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### Scriptwriting as creative writing research: a preface

It is an unusual step to publish a collection of unproduced scripts. Rarely, if ever, are scripts treated as texts in their own right and seen as deserving of publication, irrespective of any staging or production. This perceived unpublishable status of unproduced scripts fosters a sense that such scripts are not a suitable focus of scholarly discussion. They are dismissed as somehow amateur or unworthy; this despite the fact that many of the most successful scriptwriters have written at least one script, usually many more, that never ‘made it’ to stage or screen. Are these works somehow less worthy of critical discussion, or weaker examples of the writer’s creative and research processes, than their produced works? I would argue that they are not.

As a creative writer myself, all the textual works that I produce are the result of similar creative and critical processes, from my initial intention to examine a subject or theme to my final draft. This process, with both my fiction and non-fiction work, begins with intent or insight then proceeds to planning, research, discovery (or further insight), writing, reflection, re-writing, and ends with more reflection and then my final edit. Publication is a minor player in this creative and critical process. As Graeme Harper notes about the published works of writers, ‘creative writing does not begin with these works: creative writing does not begin where it ends’ (2012: 1).

If anything, publication has only a slight impact on my relationship to the knowledge that has been explored or produced in those artefacts. Publication disseminates that knowledge, yes, and different knowledges (or meanings, if you will) can be produced by a published text’s readers. This does not mean, however, that these different knowledges about a text that I produced destroy my own knowledge or appreciation of that text. If anything, they validate my knowledge as an equal understanding, in a kind of symphony of knowing. In fact, it is quite often the case that the readers’ understandings of a text that I wrote are much the same as my own. In the end, publication as part of the critical and creative process provides not much more than further opportunities for reflection on the processes and understandings that preceded it.

Despite the clear scholarly value of a creative and critical artefact at all the stages of its existence, the unproduced script is relegated to the margins of both film scholarship and writing scholarship. It is a kind of textual other, the exiled abject of mainstream film and theatre discourse. The reason for this is, to put it simply, the fact that scripts (especially for the screen) are rarely seen as complete creative works but

rather as blue prints for a finished product, which is a film, stage production or television program. This means that, other than in an industry setting, scripts are rarely studied, debated or discussed in their own right. And this is why the term ‘scriptwriting’ is being used instead of screenwriting or playwriting in this special issue. The word ‘script’ emphasises that the texts published here are primarily the artefacts of a writing practice (script comes from the Latin for writing, *scribo*). Also, by not signalling the mode of production or reception (stage, television or cinema), the term ‘script’ hopefully reorients the reader from approaching the text as ancillary to a staged or screened production to understanding it as a finished creative and research work on its own terms.

The notion that scripts are merely blue prints for a later production has informed the way scripts are formatted and, therefore, read. Scripts, when understood as only production blue prints, are seen as technical rather than creative documents. They are seen as akin to an architectural drawing – an illustration and set of instructions enabling the construction of the “true” creation that is the finished building. This has meant that scripts have been required to meet any future production crew’s need for technical information. As a result, the formatting of scripts for both stage and screen is subject to strict industry standards. These standards dictate the size and type of font used, the size, case and position of different elements of text (dialogue etc) and also where and how scene, setting and even story are conveyed.

There is however more than one industry standard. There are different standards for stage and screen scripts, and different standards again for screenplays that are written for cinema as opposed to those written for television. There are also American and British standards that differ significantly. In Australia, commercial screen productions tend to adhere to the American standard whereas non-commercial productions (a script for an ABC teledrama say) often adhere to the British standard. There is also an emerging Australian standard for stageplays. The imposition of these standards on scripts privileges certain kinds of readers, namely industry professionals, over readers who are approaching the script as a text, as a story and a creative work in its own right. This contributes to the lack of attention paid to scripts as stand-alone creative and/or research works.

This is problematic given that these standards have no objective basis. They are merely conventions. There is no substantive reason for stage or screen scripts to be formatted in these highly specific ways. In fact, it has been argued that screenplay formatting in particular is unnecessarily dogmatic (Millard 2009). Take as an example the use of *Courier New* as the only acceptable font for screenplays. The only reason for its initial use appears to be because it was the font used in early twentieth century typewriters when the first studio scripts were being produced. The continued use of this antique font seems to be little more than tradition.

Having said the above, there are some benefits to standardised script formatting – it can facilitate a smoother reading experience after the initial exposure, purely because the formatting becomes familiar. Those of us who read scripts regularly come to focus on their story elements rather than technical instructions such as *INT.* and *EXT.*, which refer to internal and exterior, *CUT TO*, which is a scene transition, or *(V.O.)*

which indicates a voice-over.<sup>1</sup> These technical marks become something like pictographs which we scan for information about time and space, among other things. I like to think of them as temporospatial emoticons; telling me where, when and how things are occurring for the characters. They help to situate the characters, and the readers, in the script's story world.

The scripts included in this special issue do not strictly adhere to either the American or British standard formats for stage, cinema or television. However, they do not completely abandon those standards either. The scripts for the screen (Baker, Batty, Beattie, Joyce & Joyce and Waters) differ from the scripts for the stage (Davis and Hassall) quite simply because they were conceived with very specific spaces and functional possibilities in mind that are different between stages and screens. Each script deviates to a degree from the standards for its genre, and they differ from each other in a number of other ways. Rather than impose yet another standard to this special issue, my co-editor and I chose to allow the scriptwriters the freedom to format their scripts according to their creative vision and their industry (stage and screen) experience. Some of the contributors have experimented with formatting more than others (e.g. Hassall). We have, however, applied some elements from a number of standards, such as the accepted fonts for screen and stage scripts (*Courier New* and *Times New Roman* respectively), to provide some continuity and cumulative familiarity in the reading experience.

Further scholarly and creative work needs to be done to establish a style or format for scripts that are written as stand-alone texts irrespective of production. This work needs to discover and refine a script format, perhaps a hybrid style that accommodates both stage and screen, that is easily readable by a general audience as a text in itself, whilst also retaining its functionality for any future production. This would go some way to improving the likelihood of unproduced scripts securing publication.

The reluctance to publish unproduced scripts means that the study of play scripts is limited to the accepted canon (Shakespeare et al.) and the study of screenplays has been limited to the scripts of mainstream cinema, a corporate and commercial undertaking, which arguably inhibits critical depth and insight in this scholarly enterprise. This means that the dialogue between the academy and the industry on scriptwriting is rather one-way. This is a particular problem with regard to screenwriting. By dint of its near total colonisation of cultural output, the screen industry, which is commercial rather than creative or critical in intent, indirectly determines not only what kind of scripts should be studied in the academy but what kind of scriptwriters universities should produce. Not that the commercial screen industry truly values academic qualifications. They assess prospective scriptwriters by their own measures, which usually means industry experience.

A quick scan of the qualifications of many academics in film-making departments, and particularly those in the USA, reveals a strong focus on industry credentials rather than scholarly or research experience. This has a distinct and visible impact on the kind of scriptwriters rising to ascendancy both in the marketplace and as the focus of academic study. Many of the current generation of scriptwriters seem hypnotised by special effects and the blockbuster aesthetic. Scholarly output seems equally

bedazzled by the blockbuster, with whole anthologies dedicated to commercial film franchises such as *Twilight* (2008) and *The Hunger Games* (2012), but barely a peep on independent – let alone scholarly – scriptwriting.

For me, the only scripts showing innovation and critical insight over the last decade have come from outside the corporate structures of contemporary film and theatre production. These innovative scripts have largely been written by single authors outside of the production machines of studios and major theatre companies and without any promise of production or publication. In other words, they are written ‘on spec’. This Special Issue of *TEXT*, therefore, responds to the challenges faced by academic scriptwriters in inculcating discussion and debate around scripts as creative artefacts or texts in themselves and the difficulties in having ‘spec’ scripts or plays published and counted as research outcomes.

The scripts collected here, although written as creative research and not necessarily for production, are formatted for both stage and screen.<sup>2</sup> They also engage with a range of genres, from wry comedy to experimental performance. The scripts are all shorter works and each demonstrates innovation and excellence in creative writing within the limits of the script format. The scripts also contribute new knowledge (new information, new ways of thinking about a subject or new ways of presenting a subject). This innovation or new knowledge is often in the theme or content that the script presents, but can also be found in the structure of the work. Each script is accompanied by an ERA research statement that makes explicit the script’s relevance as a research outcome. My co-editor, Debra Beattie, provides more detail on this, on the forms the scripts take and the stories they tell, in her critical introduction.

Scriptwriting is a practice. More to the point, scriptwriting is a *writing* practice that deserves scholarly attention. Both academic and commercial scriptwriting have quite distinct approaches. Nevertheless, both foreground collaborative processes to some degree (Maras 2011, 2009). Both also emphasise a reflective relationship with readers/viewers and social and cultural structures (Sawyer 2006). As a collaborative practice, scriptwriting displaces a number of ideas about writing and creativity. Collaborative scriptwriting refuses the notion of authorial integrity and disrupts the idea of ‘authentic voice’ which is often at the heart of the teaching of creative writing. Scriptwriting also displaces the idea that creativity is an internal and individual or solitary process. Academic scriptwriting, though perhaps less collaborative than its commercial counterpart, still entails some collaborative processes. In academia, these usually take the form of seeking comment and feedback from colleagues and the peer-review process. Academic scriptwriting is however different from commercial scriptwriting in that it has a stronger critical research focus and often reflects the distinct vision of a single writer-researcher. Academic scriptwriting is also much more self-reflexive. It is a practice undertaken in the context of a discipline and in ways that mean that the writing is informed more by discipline specific knowledge than by commercial demands or the expectations of wider audiences or readerships. This makes the scriptwriting that occurs within the academy distinct enough to be worthy of study in itself.

## **Equalising playwriting and screenwriting in the creative writing discipline**

For scholarly discussion of unproduced scripts to move out of the margins, there needs to be an acknowledgement that there is no sound reason for dismissing unproduced scripts as objects of study. This is less of a problem with scripts written for the stage (as will be shown below) but remains a significant problem for scripts written for the screen (cinema or television). The simple answer to this problem is for academic scriptwriters to seek publication of their unproduced stage and screen scripts in academic journals, like this special issue.

Whereas journal publication may prove to be a swift solution for writers of stage scripts, it is likely that writers of unproduced screenplays will still be treated as second-class screenwriting citizens. For this to change, we need to recognise that, like playwriting, screenwriting is a creative writing practice and all writing practices are worthy objects of study in the discipline of creative writing. Hopefully, this will also become the norm in such university departments as English and Film and Media.

The bias against the academic study of unproduced screen scripts can only be dislodged by understanding its origin. This lies in the discipline of Film and Television Studies. It is, therefore, worth taking a little time to explore it here. The first thing to note about screenwriting as a field of academic study is that it is surprisingly under explored (Nelmes 2010). Steven Maras has argued that ‘screenwriting research is a relatively new area’ (2011: 278). Ian W MacDonald posits that this is ‘probably due to film academics frying bigger fish, focusing on New Waves, semiotics and male gazes, and only intermittently recognizing a need to consider the formation of the idea for a screenwork as something of interest’ (2010: 7). Another reason for the lack of critical attention to screenwriting is the perception in Film and Television Studies mentioned above, which sees scripts as mere blueprints for films and television programs, and as unfinished and transitional and insignificant in relation to the finished and concrete film or television show (MacDonald 2010). MacDonald notes the marginal position of screenwriting within film and television studies when he writes that it is:

An awkward and peripheral subject ... sidelined because of its problematic relationship to the apparently more concrete final ‘text’ of the film. Considered as rough sketches or the ‘blueprint’, or as incomplete or transitional, who would not look at the script in its various forms as somehow inferior? (2010: 7)

This critical dismissal of screenwriting as a field of study could be seen as a problem of discipline. Film and television studies will always privilege the study of finished films and programs over the study of screenplays. Literature and literary studies also replicates this anti-screenplay bias due to its privileging of published texts (Boon 2008). As noted above, screenplays are rarely published and when they are – as with screenwriters such as Tarantino and Mamet – these scripts are not necessarily the versions used in the film production (Boon 2008). Literature and literary studies do not, however, exclude the study of stageplays, even though the structure of plays (such as the inclusion of stage directions) and their formulaic nature is not substantially different from that of scripts (Boon 2008). In fact, literary scholars ‘generally approach Shakespeare’s plays as written documents, not performances.

That is, the written play is privileged over its performance' (Boon 2008: 30). This privileging of the text over performance makes sense when it is acknowledged that a play can have multiple productions, each staged somewhat differently.

Take as an example the rather diverse stage and screen productions of Shakespeare's plays. Taking screen adaptations of just one Shakespearean play as an example, we can compare George Cukor's 1936 orthodox film rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* to Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 version and, nearly three decades later, Baz Luhrmann's 1996 postmodern adaptation. These films are stylistically very different from each other – and draw out quite different themes from Shakespeare's text – however, they all adhere rather faithfully to the play's structure and core dialogue.

The prevalence of the Hollywood remake is another example of the multiple productions a script or screen idea can have. One such example from my favourite genre, the Southern Gothic, is the number of stage and film productions based on Carson McCullers' play of her novel *Member of the Wedding* (1946). This novel has been adapted many times for the stage, cinema and television. McCullers' own adaptation for the stage opened on Broadway in 1950 and was revived in London in 2007. The first film version – adapted by Edna Anhalt and Edward Anhalt and directed by Fred Zinnemann – was produced in 1952. McCullers' stageplay was then adapted for television in 1982, directed by Delbert Mann. Another film version, adapted by David W Rintels and directed by Fielder Cook, was produced in 1997. It could be said that the script *Member of the Wedding* (1950) has had wider dissemination than the novel.

Given such information, a continued bias against scripts (stage or screen) seems to have no basis. As Boon argues, 'other than the fact that stage plays have existed much longer than scripts, it is difficult to come up with objective criteria that would enable us to embrace one and exclude the other' (2008: 43). William Horne summarises the need for scripts to be studied independently from any film or production based on them when he writes:

There will be no substantive study of the script, until and unless it is afforded its own legitimate aesthetic existence – not merely as a set of interim production notes or as a substitute film – but as a separate work ... it is crucially important that the script be viewed not only as a shooting script but as an independent *text* (emphasis original) (1992: 53).

This discipline bias is, however, not likely to be duplicated in creative writing departments where scriptwriting (for stage or screen) can be taught simply as another writing practice; a practice with the same significance as poetry and fiction writing. In the discipline of creative writing, scripts are approached as independent texts. This attitude in the creative writing domain towards scriptwriting is facilitated by the many similarities between writing for the stage and writing for the screen (Boon 2008). As discussed above, both stageplays and screenplays are texts that have a number of iterations and are no less formulaic than say a sonnet. More to the point, both may (or may not) lead to production or staging and publication (Boon 2008).

In my own experience, I have noted that, for purely practical reasons, creative writing departments often favour published over unpublished scripts. It is, quite simply, easier

to access published works as they are readily available in the marketplace. This inadvertently reinforces the notion that a script is merely a blueprint for the finished work that is the stage performance or screen production. This presents a problem for academic scriptwriters who seek to have their work examined as the artefacts of a writing practice given that commercial publishers require that any script submitted for publication must have been staged or produced at least once. Thus the need for academic journals to step in and provide a venue for the publication of scripts as research outputs, irrespective of production.

Despite this tendency to select readily available or published texts, the lack of production or publication is not necessarily an obstacle in the discipline. The text can still be studied as an artefact that evidences specific creative writing practices that explore specific themes and produces and disseminates new knowledge. Within the discipline of creative writing, it is possible, therefore, to study screen and stage writing as more than a mere blueprint for the 'real' text that is the finished film, program or stage production. When the study of scriptwriting is undertaken in such a way, a script can be studied both as a text in, and of, itself (irrespective of publication or production). Within Creative Writing departments, scripts can also be seen as texts or artefacts that document the practices and investigations that are a part of the writing process itself. Also, scriptwriting as an academic sub-discipline within writing might prove to be a valuable position from which to investigate writing practice as it manifests in the screen and theatre industries, both of which emphasise a more collaborative approach to writing than, say, poetry or fiction. The Creative Writing discipline is also the perfect home for study of scripts that are the research output of writing academics.

Maras (2011) notes that, in the developing field of screenwriting studies, a number of distinct research trajectories are emerging, each with significantly different approaches. One of these research trajectories is that of practice-led research, which Maras describes as relating 'to the growing recognition of practice-based enquiry as a research method' and is often undertaken by 'individuals who span both practical and academic expertise' (2011: 280). So far however, only a handful of scholars, such as Millard (2006) and Nelmes (2010b & 2007), have engaged with scriptwriting as a creative practice. To date, none have engaged with the unique domain that is scriptwriting within the academy, that is, with scriptwriting for both stage and screen as creative research in and of itself, without reference to any existing or possible production. This special issue of *TEXT* addresses that significant gap.

For all the reasons noted above, I would suggest that, currently at least, the study of scriptwriting is better situated within the domain of creative writing than that of film studies or screen production. Creative writing has been a leader in the development of practice-led research and continues to produce outstanding work on the subject (see, for example, Brien 2006; Smith & Dean 2009; Webb & Brien 2011). Thus, the discipline of creative writing is well-equipped to make a foundational and significant contribution to the emerging area of scriptwriting studies by doing what it already does best: privileging scripts as texts in, and of, themselves, as well as artefacts of a creative practice, that produce and disseminate new knowledge.

## Endnote

1. For a glossary of script terminology see the website *Screenwriting Info*: <http://www.screenwriting.info/glossary.php> (accessed 1 September 2013)
2. Some of the scripts have been or will be produced, however this was not the basis of their selection for this special issue.

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