

Notes on a Genre to Come

## screenwriting and the 'thesis-film'

STEVEN MARAS

*After Linda Aronson*

This piece draws together two areas: screenwriting and film or video works (to be jointly referred to as 'films') that explicitly try to undertake a conceptual practice. Conceptual practice is to be understood here not within the exclusive framework of conceptual or abstract art, but of acts and interventions in theory of the kind that crossover between the academy and the broader culture. Interventions of this kind have (especially in the form of the essay film, and films by humanities academics) been a part of Australian screen culture since at least the 1980s. While these interventions may not appear to be central to much cultural studies work, I want to suggest that cultural studies is intertwined with them in at least three ways. First, because while cultural studies takes a variety of forms, one version of it maintains an interest in new kinds of writing, conditions of theory, and intellectual performance. Second, because a crossover exists between innovative film-making and critical/cultural studies, as evidenced in work by Noel King on *My Life without Steve* (Gillian Leahy, 1986) among others.<sup>1</sup> And third, because, as with other areas of academia, the textual and technological conditions of pedagogy and scholarship are changing, including those for the doctorate, in ways which impact on the intellectual and conceptual conditions of cultural studies work. Proposals for non-standard or 'production' PhDs are becoming more common, and at the same time cultural studies will, we assume, continue to engage with new forms of expression.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, rather than focus on a particular genre like the essay film, I want to examine what can be called a 'thesis-film' as a way of shifting the terrain, and addressing the conceptual

issues more directly. At the same time I want to acknowledge that the definition of this ‘object’ is currently being worked out as we go, and that other forms of production PhDs, such as interactive works, are pushing for attention as well.

The combination of screenwriting and thesis-film in this article is an unlikely one in the sense that a divide or stand-off of sorts exists between the way writing for the screen is thought about in screenwriting circles, and an idea of thinking with images that permeates screen culture more widely. This divide is usually looked at in terms of the damaging influence of formulas, or the way thinking about structure forms a normative or myopic way of thinking about film.<sup>3</sup> With a dominant trend being to see script manuals as a kind of blight on film technique, there have been few attempts to engage with the theory of screenwriting on its own terms and see how conceptual practice fits into it.<sup>4</sup> In this piece I use Linda Aronson’s book *Scriptwriting Updated: New and Conventional Ways of Writing for the Screen* as a stepping-off point to consider an uncharted genre that I want to put forward as a new approach to the screen: namely the ‘thesis-film’.<sup>5</sup>

Aronson’s book is one of the first systematic attempts to incorporate ideas of parallel and flashback narrative into the mainstream approach to structure. The central premise of the work is that while *new* ways of writing for the screen (involving multiple protagonists, parallel or flashback narrative, tandem and sequential narratives) are apparently based on a departure from the *conventional* three-act structure that has been a mainstay of screenwriting, in fact these approaches draw on ‘the nuts and bolts of traditional three-act narrative to create unity and rising jeopardy in individual plots and across the film as a whole’. (xiii) Rather than assume that new approaches to writing for the screen depart from three-act structure, Aronson sees it re-appearing, like a fractal pattern, in each of the story-lines. At the same time as updating screenwriting in this way, Aronson follows other writers in proposing a theory of creativity and ideas development.

Aronson’s book is extremely successful within its own terms and limits. The question emerges, however: what are those terms and limits? There are, of course, as with all books, obvious or explicit limits: Aronson doesn’t consider documentary, for example. But there are also less obvious ones created by some of the assumptions she makes in the book. This is where the ‘thesis-film’ becomes an interesting entity to consider, as a kind of limit case describing conceptual films and film-making, and the place of concepts in film. Thinking about the thesis-film means dwelling on the relationship between thinking in cinema and writing for the screen.

A tension between an institutional and a (for want of a better word) ‘formal’ understanding of genre makes the thesis-film a complex object to describe. Not all thesis-films are submitted as a dissertation. Similarly, not all dissertation films are thesis-films. While many films can be described as ‘thetic’ in nature—Ingmar Bergman’s films as a study of existence

and memory come to mind—the thesis-film is linked to a formal act of conceptualisation or theorisation (either by virtue of its institutional context, or the demands of its content). They are more than a ‘study of the human condition’, which is a phrase that at times seems to serve as a justification for not considering technology, or our inhuman conditions. This is not to suggest that the thesis-film is just a theoretical film that seeks to illustrate a theory or make the theory its ‘content’; instead, the ‘content’ is the thinking, the conceptual practice as represented in and by the film.

The thesis-film is therefore more than just a film with a thesis. The film *is* the thesis, or, in other words, the mode of expression of that thesis forms a part of the conceptual practice of the film. As such, the nature of the thesis in the thesis-film is inseparable from its mode of expression. Writing of *Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948), André Bazin notes not only that the film has a thesis—that ‘in the world where this workman lives, the poor must steal from each other in order to survive’—but also that the presentation of the thesis, the fact it is never explicitly stated, alters our engagement with it. Thus we approach *Bicycle Thieves* not as a propaganda film, but ‘all the more irrefutable because it is presented to us as something thrown into the bargain’.<sup>6</sup> Building on Bazin we can say that thesis-films engender a way of reading that opens up a conceptual field particular to the work that the film is trying to do. Thus, to take another example, in *Sunless* (Chris Marker, 1982) an ethnographic essay on Tokyo and Japanese society is traversed by an exploration of memory, time and cinema. A trans-continental space of association (Africa–Japan), structured by the letters that form the basis for the narration, opens up a conceptual field in which to engage with ethnography and re-frame the cultural geography of Tokyo.

For some readers with a theatre background, the idea of the thesis-film will echo that of the ‘thesis-play’ or *pièce à thèse* which presents a philosophical thesis through plot and dialogue. The thesis-play goes beyond a ‘problem play’—although the distinction between problem play and thesis-play is contested—to suggest a particular position or idea. Rather than simply be about a particular topic, the thesis-play adopts, at the level of the premise, a certain argument, or set of positions. It also draws on situations and forms of staging to resonate with the thesis (Sartre’s *No Exit* is worth mentioning here).<sup>7</sup> But beyond the thesis-play, a thesis-film is not limited to characterisation and dialogue—it can thus avoid the effect of characters serving as a mouthpiece for the philosopher—and draws on more dynamic techniques of animation, juxtaposition and montage.

The ‘thesis-film’ will only be loosely defined in this piece. I will not be suggesting a catalogue of thesis-films. Nevertheless, this genre, sitting on the horizon of our understanding, can be found in different forms, activated either explicitly or implicitly. The genre can be activated explicitly in the context of so-called production PhDs or honours theses, where video works can take up to as much as fifty per cent of the dissertation: examples include

*Hatred* (Mitzi Goldman, 1995), *Letter to Eros* (Josko Petkovic, 1994) and *On Becoming* (Teresa Rizzo, 1993).<sup>8</sup> The thesis-film, or some elements of it, can be found coded as documentary or as an 'essay film' such as *Camera Natura* (Ross Gibson, 1985) and others (see below); in experimental feminist films such as *Serious Undertakings* (Helen Grace, 1983) and *My Life without Steve*; in a genre of films about theorists including *Wittgenstein* (Derek Jarman, 1994) and *Walter Benjamin: One Way Street* (John Hughes, 1992); or even some types of radical cinema invoking new forms of pedagogy.<sup>9</sup> It can be embedded in films that have an ostensibly narrative character but in which characters and situations play a part in a complex conceptual practice. As such, the thesis-film can be seen as part of a new approach to writing for the screen: although as we shall see this genre is difficult to place within the framework of Aronson's argument.

Of course, a book on the practice of screenwriting cannot be asked to cover everything. Experimental and documentary film-makers could easily identify gaps in Aronson's work. This is not a reason to avoid making 'unreasonable' demands of her work, however. Aronson's emphasis on new ways of writing for the screen forms an invitation that shouldn't be ignored. Addressing the implications of different exclusions is important because fiction is not the sole preserve of normative ideas of screenwriting. Although the current expectation might be that screenwriting doesn't need to cover the issues that the thesis-film raises, the question is whether we continue with this view. If we continue with a stand-off between thinking with the medium and writing for the screen, the danger is that a particular approach to writing for the screen comes to dominate the field, and ways of looking at the field. And once this happens, the shape of the field starts to change, moulding to this new perspective at the expense of other possibilities.

#### — GENRE

Aronson's book forms a useful stepping-off point primarily because she puts genre at a premium. For Aronson, thinking about genre, about 'what film we're in', forms a crucial development step. Her understanding of the term is through the concept of model. Screenwriters are often asked to 'write-to-model'. (14) 'Models are successful patterns that audiences enjoy and, in some cases, have been enjoying for thousands of years'. (14) At times the words 'model' and 'genre' become interchangeable. (14) The term 'model' in her work tends to be used to apply to the situation where writers have a task or template or format to write to. The term 'genre' tends to relate to audience expectations, or the 'experience the audience is looking for when they come to this sort of film'. 'It reminds you that a thriller must be extremely thrilling, or that a spy story must be extremely full of suspense. It reminds you that a "whodunit" must keep us guessing'. (18–19) While models tend to be fixed, audience expectations are things that can be played with. With her primary reader being the screen-

writer, Aronson breaks down genres into a set of tasks: Genre=Pattern+Emotion+Credibility+Originality. (21) A key term here is 'pattern', which relates to the main character actions (what spies do, people falling in love). In this approach, genre becomes an issue of story pattern and emotion. What becomes less important in this approach, and only partly dealt with by the idea of audience expectations, is the idea that genres are related to ways of reading: understanding of conventions, ritual participation, codes of presentation, expression and atmosphere, and subject positions.<sup>10</sup> Audience expectations are not simply expectations about the patterns, but knowledge about what the genre expects from readers. In other words, there is more work on the part of the reader to recognise and acknowledge genres than allowed for by the notion of audience expectation.

The idea that genres involve active reading has special implication to the identification of new or emerging genres. Some process of familiarisation and education needs to happen before the genre is known and accepted: Brecht's writings on the epic theatre are a good example of the kind of work required.<sup>11</sup> Without consideration of this aspect of genre, the world of genre becomes closed off to new developments and approaches. The thesis-film is interesting to consider here. One pre-text for this genre is Alexandre Astruc's 1948 article, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra Stylo*'. In his article, which has been seen as an important influence on auteur theory, Astruc tries to highlight a process that 'cinema is quite simply becoming a means of expression', a language.

By language, I mean a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel. That is why I would like to call this new age of the cinema the age of *caméra-stylo* (camera-pen). This metaphor has a very precise sense. By it I mean that the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative, to become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language.<sup>12</sup>

For Astruc, this novel approach to cinema puts it in a new relationship to thought and ideas. '[If Descartes lived today he] ... would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Méthode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily'.<sup>13</sup> Astruc builds on this idea:

What I am trying to say is that the cinema is now moving towards a form which is making it such a precise language that it will soon be possible to write ideas directly on film without even having to resort to those heavy associations of images that were the delight of the silent cinema.<sup>14</sup>

While Aronson treats genre and a model in a distinct way, they also blur together in her work. Maintaining a formal distinction could be useful, however. For example, when a person does a production PhD they could choose the model of a broadcast documentary, and here the model works in lieu of a different genre. In contrast, another person might choose to do a thesis-film and once submitted, re-work it in a more commercial form. The difference between writing to model and writing to genre becomes an important way to negotiate different institutional demands.

A final issue in relation to genre is Aronson's literary focus. In Astruc's work, we see the beginning of a new understanding of cinema that gives rise to new approaches to film-making. In imagining Descartes 'doing philosophy with a 16mm camera', Astruc reminds us that not all genres are literary. Aronson's approach capably speaks of the mixing of genres and expectations, but mainly within the fictional domain. One of the challenges of the thesis-film is that it is a hybrid of theoretical practice and in some cases fiction. Aronson links genres to forms of story and ways of storytelling. But while the thesis-film intersects with this domain, its development does not come from the realm of storytelling alone. An important aspect of its development comes from the notion that while the dominant medium of thinking, reading and writing for the past two centuries has been the book, it is possible to think in other media. Indeed, new electronic media forms such as hypertext change the rules of the game for the presentation and argument structure of scholarly work.<sup>15</sup> The increasing trend toward production PhDs are frequently linked to an updating of scholarly literacy.

#### — TRANSMISSION

In the realm of the PhD, while it is conventional to refer to the written work as the thesis, it is useful to distinguish between the document produced (which becomes the dissertation) and the argument (the thesis). The thesis-film relates to this realm of argument, proposition, and theorisation, not to the fact that it is (sometimes but not always) submitted as a dissertation.

The idea that the thesis-film is linked to thought, concepts or argument poses an interesting challenge to Aronson's work. In *Screenwriting Updated*, she invests heavily in a theory of creativity that opposes *lateral*, associational, generative thinking to *vertical*, step-by-step logic with right and wrong answers. Her work has strong links to Romantic philosophy and its emphasis on originality, imaginative thought, and spontaneous creativity versus technique. In these terms it is very easy to position the thesis-film as a pure form of vertical thinking, with very little imagination. I would argue, however, that this positioning would be inappropriate for the genre.

Another aspect of Aronson's work poses a more significant difficulty. When Aronson states 'structure is the business of creating the best vehicle to carry and display the idea', (39) she

is setting down a whole way of thinking about ideas and concepts in cinema, and cinema as a form of thinking. We can identify a number of assumptions implied in this statement. First, ideas are there to be transported and displayed. Second, ideas are closed-off before transportation; their transmission doesn't add anything. Third, like some ideal content, ideas are distinct from the form in which they are presented. Fourth, ideas are independent of their cultural context—it is assumed that films viewed today will remain the same in the future and contain the same 'idea'. This use of metaphors of transportation to imagine the space of writing for the screen closes down on ideas considerably. What communication theory calls a transmission model of communication takes centre stage. Indeed, for Aronson, structure serves to 'transmit the story'. This approach blocks different ways of thinking about ideas and the communication of the thesis. Astruc's notion that 'the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of the narrative' is very difficult to envisage in this framework.

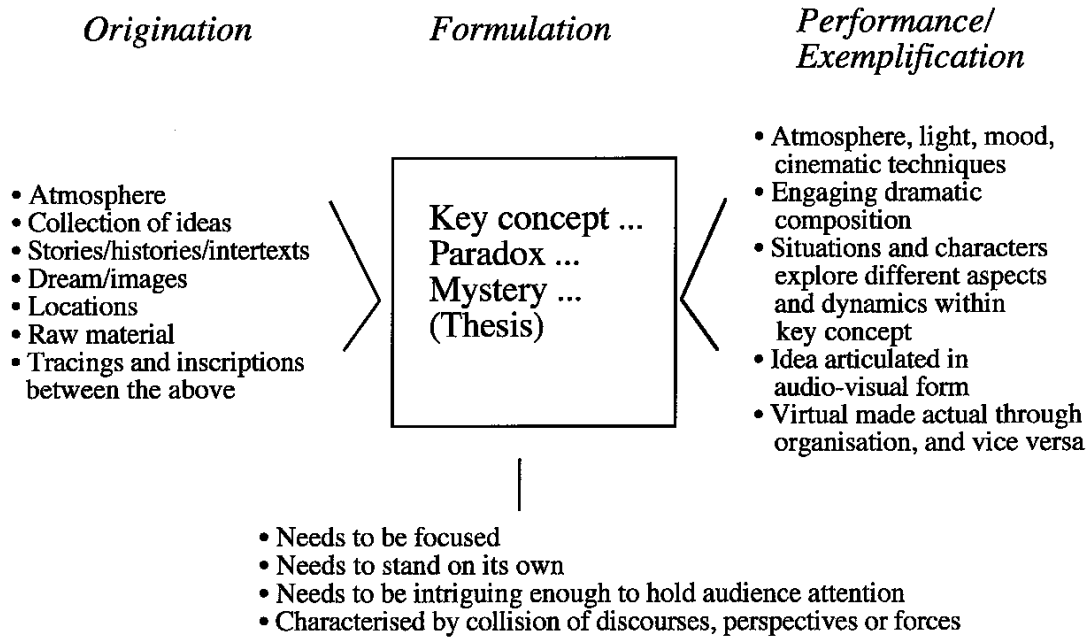
#### — 'NON-NARRATIVE' SCRIPTING

An obstacle to a fuller understanding of the thesis-film is the emphasis on narrative and action in contemporary screenwriting. The emphasis is placed on plotting works against a broader consideration of ideas and ways of working with them. Indeed, while Aronson's book is replete with hints on how to develop a story idea, a variation of a story trigger, or a permutation of a fable, there is little guidance on how to develop a concept. Her definition of an idea is purely narratological: an idea is 'normality disturbed by an unusual event, and a story or chain of reactions to an unusual event'. (54)

Historians of early cinema have begun to question the categories of narrative and non-narrative cinema.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, building on the description of narrative film offered by David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, there is an argument that just because a film doesn't 'contain a series of causally related events that take place in time and space' doesn't mean that it is fully without story or narrative.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, I want to retain the term 'non-narrative' here in order to elaborate on a different approach and space to scripting (while at the same time acknowledging that narrative scripting can also draw on these techniques, and the thesis-film can draw on narrative techniques).

Non-narrative scripting is not necessarily anti-action, anti-plot or anti-narrative, but rather it sees these elements as part of the exemplification or performance of an idea rather than solely in terms of telling a story. In lieu of a more detailed investigation of the poetics of the thesis-film, the figure on p. 92, while basic, illustrates three important elements of a general approach to non-narrative scripting.

First, an idea or trigger point is not the only form of an 'idea'. Too often the notion that good ideas are crafted in a work is undermined by a 'light bulb' approach that sees the idea



as a trigger or catalyst or initial story idea. Indeed, a range of elements can be crystallised or formulated into a thesis. While it is not necessary to be prescriptive about the contents of a thesis—although a video work that has little visually interesting material could be a problem—to qualify as a thesis the ideas must be focused, stand on their own, and be intriguing enough to hold audience attention. A dialectical collision of discourses, perspectives or forces usually defines the latter.

The second element has to do with the way the thesis is communicated, and more particularly the performance of the idea. In a non-narrative approach performance follows a logic of elaboration, complication and exemplification that is not solely organised around the story spine (the relationship of set-up, turning points and climax) or character spine (the relationship of motivation, and action, to the goal). Situations, characters and action highlight aspects of the key concept or exemplify, extend and possibly exaggerate aspects of the thesis.

Third, this figure illustrates that the primary consideration in the scripting process is not exclusively ‘story structure’ in the form common to writing for the screen but the playing out of an idea-matrix that in turn develops and forms part of the conceptual practice and poetics of the piece. A thesis-film could be considered algorithmic in the sense that it puts a set of concepts or propositions into play rather than organising (passive) story material. This is not to say that its approach to non-narrative scripting is anti-structure. Traditional notions of complication and conflict can indeed be useful in thinking through the performative structure of the piece. But here, structure is not linked to rising jeopardy, or the structur-



ing of incidents, alone. Structure is instead linked to, and works across, the formulation of the thesis and the performative aspects.

A set of contrasting terms can help clarify the way in which the thesis-film represents a space of image formation different to that of mainstream screenwriting.

#### — TELLING VS. THINKING

Screenwriting is increasingly being linked to notions of storytelling. While this is legitimate, it has the risk of taking the notion of telling for granted. In Aronson's work, the notion of a story pattern takes the place of any mention of the concept. The film is a vehicle for carrying information to the viewer. Against the idea of a film as a vehicle of transmission for an idea, in a thesis-film the work is exemplificative. The work of the film exemplifies the thetic work or argument structure. A broader emphasis on thinking in visual terms or in cinematic terms is not easily discussed in terms of telling. Not all approaches to the screen are well served by the idea of telling a story, which brings me to the next set of terms ...

#### — NARRATOLOGICAL VS. PERFORMATIVE

The dominant paradigm of story in mainstream screenwriting is narratology: operating between the story as it exists in an ideal form and the plot or scenario as it is presented on the screen, narratology focuses on the relationship of story to plot, timing and style. What the film is about is decided by the nature of the action in the film. In a performative framework, the focus is on the actualisation of the thesis in different forms. In a performative paradigm the emphasis falls on the rhizomatic interconnection, resonance and counterpoint between elements rather than an emphasis on structure as a means of transmission. This paradigm can bring with it particular risks. At times, a thesis-film may lack the dramatic unity of a three-act structure, or the thesis can overwhelm the film, or viewer's expectations of the dramatic object.

While the term 'non-narrative' may be inadequate here, what I hope to have shown is that developing ways of reading a genre is an important aspect of working with new approaches to writing for the screen. A difficulty with drawing a clear distinction between 'narrative' and 'non-narrative' works in the context of the thesis-film is that thesis-films can draw on narrative, while many narrative works are thetic in nature. A feature film can make observations and insights about desire, social norms, beliefs and identity. The thesis-film becomes distinct, however, in terms of its relationship: a formal act of the creation or invention of a conceptual practice or theoretical position. Based on the preceding discussion, however, there is a sense in which the term 'non-narrative' may be apposite. That

is, in the way it points to a way of organising material—by which I mean the theme or idea taken into consideration alongside the formal possibilities of the medium—that is not based on plot. Eisenstein's montage of attractions gives high priority to discussion of film material because, in not basing itself on plot, it looks for other thematic and formal possibilities of association and juxtaposition.<sup>18</sup> Writing for the screen, by contrast, tends to define itself in terms of the structuring of incidents. It relates to story or plot material rather than film material more broadly. Writing for the screen, if presented as the only approach to structure, thus narrows down the possibilities of working with film material.

#### — NOT THE THESIS-FILM

A thesis-film is not necessarily delimited by the idea that it must qualify as a dissertation. A non-institutional relation to the thesis gives the genre an autonomous existence. At the same time, while a thesis is synonymous with an argument, not all thesis-films must involve a traditional academic thesis: a doctrine that must be promoted in argument, or one that must be proved. There can be different kinds of thesis: some are probabilistic, working on a 'what if' logic; or abstract; or deconstructive. Others might be polemical; or fantastical. The thesis can itself be a conceptual field generative of other positions. *Walter Benjamin: One Way Street*, for example, engages stylistically and conceptually with the precepts of Benjamin's work: his interest in cultural transmission, remnants and ruins; his views on fragments, juxtaposition, privileging of montage and image over narrative; and Benjamin's search for a different kind of conceptual practice—all in order to make Benjamin's theses belong to the film.

Not every film about philosophers or the history of ideas is a thesis-film. The thesis-film seeks to 'think' in the medium of presentation. This might include aspects of 'talking head' intellectualism but goes further in performing the ideas through the devices and techniques of an audio-visual medium. By 'performing the ideas', I mean more than presenting an audio-visual analogue or illustration of a particular idea, or even a poetically evocative elaboration of the theme, but a gesture that furthers the overall thesis of the film, or elaborates on the complexity of the issue.

Not every ethnographic film that demonstrates self-reflexivity through filming one's self, or by inter-mixing text and image is a thesis-film. Drawing on techniques of deconstruction of ethnographic self-reflexivity does not mean that the thesis itself is deconstructive.

Not all films that involve characters and drama are automatically *non* thesis-films. *Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002) is an example of a film exploring a precise thesis about the status of women in society, and also the status of relationships in modern Iranian society. Indeed, even the car can be considered a concept object, in the way it symbolises modernity but also draws the viewer into the text.

Not all films drawing strongly on narratological conventions are non thesis-films. *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2002), for example, stands at the limit of a narratology in which the story is presented in full through the plot. The restricted presentation of the plot in the film limits the audience's ability to form the narrative: a condition that emulates the protagonist's condition of having no short term memory. At the same time, the film probes a set of theses about knowledge, identity and morality, and the implications of memory and habit on the human condition.

If thesis-films are to appear, or are among us, one place to look for them is in the genre of the essay film. While this article cannot offer a comprehensive survey of the essay film, not all 'essay films' in the tradition deriving from *Letter to Jane* (Jean Luc-Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin, 1972) and *Sunless* (Chris Marker, 1982) need be thesis-films. Marked by a deviation from the notion of documentary as an engagement with a notion of objective truth, essay films signal a more personal or subjective treatment of (and engagement with) the material. The fact that letters form a structural device in both *Letter to Jane* and *Sunless* is important. Drawing on a tradition of the literary essay as a place to survey, to attempt understanding and try out issues, the essay film often draws on a range of philosophical and artistic inter-texts or ideological debates that give it sense. Quotations are often worked into the narration, or via textual quotes on the screen. Photographs or paintings or other films can form the basis of discussion in the film.

Essay films clearly break some of the film-making ground being trod over here. Peter Thompson distinguishes between the formal, impersonal and premise-driven essay based on the gathering of evidence and a more informal form. He defines the latter in terms of the following characteristics:

*Flexibility*—it can change forms of narrative address on a dime and speak directly and simply to its audience, unlike a short story writer who generally creates a character to be his or her mouthpiece. The essayist can, in other words, step out of character.

*Self-reflexivity*—it can acknowledge the presence of the author.

*Self-criticality*—it can acknowledge, analyze and critique its own processes as it writes. Its territory can stay small or expand to fit the mind of the essayist as it evolves there. An essay can be linked with other essays and other fictions, or non-fictions.

*Blurring narrative boundaries*—it can absorb or incorporate different genres and tones and themes. It can incorporate biography, autobiography, history, culture, poetry, fiction, criticism, photographs, drawings, film.<sup>19</sup>

Central to the essay-film form is that it highlights the issue of speaking position: either the position of the filmmaker in relation to the frame of film-making, or the position of subjects as representatives of discourse.

In the essay film, the audio-visual text finds an alternative logic of organisation to that of drama or objectivity. The text also finds, as Thompson notes, a different kind of subject matter:

film essayists can now take as their *theme* [sic] in which the subject is a particular development or an interpretation of that theme, and *one which has a determining influence upon the form of the film*. The theme thereby becomes extremely active in that the cinematic essay is often a *meditation on ideas in conflict* and *these conflicts actually suggest the form* that the film might take.

This fusion of theme and form through interpretation strongly suggests some of the qualities of a thesis-film and conceptual practice being discussed here. A key criterion of the thesis-film is a dynamic or reciprocal interaction between the thesis as a generative scheme and the images of the work, with the images themselves contributing to the development of the idea. That said, there are features of the essay film that might differentiate it from a thesis-film. While the essay film marks a disarticulation of traditional modes of expression in documentary through the essay form, and foregrounds film-making as an act of (textual/political/social) analysis, it does not always form itself around a central thesis, or propose one. While Thompson shifts the emphasis in his discussion towards the informal essay film, a thesis-film brings some of the expectations of a formal essay into play, where there is an expectation of a proposition or argument being tested (although this is not to say that it is rigid, or that images are subordinated to the position of evidence).

Aronson's work usefully opens up the question of new ways of writing for the screen. But what is also required is a critical analysis of the conventional approach she both modifies but also works within. Without this critical step, the paradigm of screenwriting, and what is possible within it, will remain the same—an update will operate in place of a comprehensive upgrade. Perhaps more seriously, without this work, writing for the screen will remain in an informatical understanding of itself, and fall short of thinking of itself as a conceptual practice. While Aronson's work should be applauded for making thinking about creativity central to her book, it needs to go further. The stakes are significant, for without critical thinking of this kind writing for the screen and 'thinking on the screen' will continue to follow different trajectories.

I began this piece by drawing a link between exploration of the thesis-film and an interest in new forms of writing, conditions of theory and intellectual performance that have characterised one trajectory of cultural studies. While fictocriticism has been an important aspect of this interest, other media experimentation should be included. The fact that the thesis-film links in with the practice of creating alternative or production PhDs places some institutional pressure on individuals and departments to work out the rules of this form, and

formalise them. While this may be necessary, the genre of the thesis-film is not entirely synonymous with that of the film-as-thesis. It would be a loss if the thesis-film only became attached to doctoral work, or ‘academic work’, and lost its links to a broader screen culture. Reflecting on writing and teaching in the 1990s, a time of increased formalisation of research objectives across the higher education sector, Noel King encouraged readers to ‘maintain spaces for eccentric practices of writing and research’.<sup>20</sup> The thesis-film may indeed be one of these spaces. Even within the academic-institutional it would be a loss if all that emerged from research into the thesis-film was a codification of the genre in a policy sense. For the thesis-film raises broader and long-term pedagogical questions about how one links creative practices and theoretical analyses, or strikes a balance between ‘production’ and ‘theory’, and how what Colin MacCabe calls ‘trainings in various kinds of literacy’ are transforming the nature of critical work, such that ‘along with the need to be able to read and write, you also need to have the ability to record and edit audio-visual material’.<sup>21</sup>

---

Thanks to Mitzi Goldman and Hart Cohen for their responses to my questions regarding production PhDs, to Chris Fleming and Gay McAuley for pointing me to the thesis-play, and to the *Cultural Studies Review* referees for their helpful comments.

---

STEVEN MARAS teaches in Communications and the Humanities at the University of Western Sydney.

- 
1. Gillian Leahy and Noel King, ‘“I’d Thought for a Long Time that I’d Make an Experimental Film about Romantic Love”: an Interview with Gillian Leahy about *My Life Without Steve*’, *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1994, pp. 238–53. Noel King, ‘*My Life Without Steve*: Postmodernism, Ficto-Criticism, and the Paraliterary’, *Southern Review*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1994, pp. 261–75. Other crossovers between film and cultural studies are too numerous to mention. I can think of departments where film-makers and cultural studies academics co-work; film-makers with training in critical theory; as well as academics with experience in film-making.
  2. The term ‘production PhD’ is an awkward one. First, all PhDs involve a large-scale exercise in textual production. Second, the term risks leaving ‘production’ un-problematised. The term signifies the way that this form of doctoral research draws on industrial modes and methods of media production; and yet such forms of film-making are altering the parameters of industrial approaches, and in a sense changing what production means.
  3. See Adrian Martin, ‘Making a Bad Script Worse: The Curse of the Scriptwriting Manual’, *Australian Book Review*, no. 209, April 1997 <<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/April99/mar/html>>. Ruiz adopts a similar position in his critique of central conflict theory. See Raúl Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, Dis Voir, Paris, 1995.
  4. One noteworthy development is that, in a break with the usual approach, Thompson has begun to engage with screenwriting manuals at the same time as maintaining a formalist narrative approach. See Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

5. Linda Aronson, *Scriptwriting Updated: New and Conventional Ways of Writing for the Screen*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards/ Australian Film Television and Radio School, North Ryde, 2000. Further references will be included in the text.
6. André Bazin, *What is Cinema*, Vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, pp. 51–3.
7. Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, Vintage, New York, 1989.
8. It is worth noting a difference between production works submitted as a PhD thesis and those submitted for a Doctor of Creative Arts. The interface between these two is often discussed because of concerns about maintaining the standing of the PhD as a research training degree. Current thinking is that the DCA is the better option for work by established practitioners in their normal genres (e.g. feature film, installation), and the work is assessed as such, as well as backed up by a written thesis of around 30,000 words usually composed of a critique or explication of the process. The PhD involves a similar mix of written and production work, although different expectations of the written thesis, both as a vehicle of argument and product of research, is expected (around 40,000 to 50,000 words, or between thirty and fifty percent of the word length of a dissertation which is 'normally' between 80,000 and 100,000 words). From a distance the requirements of the two look very similar and the relationship between the two is evolving. A difference in genre expectation of the written aspect not only distinguishes the two, but also, I believe, effects the production work. While the production in the DCA can work happily in the 'normal' artistic form, the production work of the PhD is expected to exercise the thesis, not just illustrate it (Hart Cohen, email, 17/12/03). That said, the terrain is in the process of being formalised at different institutions, such as Murdoch and the University of Western Sydney, and other places, and is still unstable. The emergence of PhD 'interactives' in which images and text can form the body of the production piece introduces another set of new considerations, although I would argue that the navigation, interactive and interface elements of a PhD work should exemplify the thesis in some form.
9. See Serge Daney, 'Theorize/Teorize (Godardian Pedagogy)', in David Wilson (ed.), *Cahiers du Cinéma, Volume Four 1973–1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle*, Routledge, London, 2000.
10. See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992, pp. 7–9.
11. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett, Hill and Wang, New York, 1978, p. 37.
12. Alexandre Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: *La Caméra Stylo*', in Peter Graham (ed.), *The New Wave*, Secker and Warburg/BFI, London, 1968, p. 18.
13. Astruc, p. 19.
14. Astruc, p. 19.
15. David Kolb, 'Socrates in the Labyrinth', in George Landow (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1994, pp. 323–44.
16. See André Gaudreault, 'Film, Narrative, Narration: The Cinema of the Lumière Brothers', in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, BFI, London, 2000, pp. 68–75.
17. David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, second edition, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1986, p. 44.
18. Sergei Eisenstein, 'The Montage of Film Attractions', in Richard Taylor (ed.), *Eisenstein: Writings 1922–1923*, BFI/Indiana, London/Bloomington, 1988, pp. 39–49.
19. Peter Thompson, 'The Cinematic Essay', <[http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/2instructworks/3editing\\_doc/docessay.doc](http://www.chicagomediaworks.com/2instructworks/3editing_doc/docessay.doc)>, revised 23 March 1998.
20. Noel King, 'What was Then, This is Now: Writing and Teaching in the 1990s', *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1993, pp. 232–36.
21. Noel King, '"That was Then, This is Now": An Interview with Colin McCabe', British Film Institute, 3 September 1992', *Southern Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, July, 1993, p. 159.