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The Ontology and Literary Status of the Screenplay: The Case of »Scriptfic«

Abstract: Are screenplays – or at least some screenplays – works of literature? Until relatively recently, very few theorists had addressed this question. Thanks to recent work by scholars such as Ian W. Macdonald, Steven Maras, and Steven Price, theorizing the nature of the screenplay is back on the agenda after years of neglect (albeit with a few important exceptions) by film studies and literary studies (Macdonald 2004; Maras 2009; Price 2010). What has emerged from this work, however, is a general acceptance that the screenplay is ontologically peculiar and, as a result, a divergence of opinion about whether or not it is the kind of thing that can be literature.

Specifically, recent discussion about the nature of the screenplay has tended to emphasize its putative lack of ontological autonomy from the film, its supposed inherent incompleteness, or both (Carroll 2008, 68–69; Maras 2009, 48; Price 2010, 38–42). Moreover, these sorts of claims about the screenplay’s ontology – its essential nature – are often hitched to broader arguments. According to one such argument, a screenplay’s supposed ontological tie to the production of a film is said to vitiate the possibility of it being a work of literature in its own right (Carroll 2008, 68–69; Maras 2009, 48). According to another, the screenplay’s tenuous literary status is putatively explained by the idea that it is perpetually unfinished, akin to a Barthesian »writerly text« (Price 2010, 41).

Contemporary theorists interested in the screenplay as a potential literary form thus face three interrelated questions – one about the screenplay’s ontology, one about its literary status, and one about the methodology of theorizing the screenplay (both with specific regard to ontology and literary status, but also more broadly): (1) Are we to proceed in our theorizing under the assumption that the screenplay is, as the current theoretical trend suggests, ontologically mysterious – something that essentially lacks autonomy from the film (despite appearing to be textually instantiated) or is essentially incomplete? (2) Are we to proceed in our theorizing under the assumption that the screenplay’s literary status is somehow problematized by its ontological nature – by the kind of thing it is essentially? (3) Is our theorizing about the screenplay – specifically in terms of (1) and (2) but also more broadly – to be constrained by our actual creative and appreciative practices? Most proponents of the recent theoretical trend I describe

would, I think, answer »Yes« to all three questions. However, I want to argue that answering »Yes« to (3) obligates us to answer »No« to (1) and (2).

This essay examines a kind of fan-fiction work – »scriptfic« – as a case study for analysing and evaluating current theories of the screenplay. In the first part of the essay, I briefly describe the practice of writing »scriptfic« and the sorts of screenplays produced by that practice. In the second part of the essay, I argue that a particular sort of »scriptfic«, the virtual series screenplay, not only shows that extant accounts of the screenplay as essentially linked to a screen work or as essentially unfinished fail, but furthermore that our theorizing must be constrained by our actual creative and appreciative practices.

»Scriptfics« may take the form of feature length screenplays, one-off teleplays, or an entire »series« constituted by teleplays. The latter, which are known as »virtual series«, will be my focus here for challenging some of the prevailing ideas about the nature of the screenplay and its literary status. Roughly, a virtual series is a web-based, fan-authored television series that »airs« in the form of uploaded texts that usually either present an entirely original narrative (original virtual series), continue the storyline of an actual television series that has ended (virtual continuations), or use certain elements of an actual series as jumping-off points to tell an original story (virtual spin-offs).

My central argument is that if the goal of theorizing the screenplay is to actually explain the evidence supplied by our practices, then theories that involve ontological claims about the screenplay's putative lack of ontological autonomy from the film and/or inherent incompleteness must be abandoned. I shall argue that virtual series traffic in screenplays that are ontologically autonomous works that have been finished by their authors in just the ways these theories claim they are not. If this is right, it follows that such accounts of the screenplay's ontology *do not* in fact offer reasons or explanations for denying that screenplays can be literature. This is because ontological claims are claims about the *essential* features of a given kind – that is, the features that the kind has *of necessity*.

Virtual series screenplays offer strong evidence, I submit, that practitioners determine the boundaries of our screenplay concept, that our screenplay concept has changed over time, that we are now in an historical moment when some screenplays are complete, autonomous works, and that we are also now in an historical moment when some people write screenplays with the intention of creating literature while certain communities of readers appreciate them as such.

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1 Introduction

Are screenplays – or at least some screenplays – works of literature? Until relatively recently, very few theorists had addressed this question. Thanks to recent work by scholars such as Ian W. Macdonald, Steven Maras, and Steven Price, theorizing the nature of the screenplay is back on the agenda after years of neglect (albeit with a few important exceptions¹) by film studies and literary studies (Macdonald 2004; Maras 2009; Price 2010). What has emerged from this work, however, is a general acceptance that the screenplay is ontologically peculiar and, as a result, a divergence of opinion about whether or not it is the kind of thing that can be literature.

Specifically, recent discussion about the nature of the screenplay has tended to emphasize its putative lack of ontological autonomy from the film, its supposed inherent incompleteness, or both (Carroll 2008, 68–69; Maras 2009, 48; Price 2010, 38–42). Moreover, these sorts of claims about the screenplay's ontology – its essential nature – are often hitched to broader arguments. According to one such argument, a screenplay's supposed ontological tie to the production of a film is said to vitiate the possibility of it being a work of literature in its own right (Carroll 2008, 68–69; Maras 2009, 48). According to another, the screenplay's tenuous literary status is putatively explained by the idea that it is perpetually unfinished, akin to a Barthesian »writerly text« (Price 2010, 41).²

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¹ For example, Sternberg 1997; Kohn 2000; Korte/Schneider 2000.

² Although I lodge some criticisms of these views in what follows, for a broader discussion and more sustained critique, see Nannicelli 2013.

On my view, which follows the work of philosopher Amie Thomasson (2005; 2007), our theorizing about the ontology of the screenplay is strictly constrained by our creative and appreciative practices because it is those practices that actually determine the screenplay's ontological status (Nannicelli 2013). This is a very strong version of what we might call a »pragmatic constraint« (Davies 2004, 16–24), but one need not accept it to acknowledge that our theorizing ought to be constrained by our practices to *some* extent. For example, a more moderate version of such a constraint, which I imagine that most theorists would accept, suggests that the point of our theorizing is to accurately, comprehensively, and coherently explain the evidence presented by our practices. On this view, a theory of the screenplay that does not account for all our practices related to the creation, use, and appreciation of screenplays is either incomplete or flawed, and it needs to be modified or discarded.

Another way of putting it is that our theories, especially our theories about the ontology or the fundamental nature of cultural practices and the products thereof, ought to be able to handle counterexamples posed by our actual practices. In particular, theorists who claim the screenplay is not literature because of the kind of thing it is need to account for or explain away the fact that some screenplays indeed seem to be created and read as if they were literary works. Well-known examples of such screenplays that are commonly appreciated as literature and seem to have been created with the relevant sorts of artistic intention include Samuel Beckett's »Film« screenplay, Carl Mayer's screenplay for *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), Marguerite Duras's screenplay for *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), and Harold Pinter's »Proust Screenplay«. Thus far, however, theorists who have suggested the screenplay's ontology indicates it is not literature have yet to account for such examples.

One of the aims of this article is to suggest that these screenplays are not isolated instances of screenplay-literature. Rather, there is a growing cluster of creative and appreciative practices that has emerged around web-based fan fiction in screenplay form. »Scriptfics«, as they are called, may take the form of feature length screenplays, one-off teleplays, or an entire »series« constituted by teleplays. The latter, which are known as »virtual series«, will be my focus here for challenging some of the prevailing ideas about the nature of the screenplay and its literary status. Roughly, a virtual series is a web-based, fan-authored television series that »airs« in the form of uploaded texts that usually either present an entirely original narrative (original virtual series), continue the storyline of an actual television series that has ended (virtual continuations), or use certain elements of an actual series as jumping-off points to tell an original story (virtual spin-offs). In one sense, virtual continuations and virtual spin-offs are nothing new. Looking to the typology of ways fans can rewrite television shows that Henry Jenkins developed in his seminal study of fans and participatory culture, we can see that virtual continuations and virtual spin-offs fit neatly into

two categories: »Expansion of the Series Timeline« and »Refocalization« (1992, 162–177). However, the important difference for the present purpose is that many virtual series »air« in the form of screenplays (or, more specifically, teleplays).³

Undoubtedly, some fan fiction screenplays were written and distributed in fan-zines before the advent of the Web.⁴ However, my research indicates that communication via the Web has allowed virtual series writers to form highly organized online communities, or virtual »networks«, where their scripts are increasingly visible and popular.⁵ Typically, these virtual networks »air« virtual continuations and virtual spin-offs, but some also »air« original virtual series. A member of one of the most popular virtual networks, MZP-TV, explains:

A »Virtual Series« is an episodic television show that airs, not over the airwaves, but over the Internet. A »VS« is usually written in script format (the same format that actual TV shows are written in) and posted as PDFs or HTML. Each episode is uploaded and aired weekly, unless stated otherwise [...] »Virtual Continuations« [are] series that follow on from real TV shows, usually ended ones [...].

(Rooney, n.d.)

Together, these three varieties of virtual series (original, continuation, and spin-off) constitute a new way of writing and reading screenplays that has serious implications for our work as theorists.

Specifically, my central argument is this: If the goal of theorizing the screenplay is to actually explain the evidence supplied by our practices, then theories that involve ontological claims about the screenplay's putative lack of ontological autonomy from the film and/or inherent incompleteness must be abandoned. I shall argue that virtual series traffic in screenplays that are ontologically autonomous works that have been finished by their authors in just the ways these theories claim they are not. If this is right, it follows that such accounts of the screenplay's ontology *do not* in fact offer reasons or explanations for denying that screenplays can be literature. This is because ontological claims are claims about the *essential* features of a given kind – that is, the features that the kind has *of necessity*.

In short, if we accept our theorizing to be constrained by our practices in even a minimal sense, then the virtual series implies that for screenplay theory to move

³ Fans seem to agree that virtual series are usually written in screenplay form, although some are written in prose. For the purposes of ease and clarity, I will always use the terms »virtual continuation«, »virtual series«, and »virtual spin-off« to mean *only* script-based virtual continuations, virtual series, and virtual spin-offs.

⁴ Actual documentation of this is sparse, however. For discussion, see Coppa 2006.

⁵ For broader discussions of the relationship between fan writing and the Internet, see Booth 2010; Hellekson/Busse 2006; Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins 2006b.

forward, we must accept, contra the current theoretical trend, that neither is the screenplay ontologically bound to another work (a film), nor is it essentially unfinished. Instead it appears to be, in at least some cases, an ontologically autonomous, completed work of literature. I wish to emphasize a subtle distinction here: I am not making the argument that virtual series screenplays *are* works of literature in virtue of having *x*, *y*, or *z* feature. Rather, I am arguing against the idea that screenplays are all of a putative ontological kind that precludes them from being literature. I use virtual series screenplays as my example not only because they present a strong counterexample to the ontological characterizations I wish to dispute, but also because if those characterizations are erroneous then it is *possible* screenplays *can* be literature, and virtual series screenplays are good *prima facie* candidates because of the intentions with which they are created and the ways in which they are appreciated.⁶

In what follows, I do two things: First, I adumbrate a rough picture of the virtual series in an attempt to improve our understanding of this sort of screenplay writing (and screenplay reading), which has yet to be analyzed either in fan studies or in screenwriting studies.⁷ Second, I elaborate upon the implications for screenwriting theory that I have just sketched. I conclude not merely with a critique of current scholarship, but with this broader methodological suggestion: If future theorizing of the screenplay is to take a descriptive, bottom-up approach, as I think it should, then it must constantly refine itself because »screenplay« is an historical concept that will continue to change as our screenplay writing and screenplay reading practices do. Thus, my argument here is focused solely upon »scriptfic's« implications regarding the nature of the screenplay and not its relevance to theorizing fan fiction more broadly. While the latter project seems potentially fruitful, it is beyond my purview here.⁸

6 Elsewhere (Nannicelli 2013) I address the question of what specific conditions might be sufficient for a virtual series screenplay (or any other literary work) to be literature, but in this essay my only claim is that the intentions with which these screenplays are both written and read – the informal institution in which they are written and read – makes them good *prima facie* candidates.

7 To my knowledge, the only previous discussion of »scriptfic« is in Coppa 2006.

8 Therefore, I shall not be engaging with the fan studies literature in depth here for two reasons. First, my scope is limited to questions about the ontology of the screenplay and the methodology that screenplay theorizing has taken recently. Second, with the exception of a brief discussion in Coppa 2006, fan studies has yet to address »scriptfic« as a form of writing. Moreover, as Derecho 2006 points out, fan studies tends to study fan fiction as a »cultural phenomenon« to the exclusion of analyzing it as an »artistic practice« (61). Both Derecho 2006 and Wenz 2010 do offer valuable discussions of fan fiction as a literary practice, but unfortunately their articles do not lend support to my argument because my dispute is with those who deny that the *screenplay* (fan-authored or not) is literature. However, perhaps on another occasion, the arguments here could be used to bolster their case.

Before I begin, two brief notes on methodology: First, I hope it will be apparent to readers that my project here is philosophical and my argument is conceptual. Because my aim is primarily to argue against prevailing views about the ontology of the screenplay – views about the screenplay’s essential nature – the relative marginality of the creative and appreciative practices I describe here does not diminish my case. Again, inasmuch as ontological claims are claims about the fundamental nature of things – the properties things have *essentially* in virtue of being of a given kind – the theorists who advance them are obliged to account for *all* instances of the particular kind under analysis. Note that this is not just something I am claiming, but rather is how ontological theorizing is broadly conceived in contemporary analytic philosophy of art (see, e. g., Stecker 2010).

Second, and relatedly, a relatively small »sample size« is sufficient for the purposes of my argument. I researched four virtual »networks«, each of which »airs« multiple series: Triple Five Productions, VBCtv, The Entertainment Network, and MZP-TV.⁹ Of these, I looked most closely at MZP-TV because it is one of the most organized, active, and popular networks. I also examined a number of independent virtual series – those unaffiliated with any virtual »network« – with a particular focus on *Virtual Firefly*. My estimate is that between virtual series affiliated with virtual networks and independent virtual series, I researched close to fifty different virtual series in total. The point to stress, though, is that the methodology here is conceptual analysis, and the existence of *any* »scriptfic« writing practices is sufficient for my critique of prevailing conceptions of the ontology of the screenplay.

2 The Virtual Series: Basics

Because »scriptfic« has been almost entirely ignored in both the fan studies and screenwriting studies literature, it seems worthwhile to describe in some detail what exactly virtual series are before shifting focus to the theoretical implications posed by the screenplays that constitute them. First, original virtual series are, as the name suggests, original works of fiction developed by their creators, show-runners, producers, and/or writers for the purpose of »airing« virtually, via uploaded scripts, rather than being shot. The first question one might have is

⁹ Triple Five Productions is at <http://www.freewebs.com/triplefiveproductions>; VBCtv is at <http://www.vbctv.com>; The Entertainment Network is at <http://www.theentertainmentnetwork.blogspot.com>; Monster Zero Productions is at <http://www.mzp-tv.co.uk>; *Virtual Firefly* is at www.virtualfirefly.net, accessed March 10, 2013.

why, if the virtual series – original or otherwise – is not shot, positions like producer and show-runner exist. In fact, the division of labor in the production of virtual series resembles that of the pre-production of real television series. The actual scripts of individual episodes are usually written by one or two person(s), but they are not necessarily the person(s) whose vision has determined the narrative arc of the episode, let alone how that episode ties into the series' overall story arc. These broader decisions may be made collectively, in meetings of the entire writing staff, but the ultimate responsibility for long-term narrative structural planning belongs to the show-runner, who, in addition to developing the larger arc for a full virtual season or the virtual series as a whole, may also write individual episodes if she so chooses. The executive producer of a virtual series may have a creative function, but is also the person who, along with the show-runner, is responsible for overseeing the entire production of the virtual series and ensuring it »airs« on schedule.¹⁰

The original virtual series has a complex, symbiotic relationship with the other main two types of virtual series – the virtual continuation and the virtual spin-off. It is interesting to note that in principle there is no reason why an original virtual series necessarily needs to have any sort of connection to fandom at all. In practice, however, it is authors of virtual continuations and virtual spin-offs who write original virtual series, and virtual networks tend to use original virtual series to supplement their fan fiction. The largest virtual network divides its programming across two different websites: MZP-TV has one website dedicated to original virtual series and another devoted to »scriptfic«, including virtual continuations and spin-offs of both movies and television programs.

Another interesting point of intersection between original virtual series and fandom – one which offers an in-road to our theoretical concerns – is the fact that original virtual series, as well as virtual continuations and virtual spin-offs, often »cast« actors in the roles of their characters. Usually, this happens in at least one of two ways. The creator of the original virtual series may simply tell the reader whom to imagine in a particular role via a credits page at the beginning or ending of the script. In addition to or instead of a cast list, many original virtual series actually use photographs of real actors and/or celebrities in promotional art to help concretize the image of a character in the reader's imagination. One might also suspect that by using photographs of real actors or celebrities, the creators of

10 In fact, one of the ways in which virtual series writing distinguishes itself from other forms of fan writing is through the set scheduling of virtual shows. Most virtual series »air« on specific days of the week, and some even »air« in specific time slots. See, for example, the calendar at VBCTV, <http://www.vbctv.com/>, accessed January 12, 2013.

virtual series draw upon their star personae to assist in characterization. This does happen, but it is interesting to note that virtual series creators often cast lesser-known actors who do not have particularly robust star personae.

In any event, this practice of »casting« virtual series raises an important question about their authors' intentions: What purpose or function is the virtual series intended to serve? That is, are the casting choices the fanciful imaginings of the writers, or do they reveal substantive intentions that the virtual series may one day be produced as a real series? Although there is little question that, in most cases, the primary intention of original virtual series writers is to create screenplays written for the sole purpose of »airing« virtually, one wonders if some authors might write with a secondary intention that their scripts are eventually used to create works for the screen. Lee Chrimes puts it nicely on his *Somewhere In Between* website: An original virtual series is »a series of episodic screenplays acting for all intents and purposes like an actual TV show, except of course we're not being filmed. Yet!«

This final »yet« perfectly captures what could be safely characterized as the multilayered or shifting intentions of original virtual series writers. A community of readers constitutes their primary audience, and the immediate or primary goal must be to engage with that audience – to offer it some sort of imaginative reading experience that is valuable in its own right. At the same time, however, an original virtual series creator might have the secondary intention of writing a series that she or someone else will film. In actuality, this sort of case is probably quite rare. An amateur production of even twelve episodes of fifty minutes each is barely imaginable. Furthermore, a substantial number of original series writers have, unsurprisingly, aspirations to write for film or television professionally, and many of them know a good deal about the industry. Therefore, they are likely aware that producing a full season's worth of previously written scripts (with the lead roles already cast), let alone by a novice, just isn't done in the television industry.

Nevertheless, it is plausible that some original virtual series writers imagine or hope that at least one of their episodes, maybe the pilot, is read by someone in the industry who recognizes their talent and helps them produce it. In short, there is some remote possibility that at least one episode from an original virtual series gets produced. Consequently, any characterization of original virtual series writers' intentions that we might sketch becomes complicated insofar as those intentions may not *only* be to write screenplays that are just for reading. In fact, I do not think this poses a problem for arguing that original virtual series screenplays are finished, ontologically autonomous works because the fact that the writers have the *primary* intention of creating screenplays that »air« virtually seems sufficient. That is, at least *qua* part of an original virtual series, these screenplays are finished and ontologically autonomous works – even if one wants

to argue that, down the line, *qua* »blueprints« for the production of an actual show, they are not. Nevertheless, to avoid this kind of complication, I now leave original virtual series aside, and focus upon virtual continuations and virtual spin-offs for the purposes of making my central argument.

3 Virtual Continuations and Virtual Spin-Offs

In contrast to original virtual series, virtual continuations and virtual spin-offs are virtual series that are based upon the fictional universes of real television shows. Generally, a virtual continuation picks up a storyline from where it is left when a real series ends, suggesting how things might have happened if the series had continued. For example, *Buffy: The Virtual Continuation* began »airing« on the Monster Zero website shortly after *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB 1997–2001; UPN 2001–2003) ended its run. The creators of *Buffy: The Virtual Continuation* simply picked up where the real *Buffy* left off. They wrote scripts for a virtual Season Eight that they imagined could reasonably follow upon the real Season Seven (and all previous seasons).

A virtual spin-off takes the fictional world of a real television show as its own, but departs from the storyline of the real show in some significant way. One of the more frequent manners in which this departure occurs is through an operation Henry Jenkins has termed »refocalization« – the process by which a fan writer re-centers the emphasis of the narrative away from main characters and onto secondary characters (1992, 165–168). For example, *Faith* is a long-running virtual spin-off that depends upon this notion of refocalization. The character of Faith plays an important part in the Season Three storyline of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but reappears only sporadically in following seasons. The virtual spin-off, *Faith*, takes the fictional world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a starting point, but creates a narrative that focuses primarily on the character of Faith rather than Buffy.

However, as demonstrated by another example of refocalization, *Connor*, virtual series cannot always be neatly classified as either continuations or spin-offs since the boundaries between these two categories are often fuzzy. *Connor* is a sort of hybrid because it continues the storyline ended in *Angel* (WB 1999–2004) – which is itself a *Buffy* spin-off – but also shifts narrative focus from Angel to his son Connor. So although there are some virtual series that fit squarely into the virtual continuation category and some that fit squarely into the virtual spin-off category, others straddle this boundary.

In dealing with such virtual continuation/virtual spin-off hybrids, in particular, it is useful to make a further distinction – which is of especial theoretical importance – between virtual series that could reasonably occur within the

fictional universe of the »canonical works« and those that could not¹¹. For example, *Faith*, *Connor*, and *Buffy: The Virtual Continuation* all share one common feature: »Buffyverse«. The portmanteau, »Buffyverse«, refers to the fictional universe created by Joss Whedon in which *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* are set. Moreover, there is another Whedon universe in which *Firefly* (Fox 2002–2003) and *Serenity* (Whedon, 2005) take place. Typically, virtual series – particularly virtual continuations – based in a fictional world like »Buffyverse« strive to adhere to the internal logic governing that world and attempt to create storylines that cohere with the narrative events that have occurred in the canonical works. Thus, in at least some cases, a virtual series has the possibility, however remote, of becoming an actual series inasmuch as it is consistent with the rules and narrative events of the fictional world in the canonical works. In principle, Whedon could decide to continue *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, starting from Season Eight, by using the scripts written for *Buffy: The Virtual Continuation*. And as long as such a possibility exists, we might wonder how the fan writers of such virtual series intend their scripts to function: Solely as virtual episodes and, thus, as ends in themselves – complete, autonomous works? Or as potential production documents and, perhaps, unfinished drafts?

In some ways, therefore, the most theoretically interesting kind of virtual series is one that departs from the canon in some way such that the writer clearly intends her script *only* as an end in itself. Consider the case of *Virtual Firefly*. *Firefly* was cancelled by Fox in 2003, well before the end of the season. Thus, *Virtual Firefly* was, at first, »dedicated to a ›virtual continuation‹ of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* in the form of scripts of additional episodes« (anonymous). However, the challenge for any *Firefly* continuation is that despite the show's cancellation, the canon has continued to expand through other media platforms. For example, the 2005 film, *Serenity*, picks up the *Firefly* storyline some time after the events of the final episode of the series. Whedon later co-wrote a three-issue comic book series, *Serenity: Those Left Behind*, that focuses on events that occur in the narrative time elapsed between the final episode of *Firefly* and the movie, *Serenity*. In its first season, then, *Virtual Firefly* not only continues *Firefly*, but also incorporates the expanding *Firefly* canon into its ongoing narrative.

At the same time, however, the *Virtual Firefly* writers explicitly recognize that the canon is likely to continue to expand in ways that they cannot predict – and in ways that may diverge from or conflict with events that occur in their virtual series. The creators assert, »We know that Whedon will return to us with another

¹¹ The question of what constitutes a canonical work for fans is interesting, but space does not permit me to address it here.

movie, book, or some other way to continue the tale he started in *Firefly*. Until that time, we'll be here«. (anonymous) Significantly, this admission implicitly accepts the fact that the virtual series will not be the basis for any actual, canonical continuation of the *Firefly* narrative. It also acknowledges that the canon is likely to expand in ways that make the narrative events of the virtual continuation logically impossible. But, it seems, this is orthogonal to the intentions of *Virtual Firefly*'s creators, for whom the »airing« of virtual episodes, rather than the actual filming of screenplays, is the ultimate goal. And it seems plausible that this kind of conception of the virtual series – as an end in itself – is what leads the *Virtual Firefly* authors to rewrite the canon in Season Two, which »is dedicated to exploring the question, ›What would things have been like if Joss Whedon had been able to tell the story of *Serenity* in twenty-two episodes rather than two hours?« (anonymous) That is, Season Two of *Virtual Firefly* rewrites Whedon's film, *Serenity*, as twenty-two virtual episodes – a project whose intended purpose is surely limited to offering a specific community of readers an imaginative experience that is intrinsically worthwhile. Accordingly, fans read and appreciate the screenplays for their own sake, rather than sending them to film studios with pleas that they be produced.

The theoretical implications of the kind of autonomous screenplay writing and reading practices suggested by *Virtual Firefly* are brought into sharpest relief by a similar but more striking example. *Charmed: Reset Reality* is a virtual series that sits uneasily somewhere in between the categories of virtual continuation and virtual spin-off. Because this virtual series picked up the *Charmed* (WB 1998–2006) storyline from a midway point – the end of Season Three – rather than the end point, its narrative was actually at odds with that of the actual television show while it was still airing. A virtual series of this nature – that so radically departs from the fictional reality of the actual television show – is sometimes called an »alternate universe series«, and in fact this is how *Charmed: Reset Reality* is regarded by its creators (Camile n.d.). The very purpose of this virtual series is to relate a counterfactual narrative – one that the actual show did not supply, but that fans would have liked to see. *Charmed: Reset Reality* embraces, then, the impossibility of the virtual becoming the actual. These screenplays are solely intended to be read and discussed amongst a community of *Charmed* fans – not, in any way, to function in a production context, leading to actual television shows. And this is precisely how the screenplays are in fact appreciated: fans read them and enjoy them not as means to a (cinematic) end, but as ends in themselves. Thus, these scripts appear to be finished when their authors upload them to »air« on the Web. Correspondingly, there is no particular film or television show to which they could be ontologically tied.

4 Theorizing the Screenplay

If the screenplays of at least some virtual series are indeed complete (in the sense of being finished) and autonomous (in the sense of not being connected to any particular film), then we ought to deny ontological claims that the screenplay *essentially* lacks these features, as well as claims that these putative ontological facts somehow problematize the screenplay's literary status. Let us take each issue – completion and autonomy – in turn. I cannot here develop or even fully defend an account of work completion, but if one accepts the sort of general pragmatic constraint on our theorizing that I mentioned at the outset, then whatever view we adopt will centrally involve authorial intention. This is because, generally speaking and notwithstanding some important exceptions, our appreciative practices indicate that we normally take authorial intention to be determinative of when a work is finished.¹² The challenge, then, is not to say if completion is intentionally determined, but rather to say more precisely in what way it is. One plausible proposal, advanced by Paisley Livingston, is this:

Roughly put, a work is genetically complete only if its maker or makers decide it is so. Clearly, we do not want to say that any such decision necessarily results in the creation of a work of art, and even less, a good one; the idea, rather, is that such a decision is a necessary condition of the successful completion of a work.

(Livingston 2005, 55)

Such a view of work completion not only lines up nicely with our appreciative practices in a variety of standard cases outside the realm of screenwriting, but also accounts for some of the resistance to the idea that screenplays are complete works. In a number of cases – particularly in the Hollywood studio system – screenwriters do not get a chance to decide that their works are complete. Sometimes, a producer will begin production on a script the screenwriter does not think is finished. In other cases, screenplays are circulated amongst multiple screenwriters, none of whom decides the script is finished. However, in the context of scriptfic, such impediments to the completion of screenplays are absent. Rather, in the case of virtual series screenplays, Livingston's necessary condition for work completion is typically met when the author uploads his or her script to be read.

¹² For the purposes of space, I am putting aside more complex cases and issues such as those discussed in, for example, McGann 1991 and Stillinger 1991. Note however, that in many such complex cases out we face an epistemic problem: How do we know what the author(s)' intentions were and in which text (if any) were they realized? This does not, however, constitute an objection to my ontological claim that it is the author's intentions that are determinative of a work's completion – whether they are discoverable or not.

Thus, the virtual series raises problems for accounts of the screenplay's ontology according to which it is, by its nature, incomplete. For theorists like Steven Price, the putative fact that the screenplay is like a Barthesian »writerly text«, which is endlessly rewritten, explains its tenuous literary status. In Price's words, »Although [the screenplay] is clearly to be differentiated from the Barthesian text, it is still in many respects the contemporary text *par excellence*, and at the very least [Barthes's ›From Work to Text‹] can take us further in distinguishing the screenplay from literature (or ›work‹)« (2010, 41). Of particular relevance here is that, supposedly, »the reader of the screenplay, at least in its industrial context, directly participates in the activity of production and, metaphorically and very often literally, in the ›re-writing‹ of the text« (2010, 41). But Price is not only describing screenwriting in industrial contexts. In a chapter entitled »Ontology of the Screenplay«, he claims of the screenplay's »general condition«, that it is »erased in the process of production, but only partially« (2010, 52). In sum, he concludes, the screenplay's »writerly« nature indicates that »The ›real‹ or ›authentic‹ screenplay is a chimera« (Price 2010, 49). Supposedly, this is what makes the screenplay difficult to pin down as an object of literary appreciation.

Because I offer a sustained critique of this claim elsewhere (Nannicelli 2013; Nannicelli forthcoming), I will raise just a few points here. Note that Price conflates two different senses of rewriting. On the one hand, he likens the screenplay to a Barthesian text in order to suggest it is perpetually rewritten. But invoking Barthes's notion of the writerly text raises two significant problems. First, it falls afoul of our pragmatic constraint and fails to explain the fact that in our standard practices we do not act as if works of literature are writerly texts. Second, even if one rejects the pragmatic constraint and finds Barthes' ideas convincing, the notion of the writerly text does not indicate that the screenplay, in particular, is incomplete because all writerly texts are rewritten. On the other hand, Price is speaking of rewriting as a literal, material process through which screenplays go when in production. This is the only sense of rewriting that would lend real weight to Price's claim that screenplays are incomplete in a specific way – a way that sets them apart from other writerly texts. Suppose for the sake of argument this rewriting process means that no commercially produced screenplay is ever genetically finished in Livingston's sense. If this were true, it would still not give us reason to doubt that virtual series screenplays – completely uninvolved in commercial production and not rewritten in the literal sense – meet Livingston's necessary condition for completion.

Let us now turn to the issue of autonomy. According to the view I am disputing, the screenplay is not an autonomous form in the sense that it is ontologically tethered the production of a particular film. This is *not* the claim, with which I agree (Nannicelli 2013), that a proper readerly appreciation of the screenplay must involve an understanding that its norms and conventions are historically and

industrially situated and, thus, in an important way connected to the institution of filmmaking. Rather, the proposition I find questionable is, as Noël Carroll puts it, that screenplays are »ontologically ingredients in the motion pictures with which they are associated rather than being independent artworks« (2008, 69). According to Steven Maras, »One general problem with the attempt to see the screenplay as a form of literature is that it tends to take the script out of its production context, restrict [its] intermediality and treat it as an autonomous work of art« (2009, 48). For on his account, »the intermediality of the script complicates the extent to which the screenplay can be considered an autonomous form« (Maras 2009, 48). On this view, regarding the screenplay as an independent literary work is to confuse a part of a single work for a distinct work in its own right.

Again, because I have offered sustained criticism of these claims elsewhere (Nannicelli 2011; Nannicelli 2013), I will only make a few brief comments as they pertain to virtual series screenplays. To be fair, Carroll and Maras do not have unproduced screenplays in mind. However, this is part of the point: virtual series indicate that there are relevant screenplay writing and reading practices that take place outside the context of film production. And this demands a subtler understanding of the screenplay's ontology. A plausible theory of the screenplay's ontology must account for screenplays that are written and read both in and out of production contexts. More specifically, when a screenplay is written and read outside of a production context, it cannot be ontologically tied to a distinct work – a film – so regarding it as an autonomous work cannot involve the sort of mistake Carroll and Maras suggest. At best, the films made from screenplays have those screenplays as ontologically dependent constituent parts. But when a screenplay is written and read outside of a production context, there is no particular film to which it could be ontologically connected. In the case of virtual series, the screenplay is the *only* work that is a candidate for appreciation.

A skeptic may here object that virtual series do not traffic in screenplays properly so-called. Is it not the case, an interlocutor might ask, that for something to be a screenplay it must have the intended function of being used to make a film – of suggesting the various constitutive parts (character, dialogue, etc.) of a potential film? In response we could note that, on the contrary, there are some good reasons to think that something need not be intended for production for it to be a screenplay. Consider, for example, television spec scripts. A television spec script is a teleplay for an episode of a popular, currently airing show that an aspiring writer creates and sends around in the hopes that a studio will recognize her talent and hire her. It is a commonplace in the television industry that – unlike in the film industry – television spec scripts are not written with the intention of being sold or produced, but with the purpose of demonstrating a writer's abilities. As the author of a guide to writing for the television industry

puts it, »Its sole purpose is to showcase [one's] writing talents« (Kellison, 2006, 47). Another guidebook summarizes the dilemma of the television spec script writer with bitter humor:

It's a pitiful thing, the episodic spec script. Granted, lots of valuable writing has been done on spec. Almost every first novel. The vast majority of plays. Innumerable great movies. Just about the entire canon of English-language poetry. But all of that work was done with an expectation – or at least a hope – that it would some day find an audience. But an aspiring TV writer who sits down to write a spec episode doesn't have that hope. He's got to know that this script will never be produced [...].
(Goldberg and Rabkin 2003, 31)

The television spec script is indisputably one variety of screenplay, yet the evidence cited above makes it clear that it is a type of screenplay that is not written with the intention of being produced. Therefore, something need not be written with the intention of being produced in order to be a screenplay. Thus, we can meet the challenge that virtual series do not traffic in screenplays properly so-called.

5 The Way Forward

Despite my criticisms of current thinking about the screenplay, I believe that my proposal that we reconceive our theories should appeal to a broad spectrum of scholars. The reason, as I indicated at the beginning, is that what underlies both my critique and call for reconceptualization is a methodological premise that I believe is uncontroversial. To wit, I think that most theorists will accept that the goal of our theorizing is to explain evidence constituted by our practices and artifacts thereof. And if this is our goal, then we need to build our theories from the bottom up, looking at specific practices and instances of screenplays in order to extrapolate plausible general theories.

Furthermore, though, if we take seriously the idea that our theories must attend to what practitioners are doing, we will see that practitioners actually have quite a lot of power. The screenplay is not a natural kind, like water, that has a timeless, mind-independent essence. On the contrary, it is a human artifact – a product of intentional human activity – and, for this reason, it is plausible that practitioners collectively draw the boundaries of the concept (Thomasson 2007). That is, because the screenplay is an artifact, it is plausible that practitioners collectively *determine* what features are relevant to something being a screenplay and, further, have the ability to gradually change what those features are.

If this account of the nature of artifacts is right, it gives us an additional reason to think that the texts involved in virtual series are in fact screenplays properly so-

called: practitioners who have the concept, »screenplay«, are intentionally making objects with *many* of the features relevant to the concept but *a few* features screenplays do not typically have, such that the boundaries of the concept are slightly changed. More generally, this indicates that the boundaries of artifact concepts like »screenplay« are historical in at least a minimal sense. By this I mean that as our practices gradually change over time, so too do the boundaries of the artifact concept. The crucial point is that because our screenplay writing and screenplay reading practices have changed over time (and are *likely* to continue change over time), so too has our concept of the screenplay.¹³ My point in this article has been to show that there are at least some screenplays that are written and read outside of production contexts despite the fact that this has *historically* not been the case, but there are broader implications here. For example, perhaps in the future, practitioners could change the concept of the screenplay such that it is no longer necessarily text-based.

In sum, if our concept of the screenplay is historical in virtue of the fact that its boundaries are determined by human practices, then some important conclusions for theorizing the screenplay follow. In particular, bottom-up theories of the screenplay not only ought to attempt to line up with our practices, but also must pay extremely close attention to those practices and, in particular, changes in those practices. This, I think, is the challenge posed by virtual series: Even if we granted, just for the sake of argument, that *in the past* screenplays were not the sorts of things that could be works of literature, the case of virtual series strongly suggests that our concept of the screenplay has changed relatively recently such that *at present* at least some screenplays are literary works. If the screenplays involved in virtual series (and »scriptfic« more broadly) were not literary works, it would be very hard to explain why their authors write them with such particular attention to artistically relevant features such as careful plotting, the use of imagery, or the deployment of poetic devices like metaphor. Furthermore, it would be even harder to explain why those screenplays are read for their own sake, let alone discussed and evaluated amongst community members.

This does not show, beyond a doubt, that »scriptfics« are works of literature, for, of course, the features relevant for something counting as literature are very much contested. But surely the above-mentioned features characterize much acknowledged literature: the specifics aside for the present purpose, it seems plausible that for a text to be literature, it needs to be written with a certain set of intentions and read in a particular way. And if one will not even accept this broad claim, my

¹³ Note here that this is *not* a teleological argument that supposes there is an inevitable end towards which our practices and our screenplay concept are headed.

argument is still not defeated. For one does not need consensus on literature's definition to plausibly identify a candidate work as literature (Nannicelli, 2013). On the contrary, one may succeed by showing that the candidate work will meet many or most of the commonly proffered characterizations of literature. Thus, if one finds something lacking in my invocation of the intentions of authors and the regards of readers, I would point out that other features of these screenplays could be highlighted to show that they would meet the criteria set forth by his or her preferred characterization of literature.

I would also grant a skeptic that when a screenplay is involved in the production of a screen work, matters are not so straightforward. Even if my arguments about virtual series are good, it will be charged, I have not shown that the arguments regarding the screenplay's putative lack of autonomy from the film or incompleteness fail when it comes to ordinary screenplays in production contexts. In fact, I do meet this challenge elsewhere (Nannicelli 2013), but for the present purpose it is not important that I do. For, as I have been at pains to stress, a theory of the screenplay's ontology is a theory about the kind of thing it is *essentially*, by its very nature. Thus, an ontological theory of the screenplay is not complete unless it accounts for *all* screenplays or is able to explain away contravening evidence and counterexamples.

This, I have argued, is a theoretical issue raised by virtual series screenplays. Virtual series offer strong evidence, I submit, that practitioners do determine the boundaries of our screenplay concept, that our screenplay concept has changed over time, that we are now in an historical moment when some screenplays are complete, autonomous works, and that we are also now in an historical moment when some people write screenplays with the intention of creating literature while certain communities of readers appreciate them as such.¹⁴

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