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Some attitudes and trajectories in screenwriting research

ABSTRACT

An edited extract from a keynote address at the third Screenwriting Research Network conference, 'Screenwriting Research: History, Theory and Practice', at the University of Copenhagen in 2010,¹ this piece focuses on what I have termed the 'object problem' in screenwriting research. I pay specific attention to how we might address the object problem by thinking about different attitudes and trajectories in screenwriting research.

Screenwriting is difficult to pin down as an area. It is also difficult to identify an object of screenwriting. In *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice* (2009), I elaborate upon this 'object problem':

Screenwriting is not an 'object' in any straightforward sense: it is a practice, and as such it draws on a set of processes, techniques, and devices that get arranged differently at different times. While this arrangement relates to what can be seen as an 'object' – say a script or a film – it is not clear that either the script or the film is best treated as an object in this context: scripts are in transition all through film production, they vary in

KEYWORDS

object problem
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1. 'Screenwriting Research: History, Theory and Practice'. The third Screenwriting Research Network conference, University of Copenhagen, 9–11 September 2010.

2. To complicate matters further, the *politique des auteurs* could also be classed as a restorative approach of sorts, as it seeks to restore the cinematic dimension of filmic expression. It could also in this sense be seen as evangelistic (see discussion below).

form and function and across different modes of filmmaking; and films are more than final products or outputs that only exist at the end of the process.

(Maras 2009: 11)

The book proposes and explores a 'discourse' approach that does not solve the object problem but does allow us to clarify it, to focus on it more carefully, and to look at particular discourses and how they construct screenwriting.

Here, I intend to address the object problem slightly differently, this time in respect to screenwriting research as an area. Many fields of study grapple with object problems to some degree (although perhaps not as acutely as screenwriting research). Rather than excise or banish the instability of the object, we can be more careful about understanding and articulating different approaches to screenwriting research, and the object relations they represent or imply. I want to tackle this goal in two ways: first by identifying four general attitudes that exist in screenwriting research, and second by mapping some different trajectories of screenwriting research.

FOUR ATTITUDES: RESTORATIVE, EXEMPLIFICATION, EVANGELICAL AND DESCRIPTIVIST

Turning to the attitudes, I do not claim to capture the style of every study in screenwriting research. But the four below are common enough to deserve highlighting.

The first attitude links screenwriting to a framework of righting wrongs. The critic takes up the cause of screenwriting or the screenplay in order to rectify the marginalization of screenwriting, or the allocation of authorship to director and not writer, for instance. I call this a *restorative* approach. This approach can form a reaction to literary studies, or the politics of the studio system, or the auteur theory.²

A second kind of attitude is that of *exemplification*, where the critic takes up the screenplay as a perfect exemplar of the postmodern text (see Kohn 2000), or the multiple-author text, or the multi-versioned text. What these two attitudes have in common is a sense that the problems they express can predetermine the field or space of screenwriting, even if they lead to different ways of thinking about screenwriting. Exemplification, by definition, involves a determining 'template' according to which the object is explored. The restorative attitude, similarly, pre-oriens the research around a gap, lack or marginalization that needs to be addressed.

A risk for both approaches is an over-determined perspective. Take the case of how a restorative perspective might engage with the *politique des auteurs*, and the latter's placing of cinema or *mise-en-scène* in opposition to the literary (Truffaut 1976). Astruc concludes, 'This of course implies that the scriptwriter directs his own scripts; or rather, that the scriptwriter ceases to exist, for in this kind of film-making the distinction between author and director loses all meaning' (Astruc 1968: 22). From the surface this can be constructed as a marginalization of screenwriting and writing. But it does not necessarily hold that interpretation, and in Astruc's case his comments are tied to the emergence of a new form of expression and writing.

A sense of grievance can linger with the restorative approach, which can lead to an overemphasis on the invisibility and exploitation of the writer in the studio system, and a reliance on particular historical references that support this perspective. While the main defining characteristic of the restorative attitude is rectifying an unfair state of affairs, I am trying to capture an aspect that is more directly linked to the idea of 'restoration': this has to do with the way this attitude seeks to restore screenwriting or the screenwriter to a particular place or position. This attitude has therefore a deep investment in a particular order or regime of knowledge. That said, the restorative project can be linked to an important political move in screenwriting research, which is to give justice to the practice and the form by addressing silences or absences in literary, narratological and even film studies discourses. It can be an important part of taking screenwriting seriously, of contesting the construction or hijacking of screenwriting in particular debates, and of beginning the process of speaking about screenwriting research on its own terms rather than have it 'spoken for' by other approaches and disciplines.

The third attitude is *evangelical*, where the critic advocates or preaches a conversion in theory and/or practice. I am thinking of my own call for a pluralistic approach to scripting (Maras 2009: 170–186). Central to this attitude are questions to do with the relationship of screenwriting research to script practice. As Ian Macdonald notes,

Screenwriting is now a broader academic subject than the industrial process of the same name, and it involves approaches ranging from the sociological to the psychological. But the realization that there is more to the screen idea than scriptwriting has caused its own problems for academics [...]

(Macdonald 2010a: 8)

Between the theoretical, academic and creative possibilities of the area and the industrial processes that might define mainstream practice, there is potential for evangelizing.

Once a disjunction between the creative possibilities of the screen idea and industrial processes of scriptwriting is conceded there arises a philosophical debate. The argument is between a 'correspondence' theory of truth that might say what happens in real scriptwriting is key or primary, and a 'constructivist' approach that says industrial processes do not in themselves deserve any specific privileging. The correspondence theory will put actual or industry practice over discourse; the constructivist or constitutive approach will see practice as formed in and bound to discourse, and question the construct of industry in relation to different ways of working.

A final attitude is the *descriptivist* or *nominalist* attitude that will focus on different configurations of writer–director relationships and collaborative arrangements. This approach is important to establishing the diversity of practices that define screenwriting, but it can turn into a catalogue of alternatives and different ways of doing things that does not always connect to the politics of the totality. This attitude could do more to address the 'so what?' question that haunts all research, and connect its descriptions to transforming our idea of the dominant approach, open up a new approach to writing for the screen, or provide historical and contextual insights beyond the specific practices being considered.

MAPPING TRAJECTORIES

Moving to the next task, there are some dominant approaches or trajectories of screenwriting research that can be mapped out. Without some sense of these we risk ignoring a scholarly heritage, conducting our research in neglect of earlier conversations and research. Screenwriting research is a relatively new area, but it is not, and arguably never has been, a completely vacant field, and I want to suggest that there are some distinct research frames in play.

Of course, any mapping is potentially controversial. Every screenwriting researcher could come up with a different map. Some will prefer a division of screenwriting research according to subject, genres or areas of practice (animation, documentary, horror, etc.). Some will define it according to actual practice, others a theoretical perspective (thus opening up a possible tension between 'research into screenwriting' as a strict examination of concrete, actual practice, and 'screenwriting research' as the broader, critical examination of the field and what is possible). Some may even reject mapping as a closing of the field and will insist on inter-disciplinarity and diversity of perspectives as a priority.

Here, I want to identify seven trajectories of screenwriting research:

1. Formalist
2. Narratological
3. Stylistic
4. Historical
5. Industrial/Institutional
6. Conceptual
7. Practice-based

Some caveat remarks at this point. The intention here is towards definition and articulation rather than reductionism and imperialism. The 'territory' of screenwriting research is not fixed, but developing with particular concepts and ideas. There are some overlaps in these trajectories so it is not a strict taxonomy; historically some grew out of others, and different writers cross-over. Finally, in discussing these trajectories, and in the space available, I mention some theorists but cannot encompass all of them, so there will inevitably be some omissions.

1. *Formalist*. This trajectory debates the nature of the script, how it is used and its purpose. Some of its key figures are Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov and Osip Brik, but arguably it has a second phase in the structuralist/materialist film experimentation of the 1970s (Gidal 1976), which inherits the focus on devices, and problematizes the place of the script by refusing to see the film as a traditional vehicle of 'representation' and narrative. Andrei Tarkovsky's *Sculpting in Time* (1986) is perhaps the most recent significant publication in this trajectory, fusing a formalistic consideration of *mise-en-scène* with a conceptual reflection on the screen idea. This trajectory considers what constitutes the script, as well as the distinction between literary versus filmic *material*, and the cinematic aspects of film. Although philosophical in tenor, it is marked by a prominent investment in practical problems, and thus links to practice-based research (see below). In some respects this trajectory also overlaps with and is perhaps superseded by the stylistic trajectory (such as in the work

of Béla Balázs), as well as the narratological and conceptual strands. But its ongoing relevance can be discerned around problems to do with the ontology of the screenplay (Pasolini 2005), realization of the idea, and literariness.

2. *Narratological*. The key focus in this trajectory is on practices of structuring, plotting and genre in relation to story, and as such it is currently perhaps the most dominant strand of research, encompassing a range of early figures from Aristotle to Epes Winthrop Sargent (1914) and Frances Taylor Patterson (1921), to Syd Field (1994), to the narrative studies of Kristin Thompson (1999). This trajectory has numerous and diverse threads, however, including the three-act structure (Field 1994; Aronson 2000); genres of novel and film (Dancyger and Rush 1995; Morrissette 1985; Bluestone 1957); film narration, story/plot dynamics and classical narrative (Bordwell 1985); narrative theory (Barthes 1974, 1977); character (Seger 1990); myth and archetype (Campbell 1988; Vogler 1988); and screenwriting and oral traditions (Ganz 2010). It mines a link between screenwriting, broader storytelling and dramaturgical techniques, and scholarly narrative theory of a kind that is mainstream in film and literary theory (Chatman 1978). Because of the dominance of 'screenplay gurus' in the area, this trajectory can be characterized by tensions between 'academic' and 'practitioner' perspectives. Intertextuality and adaptation also form important concepts, given the focus on these terms over the past 30 years in literary and film studies.
3. *Stylistic*. This trajectory is related to, but distinct from, the narratological because of its focus on the creation of language effects in writing. It thus relates to modes of reading and communication. Often linked to textual form and analysing the screenplay (Nelmes 2011), it encompasses the place of words and images in script documents (Millard 2006, 2010), and changing requirements of the format. Other key figures include Pier Paolo Pasolini (2005), Richard Corliss (1972, 1974), Claudia Sternberg (1997), Jeff Rush (see Rush and Baughman 1997), Ian Macdonald on the 'English Style' in silent screenplays (2009), and Steven Price (2010). Price's work is a noteworthy and significant contribution in this context because of the way it builds on Sternberg's earlier work, and travels across the narratological, stylistic and formal trajectories in a unique way. It also gives greater emphasis to stylistic and formal concerns than to mainstream narratological concerns such as structure and character.
4. *Historical*. The historical trajectory ranges widely across business history (Hampton 1970); biographical and first-person accounts (Brownlow 1968); craft history (Jacobs 1939); revisionist film history focusing on mode of film practice and mode of production (Staiger 1979, 1980, 1983, 1985); and institutional labour struggles (Wheaton 1973; Ceplair and Englund 1980). Formal work in the historiography of screenwriting includes the key pioneering works by Richard Corliss (1972), Edward Azlant (1980) and Tom Stempel (2000), but also work on women screenwriters (McCreadie 1994; Francke 1994), and literary history by Richard Fine (1993). There is also significant work on different national contexts: Andrew Spicer (2007), Ian Macdonald (2004a, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011) and Jill Nelmes (2010) on British screenwriting; Janet Staiger and Patrick Loughney (1997) on the United States; Raija Talvio (2010) on Finland; Eva Novrup Redvall on Denmark (2010); Stuart Cunningham (1987) on early Australian scenario writing; and Isabelle Raynauld (1997) on early French cinema.

5. *Industrial/Institutional*. Although a focus of several historical studies (Epes Winthrop Sargent, Benjamin Hampton, Lewis Jacobs), this forms a research trajectory in its own right, at the centre of which is seminal work on the script as blueprint and division of labour in the studio concept by Janet Staiger (1985). Also included here, however, is work on early film (Loughney 1997); the theory/funding nexus (Sainsbury 2003); the high-concept film (Wyatt 1994); pedagogy/curriculum (Macdonald 2001); and the film school (Geuens 2000; Redvall 2010).
6. *Conceptual*. The conceptual trajectory focuses on the status of ideas in production and project development. From early work by Edward Azlant on narrative design (Azlant 1980), to a focus on the development of the screen idea (Macdonald 2004a) and the work of the 'screen idea work group' (Macdonald 2010b), this trajectory also explores collaboration between different screen workers, and different forms of expression and composition (Carrière 1995; Millard 2010).
7. *Practice-based*. Rather than define this trajectory simply by the use of interviews or quotes by film workers, this trajectory relates to the growing recognition of practice-based inquiry as a research method. Because it is an approach as much as a subject, practice-based research crosses over regularly into other trajectories of screenwriting research. It is often characterized by the focus on particular case studies of key practitioners, or first-hand case studies. Its significance in this area relates to the fact that screenwriting research is often done by individuals who span both practical and academic expertise. Key examples include theorization of practice by Millard (2006) and Nelmes (2010), and perhaps even earlier work by Dudley Nichols (1942) and Osip Brik (1974, first published in 1936).

By proposing these seven trajectories, my intention is to help make sense of a burgeoning and growing area. Hopefully they are not too specific or too narrow, keep different options for screenwriting research open, and also keep it in touch with disciplinary issues and broader trends in the humanities. These research paths could inadvertently form the basis of a border-patrolling project, but this is to miss the point as, first, the aim is to recognize the depth of work already being done in screenwriting research and, second, to identify the threads that link screenwriting research to a range of theoretical formations and broader trends in scholarship.

That said, my proposed research trajectories enact a complex 'balancing act' in relation to particular ideas or approaches, and three are worth mentioning. While *adaptation* could be put forward as a trajectory in its own right, I link it primarily to intertextuality and the narratological dimension. However, adaptation can also usefully be explored via the conceptual, stylistic and practice-based trajectories, which informs my decision not to place it in a separate trajectory. Similarly, *feminist* and *postcolonial* approaches focusing on different cultures of film and screenwriting are not dealt with in separate trajectories. This is because it is possible to explore all of the trajectories mentioned from feminist and postcolonial perspectives, and I do not wish to presume to be prescriptive (but nor do I wish to be indifferent).

Screenwriting and the production of screen textualities is a fascinating area, and it is inevitable that researchers from many different backgrounds will (and should) engage with screenwriting. As such, it is important to acknowledge that screenwriting research has no particular monopoly on

screen texts or production documents as objects of research, and that a sociology or anthropology of screenwriting is entirely feasible – although I would suggest that if this were to develop, it could fit into a trajectory of established sociological or anthropological research, or the emergent domain of screenwriting research, or cross both domains. It is an endemic problem of any mapping that the territory can extend beyond the map, and faced with such issues my inclination would be to follow the work and the concepts and see whether the current trajectory evolves, or a new trajectory emerges.

Of these seven trajectories I specifically want to focus on the industrial/institutional area, because this strand represents some specific challenges (and also because it forms a latent aspect of my own work on screenwriting discourse). In some respects, this trajectory of screenwriting research is connected to production analysis (see Newcomb and Lotz 2002: 62). Tied to a shift away from audience studies in media research, production analysis goes beyond generalizations about the (mass) production process to seek significance in variations of production routines. It draws on a multi-layered analytical approach (incorporating the study of political economy, industrial contexts, particular organizations and individual programmes) to tease out forces of standardization and differentiation. Given the importance of processes of scripting to the creation of media fictions (and non-fictions), screenwriting research can bring a specific focus to such studies. It can extend our understanding of industries and institutions beyond an abstract and sometimes functionalist understanding of relative autonomy of media workers and systems of influence, by unpacking the identity and politics of screenwriting practice and writing for the screen at different times and in different contexts.

We have some studies in the industrial/institutional area, focused on some institutions. Labour has been a strong focus (Conor 2010; Staiger 1979, 1983). But to my knowledge we do not yet have a fully developed, whole-of-institution analysis focused on screenwriting practice, and competing definitions of story and writing for the screen. It may be that this approach is not ideal for all film cultures, and I come from a particular context (Australia) where government funding is essential to the making of many films.

Of special interest in this area is the funding/theory nexus: namely how aesthetic theories and judgements contribute to industrial decisions and shape screen culture (Maras 2009: 25). But while it is possible to identify examples of how the funding/theory nexus operates to narrow down conceptual possibilities (see Millard 2010: 12; Castrique 1997), institutional analysis raises a wider set of considerations about 'gatekeeping' and how it operates, of a kind that perhaps journalism and media studies have taken further (see Gans 1979).

What can institutional analysis focused on screenwriting provide? I have already indicated how it might extend production analysis. Screenwriting is clearly central to the life of media fictions, but the debates and issues surrounding it are (as screenwriting researchers have shown) far from settled. Additionally, institutional/industrial perspectives could connect screenwriting research more centrally to screen culture debates, and provide a better account of how screen culture operates in different parts of the world. Redvall's work on Denmark, Talvio on 1930s Finland, Raynauld on France, and J. J. Murphy's work on the independent US scene (2010) represent welcome contributions.

3. In terms of developments in the area of industrial/institutional perspectives, see Macdonald's engagement with Bourdieu, especially his use of Bourdieu to talk about *doxa*, the common understanding of how 'it' is supposed to work (or not) (Macdonald 2004b, 2009, 2010). The relevance of Bourdieu's work to screenwriting research, and the limitations of his field theory, especially in respect to the autonomy of the field (Bourdieu 2005), is still being determined.

What would institutional analysis focused on screenwriting look like? It would tease out to a greater extent the organizational context of decisions, and the forms of knowledge, power and judgements involved. It would provide a sense of *discourse in action*. That is, it would show how different concepts and theories of screenwriting circulate and become part of the norms of an institution, and part of the internalized sense-making activities of an organization, and then go beyond this to provide an understanding of screen culture and the broader context of media consumption and reception. This is an aspect of institutional analysis that is still nascent – evaluating institutional accounts against the films produced.

An institutional analysis needs to go beyond craft tensions and resentments, and get to the foundational questions of what form of practice is at stake, what 'logic of practice' is in play (Bourdieu 1990),³ what kind of writing for the screen, what conception of story, and whether screenwriting is an autonomous area in the production process. The choice of institution is key here, and at the moment we have some interesting preliminary studies on the assessment of creative screenwriting in Higher Education (Macdonald 2001) focusing on standards and norms, and the balance between skills and theory base. The work of Jean-Pierre Geuens (2000), Macdonald (2004b) and Redvall (2010) suggests film schools as an interesting institutional context. Similarly, funding bodies and their processes could be very promising sites of research.

While I value all of the trajectories of research discussed above, clearly the narratological approach is in ascendance. Yet the industrial/institutional trajectory has an important role to play in providing a more nuanced, material and institutionally aware account of screenwriting research that connects it to wider screen culture, rather than treating it as a separate area. This in turn will influence how screenwriting research takes on the task of situating itself on the wider stage of the humanities and social sciences.

As the above hopefully demonstrates, the 'object problem', while representing a real challenge for screenwriting research, should not be constructed solely in negative terms. Each of the trajectories explained above highlights an important dimension of the screenwriting enterprise, and the interaction between them points to an important multidimensional aspect that screenwriting researchers must adapt and respond to. The best response to the object problem is not to get rid of it – it is too generative and fundamental – but to articulate more clearly specific attitudes and strands of screenwriting research and build on those.

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