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Re-crafting the screenplay: A fictocritical approach

Abstract:

Screenwriters are often bound by the rules of the craft, adhering to specific formatting and functions of an industrial model. As a Writer-Director who has followed a story into production, I have felt restricted by the conventional presentation of a screenplay. I propose that a new model of screenwriting can include many different narratives, reflections, images, video and audio recordings alongside the actions and dialogue of the scenes. This alternative approach to *writing* the screen story would involve more than words perfectly formatted on the page. I have defined this multimodal form as a ‘fictocritical screenplay’.

This paper focuses on the development and re-imagining of a feature film screenplay. I will explore my own screenwriting practice as a PhD candidate during the early stages of developing *One in a Million Girl*. I will highlight the multi-layered development and presentation of the fictocritical screenplay, which invites the reader to share the same development journey as the author. By demonstrating how my alternative approach differs from a more conventional development, I argue that a fictocritical screenplay offers the Writer-Director of a film further scope to experiment and discover a more visual presentation of the screen story.

Biographical note:

Louise Sawtell is a current PhD Candidate in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Her practice-led research project explores actress representation through a fictocritical screenplay, *One in a Million Girl*. She has taught screenwriting, filmmaking and media studies at universities across Australia. Louise is the co-editor of a special issue journal for *Networking Knowledge, Gender and the Screenplay: Processes, Practices, Perspectives*. Her film practice as a Writer-Director-Performer is influenced by fictocriticism, feminism and the actor’s process as a way to challenge conventional storytelling models in the development of a screenplay.

Keywords:

fictocritical screenplay – screenwriting – script development – fictocriticism – practice-led research – writer-director

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Introduction

As Macdonald notes, the screenplay ‘is constrained by the rules of its form on the page, and is the subject of industrial norms and conventions’ (2004: 89). The screenplay is a written representation of the future film. The screenwriter transfers the idea for a film into a screenplay that will be polished over multiple drafts. Within the restrictions of the form, a screenwriter writes in a creative and original way to produce, what is often called, the ‘blueprint’ for the film. Cast and crew will use the screenplay, as a working document, to visualise the intended film. The producer will work out the budget from the specific elements on the page, such as scene headings that indicate time and location. As a general rule, one page in a conventionally formatted script will transfer to a minute of screen time. But, as Price (2013) contests, this rule is reliant on the director’s cooperation. When the writer is also the director of the film, ‘you will be free to come up with whatever notational device is useful to you’ (Dancyger and Rush 2002: 232). Therefore, I believe that a Writer-Director can incorporate the details of the creative process and visualisations of the future work alongside the written scenes of the film.

This paper focuses on my alternative screenwriting practice as a PhD candidate during the development and re-imagining of a feature film screenplay for the proposed film, *One in a Million Girl*. I have defined this new model as a ‘fictocritical screenplay’ that reflects upon the scenes as they are developed. This hybrid and multimodal form could create a stronger link between the industry and the academy by highlighting the creative process and my development journey, which is not represented in a conventional screenplay. I argue that a fictocritical screenplay offers the Writer-Director further scope to experiment and play, while encouraging the reader to experience the story in development.

A brief history of my practice

I studied the craft of screenwriting during my three years at film school, where I wrote and directed a number of short films. I was introduced to the rules of formatting and structure that I transferred into the screenplays that I wrote during my degree. By the third year I was interested in experimenting with the narrative of my graduation film, but I decided to continue using the conventional screenplay format with reflections, process, pre-visualisations and recordings developed on the sidelines. I wrote and directed the short film, *The Time it takes for a Picture to Develop* as a multiple narrative linear story that could easily be displayed in the traditional template. This screenwriting practice continued throughout the ten years since leaving film school. Many of my multi-layered, experimental films would have benefited from a multimodal and fictocritical approach to script development. The screenplays that were written during this ten-year period did not reflect the visual and textual layers presented in the films.

I have considered how these extra details could be included within a screenplay and wondered whether it would be accepted by the industry, especially when this would be my first time writing for a feature film. According to Price (2013) screenwriters can often be seen as ‘amateurs’ if they do not follow the industry standard formatting.

I was concerned that my skills as a screenwriter would not be recognised in the industry, so I chose to develop the screenplay within the academy to create new knowledge by working beyond the screenwriting conventions. I am in my second year of candidature where I have felt the freedom to dwell and be in the moment while exploring my alternative screenwriting practice. The presentation of scenes and accompanying narratives vary from page to page. I have been able to weave the dissertation (reflections and theoretical influences) within the artefact (the scenes of the film) that reflects the hybrid nature of fictocriticism. The multimodal and interactive elements are starting to take shape and I believe this fictocritical form has enhanced my practice.

Creative, critical, personal

The fictocritical screenplay shows my personal journey through the reflection about the creative process and script development. This distinguishes itself from the conventional form, which is a record of the details that will appear on the screen. By developing a fictocritical screenplay I have the ability to engage with the writing in a creative, critical and personal way. This hybrid form has similarities to the fictocriticism found in prose writing that integrates fiction and theory. Nettelbeck describes fictocriticism as ‘a hybridised writing that moves between the poles of fiction (“invention”/“speculation”) and criticism (“deduction”/“explication”), of subjectivity (“interiority”) and objectivity (“exteriority”)’ (1998: 3). The fictional and theoretical forms can be merged together to create a more personal perspective that can challenge traditional scholarly work (Schlunke & Brewster 2005). This type of writing is an extremely beneficial method for a practice-led research project that uses theory to support and influence the creative artefact.

Fictocriticism is an intertextual and personal style of writing that enhances my practice. Conway-Herron claims that ‘writing theory is directly contingent on other texts while writing creatively allows the writer to create an illusionary world from his or her imagination as if a body of ideas from the past has not informed and shaped each act of writing’ (2002: 85). Muecke (2012) also notices the breaking down of the strong distinctions between the creative and critical. Although my screenwriting is a creative practice, it is still reliant on other texts. My screen story borrows from other films, narratives, theory and personal experience, which reflects a fictocritical style. Although the personal voice is not used within the scenes, the added reflective texts use the first person to show how theory and popular culture have influenced my screenwriting.

One in a Million Girl is a postmodern, fragmentary story that references popular culture and follows what Newman (2011) calls ‘form as a game’, allowing an audience to make meaning from the narrative. This ‘form as a game’ approach is based on American film culture. An audience needs to be aware of the history of the medium to understand all the references that appear in the narrative (Newman 2011). As a fictocritical form, my screenplay allows others to see the connections between the scenes and film history. Adam Ganz (2011: 127) asserts that the audience needs to ‘feel they own the discovery’ and be given the means to ‘imagine the story’. It makes

the audience think about why the story is being told this way (Macdonald 2013). *One in a Million Girl* highlights the representation of actresses in the film industry. The film needs to reflect the social and historical context of this system.

As I write the fictocritical screenplay within the parameters of a PhD, I consider how it has similarities to the ‘thesis-film’. Maras asserts that a ‘thesis-film’ ‘puts a set of concepts and propositions into play rather than organizing (passive) story material’ (2004: 92). I have chosen to present the screenplay as a fragmented, fictocritical narrative in the order of its development to show my creative process. It aims to answer my research question: how can a screenplay written in a fictocritical style highlight the creative process while still being a record of the proposed film? I emphasise the ‘interconnection, resonance and counterpoint between elements... as a means of transmission’ (Maras 2004: 93) by privileging the process as much as the finished product.

An alternative script development

My screenwriting practice focuses on ‘writing’ the story in multiple ways. I include images, video and sound alongside the traditional written text. Lessig (cited in Koman 2005) asserts that within our remix culture writing with images, video and sound can be a more interesting way of expressing ideas. It is a particularly useful screenwriting technique where a screenplay should represent the experience of the film. I have designed the document to accentuate the visual elements within the story and the interactive nature of a digital form allows me to incorporate moving image and audio recordings. The fictocritical screenplay mirrors what Millard (2011) calls a design prototype, which she believes could be a more effective approach to developing a screen story. She claims that it ‘places the emphasis firmly on the creative process and the generation and development of new ideas rather than pre-determined templates’ (Millard 2011: 155). The fictocritical screenplay places as much emphasis on the creative process as the proposed scenes for the film.

During the early stages of a script’s development, it can be more important to flesh out the ideas in many different ways, rather than restricting the natural flow of the story by conforming to the industrial model. Nash (2013) uses a more flexible approach to writing the structure of a film by allowing it to happen as an organic response to her ideas. She suggests that writers should value the initial, messy process where ideas are developed over following the strict rules and formulas. Her ‘discovery-driven script development process’ is similar to my own exploration of the story where I place myself in the moment of the idea that will feature in the film. I improvise the dialogue of a character to understand the intention of the scene. I take the time to find the right words to describe the actions before reflecting about them. I show an understanding of how film theory and popular culture influence the scene’s progression. The fictocritical nature of my screenwriting highlights ‘ideas of value’ (Nash 2013) at every stage of its development. Macdonald (2013) uses the term ‘screen idea’ as a way to understand the process of screenwriting. At any stage of the drafting process, ‘a process of construction’, the project could change. While the finished work is still unknown at the development stage, I feel that it is important to

show my creative process and decision-making by including all storylines and scenes considered.

It is difficult to challenge the industry when so many experts are writing the rules of formatting in the hundreds of screenwriting manuals flooding the market. To go against the mould might result in the screenplay not being produced. Macdonald (2013) acknowledges the limitations of these ‘how to’ manuals and stresses the importance of ‘why’ a screenplay is written in a particular way. Some screenwriting experts are extremely skilled at explaining the rules of a strong story. They focus on the industry model and technical specifications without recognising the deeper level of its development. Lee (2013: 7) believes that ‘our traditional idea of what a script or film is needs to be re-assessed’. I also challenge the traditions of the industry in my fictocritical screenplay where I am able to use the digital technologies to support a new way of writing for the screen.

The presentation

The fictocritical screenplay functions in two ways: it provides a multimodal representation of the future film and it features the creative process through reflections about its development. A conventional screenplay only includes the written representation of the future film within the restrictions of formatting and structure. My fictocritical screenplay is presented as a landscape e-book that can be viewed on screen to capture the format of the future film, which is not the standard practice for the conventional model that is written in portrait format on an A4 page. I have chosen to use design software rather than the industry examples, such as *Final Draft* and *Celtx*, to create a visual document that can represent a filmic experience for the reader. Bloore (2013: 2) states that ‘storytelling is not a one-way process: a single moment of ‘telling’. It is an interaction between a narrator and an audience, because above all we *respond* to stories’. Although a screenplay is viewed as an unfinished product that is waiting to become a film, it is still important to create an emotional and engaging screenplay for the reader to imagine the possibilities of the future work.

I have designed a different font for each character to suggest a particular personality and to identify variations between them. The reader would be able to gain some insight about each individual character. This was quite an effective method for Jim Taylor who wrote *Sideways*. He depicted the comic nature of the two main characters in his different font choices, *Comic Sans* for Miles and *Chalkboard* for Jack (Millard 2010). When the characters within the screenplay have a distinct font that represents them, there is the opportunity for their dialogue to be more prominent on a page that is usually filled with the text written in the same Courier 12pt font.

Millard (2014) has written ‘a manifesto for sustainable writing’. She suggests that writers should develop their own prototypes, working quick and dirty to get the story written through many different possible platforms. It ‘can be a map, sketches, photo-texts, a wiki, a list, scenes that form part of a jigsaw, a graphic novel, a video trailer, a short film – whatever works’ (Millard 2014: 184-5). My fictocritical screenplay features many of these different forms to present the story as a multi-layered and

visual representation of the future film. These extra details will help me make an easier transition into the pre-production phase.

Independent screen culture

My work is situated within an independent, alternative screen culture that challenges traditional cinema. Newman acknowledges the value of difference, resistance and opposition of independent film as ‘the product of an individual’s artistic expression’ (2011: 28). This artistry is often apparent in the finished film, but rarely produced in the formatting of a screenplay, but some exceptions do exist. The Oscar nominated screenplay for *Nightcrawler* (2014) by Dan Gilroy is formatted in an unconventional way due to it being produced outside of the restrictive studio system. In an interview with Cosnahan (2015) for New York Film Academy students, he described his alternative screenwriting as a freeing process. There were no scene headings, indications of the types of locations and very minimal character descriptions within the screenplay. Different font sizes were chosen to enhance those details that were important and to depict moments of heightened drama. Gilroy explained that a screenplay could be developed as a stream of consciousness that is quite a different way of writing than a traditional approach (Cosnahan 2015). When working in the independent film industry it is possible to move beyond the industry screenwriting approaches.

Other independent practitioners have explored alternatives to the traditional screenplay form. Murphy (2007: 16) claims that, ‘they choose to take a more innovative approach to their scripts rather than mimic the tried-and-true formulas’. While this includes experimenting with different forms of narrative, such as multiple protagonists, nonlinear, parallel and tandem structures (Aronson 2010), it can also include less conventional presentations of the screenplay as a working document. Neill Blomkamp developed a package of script materials for *District 9* (2009), which included his short film that inspired the project, *Alive in Joburg*, and a graphic novel style presentation of the script and production design (Millard 2011). When Gus Van Sant made *Elephant* (2003) he discarded the screenplay in favour of an outline, map and improvisations on set. The actors put a lot of their own lives into their characters. Wong Kar Wai allows his stories to evolve during the shooting of the film after he creates an outline of the story (Millard 2010). These filmmakers saw the potential of working beyond a conventional screenplay, but their methods do not necessarily show the process of their development.

Sally Potter’s online archive, The SP-ARK Project, includes documentation from all stages of the production of *Orlando*, including its development. These working documents, that are not usually available to the public, give the viewer a greater sense of Potter’s creative process for a film. The early iterations of the screenplay and her handwritten notes are the most useful resources for my research. The project’s goal is ‘to provide a radically new and revealing experience of a multi-media archive for the social-networking age, which in turn provides a working model for innovative teaching and research...’ (Sally Potter 2012; SP-ARK section). This archive is a practical resource to understand the entire production process, but it might be useful

to view a more completed screenplay during the early stages of its development.

Guy Maddin's annotated screenplay for his autobiographical film, *My Winnipeg* (2007) has similarities to my own fictocritical form, but was published after the film had been made. The voice over narration is the main feature of the screenplay that was recorded during post-production. There are no scene descriptions in this published version, but the pages are full of personal reflections, rejected pieces of narration, striking collages and images of family albums that create a deeper connection to the story. There is interplay between words, images and other graphic elements displayed. Millard describes it as 'a prototype for what a multimodal screenplay might look like on the page' (2014: 58). Through his personal insights, Maddin (2009) uncovers his journey through the entire filmmaking process. His work has elements of fictocriticism that serve as an inspirational document for my own script development.

While Maddin's annotated screenplay has a similar presentation to my own document, it has a much different focus and might not be the best representation of a screenplay in development. Similar annotated screenplays of completed films are being published and presented as an expression of the craft. These published documents rarely show the development of the story, which is an important part of my research. Through its annotations, or in my screenplay, fictocritical narratives, there is the possibility of other screenwriters discovering different ways of writing and developing screen stories. The fictocritical screenplay provides a more 'open-ended storytelling model' (Allen 2013) that will be ready for future collaboration and production. According to Newman (2011: 28) the independent film can become a record of its era: 'in place of existential angst and alienation we find the multiplicity and fragmentation associated with multiculturalism and postmodernism'. As a product of an independent screen culture, a fictocritical screenplay can function as a postmodern text filled with multiple perspectives and fragmented narratives.

The story of *One in a Million Girl*: Theory in practice

One in a Million Girl is a musical that follows two actresses in the film industry. The first narrative focuses on the glamorous life of The Actress as she prepares to leave the industry. In the dressing room, she strips away her clothes, her make-up and the star persona that has shaped her identity. She looks back on her life and career, recalling the scenes that have made her famous. The second narrative is set in a classroom. The Teacher who did not make it as a performer instructs her actress students to write their own roles. Her lessons show the importance of representing the female experience on the screen. The Actress' story follows a traditional, chronological structure. The Teacher's narrative is more fragmented with multiple storylines featuring four different actresses who write stories about their own experiences of the film industry.

The fictocritical screenplay for *One in a Million Girl* is written in an experimental way with multiple characters and storylines. It is influenced by the research on feminist film theory and Hollywood stories, and follows a non-linear narrative structure. The chorus girls presented in the screenplay highlight the progression of

feminist film theory. They change from a unified group of a man's desires (or ideology) into a diverse group of individuals. The first classroom narrative focuses on a group of chorus girls who all look the same and the ideas presented by Mulvey (1975) in 'Visual Pleasure and Cinema Narrative'. Men view the chorus girls through the classroom window as they reveal details of their experiences of being on the screen as the objects of the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1975). When Chorus Girl 1 first auditions to be in a show, she is judged on her appearance, not her abilities as a dancer. When her thighs are measured for size, this action mirrors a similar scene in *42nd Street*, where the girls' legs are being judged. Fischer (1989) asserts that the musical is a spectacle often used to display women. Busby Berkeley has admitted to favouring looks over talent:

I never cared whether a girl knew her right foot from her left so long as she was beautiful. I'd get her to move or dance, or do something. All my girls were beautiful and some of them could dance a little, some of them couldn't (cited in Pike & Martin: 51-53).

Chorus Girl 1 questions these actions when she relives the audition process in the classroom. When the women have been transformed in the classroom and The Actress is willing to move beyond her performing role, the end of the film is able to represent a more diverse experience of women on the screen.

As I write a screen story about women, I have considered the impact of traditional storytelling approaches in relation to the female experience. The female point of view might not be found in an Aristotelian approach to writing. Seger (1996) suggests that rather than focusing on the character's actions in these types of stories, a film could explore the emotions, behaviours and psychology of the women being represented. Jacey (2010) offers an alternative guide, *The Woman in the Story*, that focuses on the many changing roles and identities of the modern woman featured in films. She recognises the smaller, unique parts of a woman's story before considering the larger overall film narrative. This technique fits a fictocritical approach that considers individual scenes before the overarching storyline.

Conclusion

When a Writer-Director uses a fictocritical approach during the development and re-imagining of a feature film, there is the potential to present a unique and visual experience that could more closely replicate the future production. This paper outlined my alternative screenwriting practice to distinguish itself from the traditional form and process. This fictocritical and multimodal screenplay highlights the creative process and development journey that can create a strong link between the academy and industry. This approach has enhanced my screenwriting practice and provides the perfect platform for collaboration and production.

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