Boundaries of Pleasure*.

Elisabeth Lewis Corley has taught screenwriting at Emory University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA. Her screenplay *The Death of Innocents*, based on the Sister Helen Prejean book that followed *Dead Man Walking*, is currently in development. She wrote the screenplay for John David Allen's short film *Love and Roadkill*, which screened internationally. Her short film *About Time*, directed by Joseph Megel, has been screened at film festivals across the USA. She holds an MFA in poetry from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers and a BA with highest honours in poetry from UNC-CH. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild, Actors' Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA.

Graeme Harper is a Professor of Creative Writing and Dean of The Honors College at Oakland University, Michigan, USA. A writer of fiction and a scriptwriter, he is an honorary professor in the United Kingdom

and was inaugural Chair of the Higher Education Committee at the UK's National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE). He is the editor of *The Companion to Creative Writing* (2013) and author of *Inside Creative Writing: Interviews with Contemporary Writers* (2012) and *On Creative Writing* (2010). Editor of *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, his latest book is *The Future for Creative Writing* (2014).

Kate Iles lectures in film and television production at both Roehampton University and Southampton Solent University, UK. Prior to teaching she ran an independent production company, Compulsive Viewing Ltd. There, she co-produced the Lloyds Bank Channel Four Film Challenge, the pioneering scheme showcasing the work of new writers and directors, which ran between 1995 and 2000, as well as producing single documentaries and documentary series, also for Channel Four. She has worked as a script consultant for various broadcasters, and the UK Film Council until its demise in 2010, and continues to produce independent drama and documentary projects.

Ann Ingelstrom is a PhD student at Bangor University, UK. She holds an MA from Umea University, Sweden, where she also attended a three-year practice-based screenwriting programme. Her research involves relating narrational theories from film and literature to the published screenplay text. The specific focus of her thesis is to examine how specific traits of the screenplay text-format serve narrational ends, and how a screenwriter communicates the potential film and its story to the reader.

Helen Jacey is a screenwriter and script consultant, and works as Senior Lecturer in Scriptwriting at Bournemouth University, UK. Her research interests include creative and critical approaches to screenwriting, the role of the screenwriter and screenplay in the film production process, screenwriting and gender, and screenwriting genre theory. As a professional writer, she has written numerous film, television and radio projects for UK, US and European production companies. She is a story consultant for international filmmakers and film agencies and author of *The Woman in the Story: Writing Memorable Female Characters* (2010).

Hester Joyce is Senior Lecturer in the Media Arts: Sound and Screen programme at La Trobe University, Australia, and has professional credits

in acting, scriptwriting and consulting in theatre, film and television. Her research interests include national cinemas and indigenous cinema; scriptwriting theory, policy and practice; screenplay narrative, aesthetics and formal analysis; and creative project assessment. She has co-authored, with Trisha Dunleavy, the book *New Zealand Film & Television: Institution, Industry and Cultural Change* (2011), and contributed a chapter titled 'Making Nation: Utu' to *Making Film and Television Histories: Australia and New Zealand* (2012).

Shaun Kimber is Senior Lecturer at Bournemouth University, UK. His interests include horror cinema, film violence and film cultures. He has published a book, *Controversies: Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (2011), and book chapters including an examination of the UK regulation of *The Passion of the Christ* and an analysis of UK media and film education using the lexicon of zombiedom. Forthcoming work includes an examination of *A Serbian Film* and transgression, and an investigation of film adaptations of the Henry Lee Lucas story. He is also co-editing *Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media*, and co-writing (with Craig Batty) *Writing & Selling Horror Screenplays*.

Susan Liddy lectures in the Department of Media and Communications at MIC, University of Limerick, Ireland. Her research interests include gender issues in the development process, and the representation of older women in screen narratives. She has produced a number of television documentaries for *Puddle Films*. Her feature-length script has received funding from the Irish Film Board and is currently in development with a Dublin-based production company. Forthcoming work includes an analysis of the representation of mature female sexuality in British and Irish film, and an exploration of recent work by Irish female screenwriters.

Alec McAulay teaches screenwriting at Yokohama National University and Gakushuin University, Tokyo, Japan. He holds an MA in screenwriting from Bournemouth University, where he is currently undertaking a practice-based PhD. His short films *The Errand* (2006) and *Three Days in Kamakura* (2012) have screened and won awards at various international film festivals. His feature production credits include *Starfish Hotel* (2006), *Backdancers!* (2006), *Sugar and Spice: Fumi Zekka* (2006) and *Tenshin* (2013). He consulted on J-Pitch, a Ministry of Trade and Industry project that advised Japan film projects on attracting international co-financing.

Joseph Megel has spent the last 25 years focusing on the direction and development of new works for theatre, film and video. He is currently a resident artist in Performance Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA, where he directs the Process Series: New Works in Development, and is Co-Artistic Director of the StreetSigns Center for Literature and Performance. He holds an MFA from the Peter Stark Motion Picture Producing Program at the University of Southern California, an MA from the University of Cincinnati's Conservatory of Music and a BS in Speech from Northwestern University, and is a member of SDC.

Margot Nash is Senior Lecturer in Communications at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, where she coordinates the postgraduate writing programme. She holds an MFA from COFA UNSW. Her areas of research include the theory and practice of screenwriting, developing subtext and Australian independent film history. Her films include the experimental shorts *We Aim To Please* (with Laurie, 1976) and *Shadow Panic* (1989), the documentary feature *For Love Or Money* (with McMurchy, Oliver and Thornley, 1982), and the feature dramas *Vacant Possession* (1994) and *Call Me Mum* (2005). In 2012 she was Filmmaker in Residence at Zürich University of the Arts.

Eva Novrup Redvall is Assistant Professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of Copenhagen, where, with Ib Bondebjerg, she is head of the Research Priority Area on Creative Media Industries. She holds a PhD in screenwriting as a creative process and has published a number of articles and chapters on Nordic film and television. She is also on the editorial board for the *Journal of Screenwriting*. Her latest book is *Writing and Producing Television Drama in Denmark: From The Kingdom to The Killing* (2013).

Díóg O'Connell is Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Ireland. She is the author of *New Irish Storytellers: Narrative Strategies in Film* (2010) and co-editor of *Documentary in a Changing State: Ireland Since the 1990s* (2012).

Christopher Pullen is Senior Lecturer in Media Theory at Bournemouth University, UK. He is the author of *Documenting Gay Men: Identity and Performance in Reality Television and Documentary Film* (2007) and *Gay Identity, New Storytelling and the Media* (2012), editor of *LGBT Transnational*

Identity and the Media (2012) and co-editor of *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* (2010) and *Queer Love in Film and Television: Critical Essays* (2013).

Marilyn Tofler trained at UCLA's Graduate School of Film, Television and Theatre, and then RMIT University, Australia. She has worked as a script assessor in Australia for Village Roadshow, ABC Television (Comedy) and Film Victoria, and in the USA for Twentieth Century Fox and NBC Entertainment, where she helped to find new writers for shows such as *Seinfeld*, *Frasier*, *Mad About You* and *Friends*. She co-created and wrote the television comedy *Whatever Happened to That Guy?* and is currently developing the sitcom *Best Intentions*. Marilyn lectures in screenwriting at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, and before this helped to set up the Master of Screenwriting course at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

Paul Wells is Professor and Director of the Animation Academy, Loughborough University, UK, and has published widely in the field of animation, including *Understanding Animation*, *Re-Imagining Animation* and *The Animated Bestiary*. He is also an established writer and director in film, television, radio and theatre, and conducts workshops and consultancies worldwide based on his book *Scriptwriting*. He is Chair of the Association of British Animation Collections (ABAC).

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*

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, Díóg 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

adds 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.

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Part I

Screenwriters and Their Screenplays

1

White Space: An Approach to the Practice of Screenwriting as Poetry

Elisabeth Lewis Corley and Joseph Megel

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 reconciliation 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 eloin 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

screenwriting'. We agree that screenwriting can be, is, and should always be, at least in aspiration, an art. Even if Renoir is right and individual creation is crucial, the time spent creating the screenplay is, after all, often the work of one person (even if that person is working with collaborators), and that person has an opportunity to raise the work to the level of art through careful use of language and a profound understanding of the form and the format. Given the requirements of the film industry, the writing process, especially of the spec screenplay, may be the only time that this kind of quiet attention is focused on the project. The result has to be strong enough to survive the armies of people who will shape the project once it leaves the screenwriter's hands.

A screenplay, then, should be not merely a set of technical notations for 'a story told in pictures' – Syd Field's oft-repeated definition (2006: 3) – but a legitimate work of art in itself. Story structure and format, the rules of screenwriting, are for some restraints that are paradoxically liberating, and for others a source of anxiety. William Wordsworth's *Nuns Fret Not at their Convent's Narrow Room* is instructive here.

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
 And hermits are contented with their cells;
 And students with their pensive citadels;
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
 Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
 Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
 In truth the prison, unto which we doom
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
 Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

(cited in Perkins, 1967: 290)

The point of this is that whilst the screenplay does come with some clear rules and guidelines, those restrictions can be as liberating as the sonnet form proved for poets like Wordsworth, Keats, Shakespeare and countless others who created opportunities for the arrival of the unaccountable.

What format does

Format is more than rules; but there are some simple rules that seem to be universally accepted in most screenwriting circles. Batty and Waldeback give a wonderfully concise overview of some of these (2008: 5–6), and Christopher Riley's *The Hollywood Standard: The Complete and Authoritative Guide to Script Format and Style* (2009) and David Trotter's *Dr. Format Answers Your Questions* (2002) delve into them in meticulous detail. What we would like to address here are the implications of some of these requirements and to suggest ways of using them to assist the screenwriter in visualising the finished film more clearly, and also to propose that there may be attendant benefits on such precision and care.

Batty and Waldeback stress the importance of correct formatting for purposes of professional appearance and for the accuracy of predictions of screen time, since the general rule of thumb is that one page of a printed screenplay translates to one minute of screen time (2008: 5). There are other reasons why the formatting might be worthy of close attention.

Scene headings

Everyone agrees that each new scene begins with a scene heading, although there are disagreements about what constitutes a new scene or what kinds of subheading might legitimately appear under a single master shot scene heading. The scene heading begins with an abbreviation for either interior (INT.) or exterior (EXT.), followed by the location (BEDROOM), which should remain exactly the same each time the same location is used, and then time of day (DAY). When it is crucial, the quality of the light can be suggested (DUSK) in place of the third element, instead of DAY or NIGHT. This technical language is understood as essential for planning purposes as a screenplay goes into production. Scheduling and budgeting programs designed to search for these cues, such as Movie Magic and Gorilla, help prepare for the compressed period of principal photography when the goal is to put together on the same day or night as many scenes in the same location as are feasible to shoot in the time allowed. It seems obvious that a new scene heading would be required with every change in location or time, including whenever time is not absolutely continuous. This concept is easy enough to grasp but is surprisingly often forgotten or misunderstood.