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Storyboarding

A Critical History

Chris Pallant
Steven Price



Storyboarding

Palgrave Studies in Screenwriting

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STORYBOARDING
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Storyboarding

A Critical History

Chris Pallant

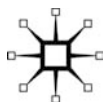
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Introduction

Why is a book about storyboarding appearing in a series entitled ‘Studies in Screenwriting’? One might think the two practices are almost diametrically opposed. A screenplay tells a story in verbal form; a storyboard is visual. Screenwriting has existed, in some form, at least since the emergence of narrative films around 1903, whereas it is commonly held that storyboarding began in advertising and in animation, notably with the Walt Disney studio’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), becoming established in live-action narrative cinema only with pre-production on *Gone with the Wind* (1939). For most studio-produced narrative films, a screenplay (albeit one that is likely to differ from the final shooting script) will have been written in advance of production, telling the whole story of the film – among other reasons, to make clear to potential artists and financial backers where their creative or economic energies will be invested. On the other hand, while some films are storyboarded in their entirety, most are not; if required, their production is often piecemeal and ad hoc, created to assist in the visualisation of particular elements of a film such as complex action sequences.

Storyboarding and screenwriting

Even in such a bald summary, however, certain cognate questions arise: about collaboration, pre-production, the relationships between a film and its pre-texts, and so on. In East Germany, in the 1960s, the storyboard was even referred to, pleasingly, as the ‘optisches Drehbuch’ (‘optical screenplay’).¹ Throughout this book we shall be examining storyboards in these contexts of production and practical film-making. However, connections between storyboarding and screenwriting become

2 Storyboarding

still more apparent when raised not in the context of practice, but of screenwriting (or storyboarding) *studies*. While film studies, media studies, and of course literary studies now have relatively long histories and well-established methodological practices, until very recently there has been almost no serious scholarship or analysis in the fields of either screenwriting or storyboarding; and the neglect of these two areas has been for very similar reasons.

Putting it starkly again, both film industries and academic film criticism have, until very recently and with some exceptions, tended to regard both screenplays and storyboards as little more than industrial waste products. Studies of cinema have tended to pay attention to completed films, and screenplays or storyboards could be largely ignored because they were merely staging posts on the journey towards the creation of a final work. Consequently, to the extent that they received any attention at all, it tended to be in the earlier chapters of book-length studies of individual films (of *The Making of...* variety). This marginalisation occurs in a different form within industrial practice: once the film is completed, the documents generated in their creation can be discarded. 'Everyone knows that when shooting is over, screenplays generally end up in studio wastebaskets', remarks the eminent screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière, without regret.² The written texts used in the creation of films were indeed frequently consigned to the wastepaper basket, or even, in industrial-scale incidents of destruction, builders' skips.³ An extremely important exception is Hollywood, where copies of screenplays were routinely retained even in the silent era as part of the studios' record-keeping practices. This means that, while there is no shortage of room for disagreement and differences of emphasis, it is possible to trace a broad history of screenwriting in Hollywood, if not always in other industries and countries.

The same cannot be said of storyboarding, however, to which the studios took a different approach. They did not systematically archive materials created within their art departments; storyboards were drawn on an ad hoc basis, and if they were created at all, they were frequently separated after shooting from the written records that were retained. Many of those that were produced failed to survive: partly because they were ephemeral documents that could be discarded after use, and partly because of the costs and other practical difficulties of archiving artwork as a routine measure. Moreover, the later downsizing and break-up of several studios in the 1970s meant that many of those materials that had been preserved were jettisoned, their survival becoming a matter of happenstance. As the author of a recent book

remarks, '[w]hen the studios broke up and the lots were taken apart, many valuable storyboards were sacrificed in the clear-out. Random works now survive in archives and in private collections – literally, the luck of the draw'.⁴

This has serious consequences for the researcher interested in storyboarding. Several major collections, such as the Warner Brothers archive at the University of Madison-Wisconsin, the MGM collection at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles (MHL), and the otherwise impressively full set of documents relating to the films of Alfred Hitchcock, which are also held at the MHL and which have formed the source material for several detailed studies of the director's work, contain enormous quantities of draft screenplays and shooting scripts, but little material relating to storyboarding. In a few cases, a reconstruction of sorts can be attempted by drawing on other collections: for instance, reproductions of images created for Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) are held in the Saul Bass collection in the same library as Hitchcock's own archive relating to the same film. The generally haphazard treatment of materials, however, is well illustrated by the fate of the artwork created by or under the direction of William Cameron Menzies for *Gone with the Wind* (1939), a large proportion of which has vanished after being sold, given away, or lost in transit.⁵

The initially casual approach of the studios to the preservation of storyboards can trap the researcher in this area in a double bind. On the one hand, for the reasons noted, the documentary record is fragmentary. On the other hand, although Hollywood was late to recognize the potential ancillary value of the reams of artwork accumulated in the creation of its films, once the commercial potential for their exploitation came to be understood the studios started to exert more pronounced control over their dissemination. One consequence is that potentially prohibitive costs confront researchers hoping to reproduce those materials that did survive. The study of screenwriting has been less extensively hampered by these conditions, since 'fair use' enables the scholar to reproduce a sense of the verbal style and other aspects of a screenplay without being confronted by quite the same permissions and copyright problems of facsimile reproduction, desirable though such reproduction might be. Meanwhile, unlike cognate areas such as literary criticism, which at least in theory tends to allow commentators to work with stable, published texts that have been edited with the needs of the scholar in mind, research into both screenwriting and storyboarding is hampered by a fragmentary historical record in which relatively little material has been

published in a form helpful to the critic lacking regular access to archival collections.

In addition to the piecemeal nature of the available materials, there is a second reason why few firm generalisations about storyboarding as a system can confidently be made: their sheer diversity, which contrasts with the relative formal regularity of screenplays. The latter tend to reproduce many generic elements, with a fairly uniform approach to matters of layout and formatting persisting throughout the classical studio period from the beginnings of sound onwards, especially in individual studios. After the decline of the studio system, a standardised approach to matters of formal screenplay presentation has been disseminated via screenwriting manuals and frontline studio readers, and although there are of course exceptions, this is apparent in most of the shooting scripts for films produced in mainstream film industries.⁶ Meanwhile, the particular stylistic traits of a given writer – an ability to create distinctive dialogue, for example – is often held to be of lesser importance (in manuals, at any rate) than the ability to reproduce generic essentials such as structure, or to write a scene in a such a way that it can easily be broken down into discrete shots. For critics attempting to establish the singularity of a particular screenwriter's voice, the difficulty has lain in disentangling that voice from the generic orthodoxy of the screenplay as an industrial form, and from the contributions of other writers within scripts that in very many cases will be the result of extensive collaboration. In short, screenwriting research is hampered by a problem of establishing singularity in the face of generality.

A certain rigidity in notions of storyboarding form can take shape, just as it has with the screenplay. Beyond the familiar, general-purpose word-processing applications that can be used to produce screenplays and storyboards, several bespoke software 'solutions' have also been developed in recent years with the screenwriter and storyboarder in mind. Screenwriting software such as FinalDraft, which debuted in 2001, is almost universally used; meanwhile, for the professional storyboard artist there are applications such as Hibbert Ralph Animation's RedBoard, and Storyboard Pro from Toon Boom, although the pairing of Adobe Photoshop with a digital stylus and tablet is often preferred. For the aspiring amateur, a recent wave of applications designed for Apple's iPad offer, with varying degrees of success, all-in-one packages for storyboard creation.

Despite this, the history of storyboarding confronts the scholar with quite the opposite problem to that posed by screenwriting. It can be

plausibly said that individual storyboards display unique properties; they 'are just as different as the films for which they were created, reaching from soft, monochrome works in pencil or ink to powerful executions with an explosion of colour in coloured pencils, felt markers, chalk and watercolours [*aquarelle*]'.⁷ In Vincent LoBrutto's words, '[s]toryboards visualize a film shot by shot', but 'can be comprised of expressive drawings or little more than stick figures'.⁸ The nature of the medium makes the singularity of the individual storyboard artist's style more immediately apparent than is the case with the screenwriter. Certain kinds of regularity can be discerned in the history of storyboarding, just as aspects of individuality can be identified in the works of particular screenwriters, but what connects the study of the two practices is that each encounters the same problem – of arriving at a helpful balance between particularity and generality – but from opposite ends of the spectrum.

Screenplays, storyboards, and the blueprint metaphor

There is another area, too, in which screenwriting and storyboarding confront the analyst with cognate questions. Until very recently, the tendency to describe screenplays as 'blueprints' for films was almost ubiquitous. Exactly the same phenomenon is encountered with the storyboard, which Fionnuala Halligan, in her study of storyboards from an art history perspective, sees as 'a blueprint for a finished feature'.⁹ The analogy is pervasive, with John Hart, from the completely different viewpoint of the practical 'how-to' guide, stating that storyboards are 'a vital blueprint that will be referred to [...] during the entire shooting schedule of the production and frequently right into the postproduction editing process'.¹⁰

Immediately, one is confronted with the problem that two very different documents, the screenplay and the storyboard, are held to have the same status, of being a blueprint for the future film. This demands consideration of the relationships between them. Since one is verbal and the other visual, we could propose that they represent two different ways of conceiving of the same material or story. Alternatively, we may be persuaded by Halligan's arresting subtitle to her book *Movie Storyboards: The Art of Visualizing Screenplays*. This implies that the storyboard takes its place in a linear series of discrete stages in film production, with the screenplay preceding the work on the storyboard, which is then followed by filming and post-production. While the neatness of this presentation of the process has a theoretical appeal, and we shall

certainly encounter many examples of storyboards that directly translate the written text of the screenplay into a precise series of visual images, the process of most actual film production tends to be messier and more complicated.

In several recent critical discussions of screenwriting, the blueprint analogy has been extensively discussed and widely contested. There are several reasons for this, but perhaps the most significant and pertinent objection in the storyboarding context concerns the implication that a neat distinction can be identified between a 'conception' stage to which both screenwriting and storyboarding belong, and an 'execution' stage in which the ideas worked out on paper in advance are filmed, and then edited and augmented in post-production. Steven Maras notes that the blueprint figure does have certain virtues, and for our purposes we may connect these as much to storyboarding as to screenwriting: 'Firstly, the idea connects the script to the process of production of which screenplay writing [and storyboarding] is a part; secondly, it foregrounds the composition or design dimension of cinema; and thirdly, it highlights the industrial scale of much film production'.¹¹ These arguments can certainly do justice to the design element of which storyboarding forms a part, although as we shall see, it would be more appropriate to associate storyboarding with narrative development, editing, camera angles, and so on, rather than with the broader architectural design of sets and costumes that is more properly the domain of concept art. Moreover, the storyboard tells us much less than the screenplay about 'industrial scale'. In the classical Hollywood era, the screenplay had multiple strategic purposes: it presented a film story in verbal form, but it also indicated divisions of labour (assisting the location manager in working out the number of scenes required in each location, for instance), which consequently made the screenplay a key document in budgeting. For these and other reasons, the submission of a final-draft screenplay was in almost every case a requirement in the planning of a Hollywood film, regardless of the extent to which the released version of the film deviated from that text. The storyboard is quite different, usually being created for localised, tactical purposes: to pre-visualise technical questions in editing or effects, for example.

This brings us to what Maras sees as the problems with the blueprint figure: 'The first has to do with the blueprint as a means of controlling production, the second with the technical nature of a blueprint and the third with the way the blueprint attempts to have the last word on planning'.¹² Regardless of the extent to which screenplays can or

should fulfill such functions, for similar reasons to those already noted the storyboard only very rarely functions as a blueprint in this sense; and then again, usually only for particular scenes. Seen in this light the blueprint becomes a needlessly restricted and prescriptive analogy, and we would do better to follow Kathryn Millard in adopting instead the figure of the 'prototype', positioning storyboards and written texts as only some possibilities among the many different kinds of material that a film-maker can exploit in preparing a project, including maps, graphic novels, sounds, videos, and so on.¹³

To insist on a radical separation of conception and execution of the precise kind implied in the blueprint metaphor also entails positing a particular kind of film, one that is largely hostile to improvisation.¹⁴ Empirical research into individual film projects, of the kinds we shall be examining in later chapters of this book, has tended to undermine the neatness of the conception/execution model. Put briefly, film projects tend to be in a continuous process of revision throughout pre-production, shooting, and post-production; neither screenplays nor storyboards can possibly anticipate all of the vagaries of the process; and storyboards of many different kinds, just like screenplay revisions, are frequently composed on the spot in order to overcome difficulties or to try alternate approaches to individual scenes. Many will be revised, rearranged, or redrawn in response either to changes in the script or for other practical reasons. And, as we shall see, it is far from unknown for storyboards to be redrafted or even entirely composed after shooting has been completed.

Just as the publication of particular screenplays has had a tendency to fix for the reader a particular form for a written text that in most cases will instead have been subject to frequent and routine revision, so, too, the presentation of storyboards in fixed and linear sequences has had the effect of causing the viewer to perceive a definite narrative arrangement that often directly seems to anticipate the film as finally released. And, once again, this can be deeply misleading. In a catalogue accompanying a recent German exhibition of a very wide range of storyboards, Kristina Jaspers notes that while in many cases the images are presented in a consecutive numbered sequence, often they show evidence of crossings-out and renumbering.¹⁵ This obvious point – that the frames of a storyboard can be rearranged to form different sequences and effects, just like strips of film in the process of editing – tends to be obscured in published storyboards, which fix a particular order in the mind of the reader, as does the completed film. This obscuring of a process of revision in pre-production and production can have

the effect of exaggerating the correspondence between storyboard and film, giving a distorted sense of the extent to which the former can be regarded as a precise blueprint of the latter.

Storyboards, animation, comics, and concept art

Despite the extraordinary variety of storyboarding materials and techniques, it is nevertheless possible and necessary to establish certain parameters of regularity. Generically, the storyboard can be distinguished from three other similar forms to which it is closely connected and with which it is often confused: animation, the narrative comic or *bande dessinée*, and concept art.

John Hart comes close to equating storyboarding and animation by titling the introductory chapter of his 1999 study *The Art of the Storyboard* 'The Storyboard's Beginnings: A Short History of Animation'. Describing the 'root' of storyboarding as 'telling a story through a history of drawings', Hart notes the precursors of animation in 'the traveling magic lantern shows of the 1600s and [...] the Optical Illusions of Phantasmagoria in the 1800s', before sketching a history of animated films beginning with the trick films of Georges Méliès at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ As Hart observes, '[e]ach of these animated cartoons, from *Felix the Cat* in 1914 to *Toy Story* in 1995, began as a drawing or series of drawings, just as so many popular cartoon characters like Popeye and Krazy Kat started as that prime example of a storyboard, the comic strip'.¹⁷

However, while the connection is undoubtedly significant (and it is one that we consider in Chapter 1 of this book), there is a clear danger of confusing distinct functions and practices if one suggests that a comic strip *is* a storyboard – or, indeed, that either of these *is* a film. Formally, the connection is clear: Hart notes in comics 'a very clever manipulation of the figures in action within each of the frames', and that '[u]ltimately, a cartoonist must place the story into a logical narrative sequence; and this, essentially, is the task of the storyboard artist'.¹⁸ As practices in creative labour, however, the difference between them is just as obvious. Although the comic strip usually appears in regular daily or weekly fragments, which in some cases will then be collected, edited, and published as a bound volume, as an artwork it has a certain autonomy – unlike the storyboard, which is a document created in the service of bringing a later artwork, the film, into being. In this respect, as a precursor text the storyboard has clear connections not with the animated film but with the screenplay, of which a similar observation

can be made. This helps to explain why screenplays and storyboards, unlike films and indeed comics, have struggled to be recognised as literature or art.

Nevertheless, it is historically suggestive that the emergence of the comic strip, especially in the form of the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, is more or less contemporaneous with the emergence of cinema, around 1895–1896.¹⁹ Again, the distinction from storyboards must be stressed – the strips were not created in order to be turned into films – but in each case the medium allows for the telling of a complete narrative, and the evolution of the *bande dessinée* shows a fairly consistent attention to parallel developments in the cinema. A biographer of Hergé, creator of Tintin, notes a series of parallel developments:

For the particular art of the strip cartoon [...] there seemed to be direct parallels with the cinematic techniques of shooting, cutting and framing. There can even be said to be a similar evolution, with ‘talkies’ superseding ‘silent movies’ just as speech bubbles took over from the texts above which the illustrations were previously placed in strip cartoons. Tintin first appeared in January 1929, the so-called ‘year of the talkies’ in the cinema. Then, during the 1940s, films graduated to colour from black and white, and so did the Tintin books.²⁰

One could take issue with some of the specifics: colour did not enter the cinema on any scale until the 1950s, and then largely in prestige pictures developed to compete with the small-sized, black and white medium of television that only became prominent in households in that decade. As we shall see throughout this book, however, suggestive correspondences between the comic strip and live-action cinema, as much as animation, are maintained throughout the histories of these different media. Indeed, dialogues between them are evident in the world of Tintin itself: after the original animated feature *Tintin and the Lake of Sharks* (1972) was created without input from Hergé, a book version was created that was ‘confusingly formatted exactly like an actual [Tintin] adventure’,²¹ while pre-production for a later series of animated films for television, based directly on Hergé’s books and created by the Ellipse and Nelvana studios in 1991, used panels from the books to create the storyboards.²² Tony Tarantini, who worked at Nelvana in 1991, notes that whenever ‘Nelvana considered adapting an existing property for an animation series production, keeping the integrity of the original work was very important’, confirming that in the case of Tintin, ‘Hergé’s drawings were

used to guide production'.²³ What this shows is that while the functions of storyboards and comic strips are distinct, they share several technical features, which are discussed more fully in the next section.

Meanwhile, it is these features, most of which concern movement and narrative action, that help to distinguish the storyboard from other kinds of production artwork. The most crucial distinction to draw is between the storyboard and what is commonly termed 'concept art' or 'concept drawings', or more generally 'production design'. In theory, the difference is straightforward. Concept drawings or paintings are normally single-frame illustrations, capturing some of the desired qualities of the *mise-en-scène* for a set, scene, or landscape: setting, light, colour, and mood. Characters are often, though not always, absent, whereas the storyboard, by contrast, 'clearly shows the relationships between the characters and their environment'.²⁴ These functions mean that not only does concept art rarely attempt the detailed representation of movement, but it also tends to present the setting as neutral, lacking the subjective experience or point of view of particular characters. As Jaspers observes,

The production design outlines the concrete setting of the film, which is created as a set or 'on location' during shooting. It is often very detailed. Presentation usually occurs from a straight-on angle (human eye level), like in stage design, from a neutral, central point of view, which leaves open from which camera angle or camera frame this room will later be captured on film. Actors are usually not included. The production design presents the director with a stage for his story; how s/he explores this stage together with the cinematographer is left to him/her.²⁵

However, characters can also be designed in processes that resemble those of set design, especially in animation. Edwin Lutz, writing in his early study *Animated Cartoons* (1920), hints at the important role played by concept art before the formalisation of storyboarding as a distinct process:

Presuming, then, that the scenario has been written, the chief animator first of all decides on the portraiture of his characters. He will proceed to make sketches of them as they look not only in front and profile views, but also as they appear from the back and in three-quarter views. It is customary that these sketches – his models, and really the dramatis personae, be drawn of the size they will have in

the majority of the scenes. After the characters have been created, the next step is to lay out the scenes, in other words, plan the surroundings or settings for each of the different acts.²⁶

Lutz's emphasis on the development of character and set design, rather than narrative structure, directly corresponds with the function of concept art in live-action film-making. Edward Carrick's 1941 entry in The Studio Publications' 'How To Do It Series', entitled *Designing for Films*, offers the following account of how the production process evolves once the scenario has reached a finished, or near finished, state:

The word 'go' is then given and the art director prepares his sketches and models or has them made for him by a sketch artist and model maker, has them criticized, and then puts in hand-finished drawings and full-size details of each particular object. These drawings are passed on to the departments concerned, i.e. the carpenters, who build the framework of the walls, the doors, windows and other practicals; the plasterers, who surface them with stone, brick or other textures to enrich them with carvings; the painters who pick them out in different colours and age them down; the property rooms, which are responsible for furnishing them.²⁷

In this materially physical and practically applied sense, the boundary between concept art and storyboard illustration is clear.

Again, however, while this linear development – from screenplay to set design to storyboarding to film – may certainly occur, the process often differs in many ways. Concept art, whether created with water-colour, charcoal, or ink pen, may develop in parallel with the storyboard, and while the creation of each develops from an initial story idea, this need not be in the form of a screenplay. As we shall see in later chapters, at a crucial stage in the making of *Gone with the Wind*, for example, it was the storyboards and concept art that formed the template for the production (see Chapter 3), with the screenplay – as is often the case – in a state of flux; while for *Jurassic Park* (1993), the storyboards for key scenes preceded the writing of the screenplay altogether (see Chapter 6). Moreover, the concept art and the storyboard can exert influence on each other: a specific graphic detail communicated through the concept art might require the storyboard to be drawn in a certain way, while the staging defined in a storyboard sequence might prompt a return to the concept art to explore alternate stage designs.

Today, digital processes are enabling all aspects of film-making – from pre-production to post-production and everything in between – to interact with one another, although the roles of concept art and storyboarding remain conceptually distinct, serving to refine graphic design and narrative design, respectively. Within animation, as Tony Tarantini demonstrates, the role of concept art (which he refers to as ‘Design’) and that of the storyboard develop in parallel across ‘Traditional Process’ animation, ‘3D Animation’, and ‘Flash Animation’.²⁸ While the ‘Storyboard’ link in Tarantini’s flow charts remains a constant connective element in terms of story development from ‘Idea’ through to ‘Animation’, the ‘Design’ linking stage in ‘3D Animation’ understandably facilitates additional layers of planning around activities such as ‘Color & Texturing’, ‘Modelling’, and ‘Rigging’.²⁹ Critically, while both sets of documents – concept art and the storyboard – remain in flux throughout production, it is much less likely that the concept art will have significant editorial changes made to it, or will be expected to serve as an up-to-date record of the production as it develops. The storyboard, by contrast, frequently fulfils such functions, serving as a constantly evolving production bible.

This is not say that the storyboard necessarily remains a physical object in today’s creative industries. In many cases, storyboarding, much like many other film-making processes, is now entirely digital – drawn directly onto a digital tablet with a stylus and reviewed on screen, either by an individual working on a computer or by a group viewing via a projector. This digital workflow carries a number of benefits, such as quicker and easier file sharing between remote studio locations via a secured network,³⁰ and rapid review via the ‘slide showing’ of storyboard images in a consecutive manner, thereby potentially reducing the need to wait for an animatic to be edited together.³¹ (In an animatic, all the storyboard panels and available sound assets are edited together to form a rough approximation of the intended sequence/film, typically used to review action, continuity, narrative, and timing before production begins.) Although this represents a radical shift in the materiality of the storyboard, however, its functionality remains relatively unchanged.

While these differing functions within production remain clear, the researcher encountering the images ‘on the page’ and after the fact may discover problems of identification, cataloguing, and taxonomy. Despite the distinctions drawn above, in individual cases the visual characteristics of concept art and storyboards may be difficult to distinguish one from the other: each may take the form of a