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**Ghostbusting in screenwriting practice: rewriting the corrective culture of script development**

Abstract:

Edmond's notion of readers as future ghosts: non-existent at time of writing (AAWP keynote 2014) has curious connotations for the screenwriter, whose writing practice is haunted by 'the influence of the producer, director, development executive, potential financiers, and the echoes of many past films and screenplays' (Bloore 2012). In other words, the screenwriter's projected readers might be imagined or extant, but the future ghosts are not readers, rather the audience of the resulting film or broadcast – that is to say, an audience unlikely to read the screenwriter's words. The screenplay's destiny, we might say, is to become a ghost itself.

The screenwriter's readers are those who will interpret the screenplay and ultimately filter it through a production process – but, first, in most instances, another procedure, namely, script development. This paper explores those practices of script development, driven by commercial concerns, that may have become entrenched – practices that might unquestionably impose templates and rules 'rather than a discovery driven uncertain process, in search of originality, story and meaning' (Nash 2014). If, as Conor has discovered, the screenwriter has historically been 'immediately alienated from her/his own labour' (2013), then how might new approaches to script development liberate us from (to risk stretching the metaphor) those spectres of ingrained practices? Drawing from an emerging field of scholarly literature on script development, this paper hopes to contribute to discussions around the screenwriter as creative writer, and raise questions around the arguably unexplored potential inherent in collaborative cultures of script development.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Screenwriting – script development – creative writing – creative practice

## Introduction

I borrow the notion of ‘ghost-busting’ (a colloquial verb put into popular parlance by the 1984 film *Ghost Busters*) as a metaphor within the following discussion, which investigates what I am calling the corrective culture of script development – a process within screenwriting, a practice already clouded by discourses of ephemerality. This air of instability around the screenplay is compounded, as Steven Price puts it, by ‘its troublesome *ghostliness* in relation to the film: it is both absent and present, dead and alive, erased yet detectable’ (Price 2010: xi, emphasis added). Moreover, author Martin Edmond’s notion of readers as future ghosts, non-existent at time of writing (AAWP keynote 2014) has curious connotations for the screenwriter, whose writing practice is haunted by ‘the influence of the producer, director, development executive, potential financiers, and the echoes of many past films and screenplays’ (Bloore 2012). In other words, the screenwriter’s projected readers might be imagined or extant, but the future ghosts are not readers, rather the audience of the resulting film or broadcast – that is to say, an audience unlikely to read the screenwriter’s words. The screenplay’s destiny, as Price reminds us, is to become a ghost itself.

This article proposes that it is from this marginalisation of the screenplay, and (as will be elaborated upon shortly) the language of screenwriting discourse, that a corrective culture of script development has evolved, whereby the unproblematised assumptions entering into the process might mean that development, in the case of screenplays, is always synonymous with repair. With this discussion, I wish to suggest that practices of script development would benefit from a ‘rewrite’ of this corrective culture in the spirit of discovery associated with creative writing practice.

## Screenwriting and script development

As I have mentioned, script development is one aspect of the broader practice of screenwriting, and one that is only just emerging in screenwriting scholarship. Moreover screenwriting scholarship itself, to a certain extent, does not quite know if it resides within studies of screen production, or of creative writing, sometimes finding itself on the outside of both looking in. For the purposes of this paper, coming as it does from the context of a Creative Writing conference, I am inviting us to consider screenwriting practice as an act of creative writing, and to thus view the challenges of script development from that perspective. I am proposing that script development – a term I shall attempt to clarify shortly – is a process that leans heavily upon assumptions. These assumptions are perhaps born of the marginalisation of the screenplay in wider discourses of filmmaking, as well as the assumptions inherent in the language of screenwriting practice. I am suggesting, then, there is a corrective culture of script development that regularly goes unchallenged. The notion of development, in the case of screenplays, is often synonymous with repair.

Script development is a slippery category in that it is a term used in various ways. On the one hand, it is often used to describe the process of bringing a draft to completion from an initial idea. In other words, in some contexts (industrial or otherwise) script

development simply means ‘writing the screenplay’. On the other hand, some use the term to describe the whole progression from script-to-screen. As I have written elsewhere (see Taylor 2015), the few available scholarly definitions suggest, for the most part, that script development is market driven. Development consultant Stephen Cleary offered this definition as part of his 2013 Melbourne lecture series:

a professional collaboration between myself and the rest of the creative team whereby we evolve a dramatically satisfying story through a process of scripting, packaging and financing, which allows the film to be made in a way that is true to our vision, which makes sense in the economic and cultural context of our industry and which, above all, enables the film to reach the audience we have identified for our story (2013).

Alec McAulay reminds us that the process of script development – like conventional narratives – tends to be seen as linear. He writes:

Received wisdom on the script-to-screen process infers that it is one of continual improvement and enhancement... And yet it stands to reason that the script-to-screen process does not always work effectively; that, theoretically at least, the ideal film is not always the one projected on screen, and that the best film achievable may in fact have been Draft 5 of a script that progressed in diminishing quality from that point on for another six drafts due to some misfire in the collaborative process (Macaulay 2014: 190).

In light of this observation, and to borrow briefly from the discipline of geometry, we might consider that even a line technically travels infinitely in either direction. I suggest, then, that mainstream processes of script development instead operate like a ray – a line that goes infinitely in one direction but not the other. This may well be to do with the Hollywood history whereby, as Kathryn Millard points out ‘development of feature-length film contributed to a scriptwriting process in which... [f]our or five experts discussed the script in detail and attempted to eliminate every flaw in structure before passing it on to the director’ (2014: 160). Contributing further then perhaps to this corrective culture of script development is the marginalisation of not only the screenplay but also the screenwriter. In an article for *Filmmaker Magazine*, Barbara Schock claims ‘writers have been historically undervalued in the film business, but today they are simply not included enough in the filmmaking process’ (1991). This might suggest a conscious or unconscious bias when it comes to the writerly element of the script development process, and the place of the screenplay itself.

When I talk about the marginalised screenplay, I refer both to its absence in discourses of filmmaking practice (some examples of which I later discuss) and also its perceived illegitimacy as creative writing in its own right and rather one technical element in the chain of filmmaking. As Price points out, ‘The most familiar and insidious argument against the literary status of the screenplay is that it is nothing more than a planning document’ (2010: 44). I suggest this limited view of the screenplay’s *function* also negates a screenwriter’s *experience* of his or her *practice*, and although it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the theorising of creative practice, I approach this discussion from a creative writing research standpoint, described by Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll as ‘concerned with actions as

well as outcomes [and] with the individual as well as the culture' (2012: 2). As such, I believe it is useful to look to those who offer a practitioner's perspective when examining this prevalent notion of screenplay as blueprint. Screenwriter and filmmaker Miranda July writes of the process of developing her screenplays, including this description that suggests a (creative) writerly approach to script development:

I liked to think of the dormant script curing like ham in a hickory woodshed. Each day I left it alone, it got better. And now it was time to check on the progress it had made without me. I printed it out and put it on my desk. I left the room and came back in, pretending I was a snoopy housesitter; sometimes this helps make me want to read my own work (2011: 139).

July's 'snoopy housesitter' persona recalls the idea of Edmond's future ghosts in the form of unknown readers, in July's case, of course, performed by the writer herself. Kate Grenville, in her guide *The Writing Book: A Workbook for Fiction Writers*, addresses what we might also consider a kind of haunting, in the form of a mind 'full of voices, whispering advice to us about how to write' (Grenville 1990: 1). She then sets about on some ghostbusting of her own, refuting the claims of such voices that might dictate, for example, that to be a writer one should 'First work out what you want to say' (Grenville 1990: 2), with such suggestions as 'many writers can't work this way because they don't quite know what they want to say until they've said it' (Grenville 1990: 2). When considering, then, the aforementioned language of screenwriting, it is useful to note that guides for screenwriters rarely, if ever, recommend Grenville's suggested flexibility of approach. For instance, esteemed screenwriting author and consultant Linda Aronson maintains, 'you need to understand your film's scenario and message so that later you know the function of each scene' (2010: 39), even though this does not necessarily reflect the reality of all screenwriting practice. US writer and director Nicole Holofcener told an interviewer that she finds it difficult to answer journalists' questions about what drew her to particular themes because 'once I start writing, things pop up out of nowhere'. She explains, 'When the script is done, of course, I can see that all of these issues and themes are things that are very important or interesting to me. But if I had planned on writing about them... I think I would have been overwhelmed' (Holofcener 2011: vi-vii). On the process of writing her feature *The Future* (2011), July similarly reflects 'Perhaps because I did not feel very confident when I was writing it, and because I had just gotten married, the movie was *turning out to be* about faith, mostly about the nightmare of not having it (2011: 8, emphasis added). Schock is similarly reluctant to endorse standard screenwriting rules around forward planning. She claims of the standard stage in script development of producing a treatment (the story of the film in prose, that it is 'a waste of time. I find it impossible to understand from a treatment how the writer will actually realize a script. This is because a good writer doesn't quite know what the story is about until he's [sic] written the first draft' (1995).

Aronson likewise acknowledges 'many very experienced screenwriters say they write without a plan' but warns, 'you will usually find that they possess enormous experience, high skill levels and an awe-inspiring combination of objectivity and mental toughness' (2010: 31). These kinds of statements are not atypical in

screenwriting discourse, which will often warn that you stray from the guidelines at your peril – cautionary tales that make up part of what Bridget Conor calls the ‘know your place’ discourse around screenwriting, to which the manuals contribute (2015: 119), thus perpetuating suspicion around screenplays that do not subscribe to dominant paradigms and upholding development practices that seek to ‘fix’ screenplays until they do. As Ian Macdonald writes ‘Defying the three-act structure paradigm may always be difficult’ and, moreover, ‘It would be difficult, when analyzing a screenplay using any such method, not to regard it as ‘faulty’ if it did not conform to the general requirement of rising action’ (2013: 49). Schock would appear to concur, writing ‘One of the biggest impediments I’ve encountered in the development process is the widespread belief in clichéd rules of story development’ (1995). These rules of story development belong to the rules of screenwriting more broadly, one aspect of which the next section attempts to address.

### **Perspective, action and the problem of other minds**

By way of examining just one example of how the language of screenwriting – that is to say, the screenwriting *rules* (and thus the script development processes that subscribe to them) – can prove difficult for screenwriting *practice*, I offer up the notion of perspective.

In any kind of writing, perspective is a concept that sometimes gets conflated with ‘point-of-view’, and this is probably particularly tempting for screenwriters – given ‘point-of-view’ is also a cinematic term. Moreover, as Robert Stam points out, ‘The term ‘point-of-view’ is somewhat problematic because it gestures in so many directions at once’ (2005: 38). In literature we might be encouraged to understand ‘perspective’ as the eyes-through-which we engage with the story. Genette’s notion of focalisation might be useful here whereby, as Stam summarises, ‘He distinguishes between narration (who speaks or tells) and focalisation (who sees)’ (2005: 39). The narrative point-of-view, though, in the simplest of terms comes down to the author’s choice of personal pronoun – first, second or third person. In other words, point-of-view is a tool with which a writer can begin to create perspective. In screenwriting, though, our access to personal pronouns is traditionally limited. In fact, feminist theory suggests that the three-act structure itself automatically imposes a third person omniscient narrator. As Larissa Sexton-Finck explains, ‘Through its omniscient consciousness, which seeks to efface the presence of a specific narrator, the three-act-structure normalises female passivity’ (2009: 56).

On a more rudimentary level – in screenwriting, the action (known in industry jargon as ‘the big print’) is always written in the third person, and any departure from this is considered bad form. Eminent screenwriting author Robert McKee has a particular aversion to the first person plural. He writes, ‘Eliminate “we see” and “we hear”. “We” doesn’t exist... “We see” injects an image of the crew looking through the lens and shatters the script reader’s vision of the film’ (1999: 357). In screenwriting practice we are discouraged from any departure from active verbs in the big print. Moreover, dialogue, as McKee also says, is a last resort, and a character’s feelings and motivations are best demonstrated through their actions. This might explain the

prevalence of undergrad student screenplays with characters repeatedly biting lips and shrugging shoulders for reasons, sadly, often unknown but this dictum of course is not without merit or practicality. If it cannot be seen on screen, the argument goes, it should no more be on the page – thus, do not tell the reader a character is anxious or disappointed, show them. However, what traditional screenwriting practice arguably has not taken into account is what philosophers call the problem of other minds. The Cartesian view – that one’s mind is ‘a radically private realm, an inner landscape or theatre, accessible only to the owner of the mind in question’ (Maslin 2001: 211) is still obviously in debate but equally hotly contested is whether or not behaviour can be considered indicative of one’s mental state. As Maslin writes, ‘Mental states, on the one hand, and items of behaviour, on the other, cannot, it seems, be identified with each other... Mental states stubbornly [refuse] to be reduced to behaviour’ (2001: 212). Therefore, is it unreasonable of screenwriting models to dictate that the goings on in the mind of a character be portrayed solely through action? This ‘problem of other minds’ might be extended beyond the trappings of screenwriting formulae and into the script development process itself within which, as Macdonald observes ‘the screen idea exists in the minds of all those involved in its production (screenwriter, producer, director and others), though of course it can never be exactly the same idea and it will never be complete’ (2013: 5).

### **The uninterrogated notion of script development**

I wrote earlier of the ‘ghostliness’ of screenplays, and how they are sometimes absent from filmmaking discourse. The analogy may even more keenly apply to the specific process of *script development* in discussions of *screenwriting*. However, one area of screenwriting scholarship that is necessarily committed to discussing script development is that of film adaptation, which makes it a useful field in the otherwise limited literature. For example, Linda Hutcheon discusses at length the complicated process of developing adapted screenplays, wondering, ‘Is the major adapter the often underrated screenwriter?’ (2012: 55) while Yvonne Griggs similarly addresses the challenges of collaboration and authorship, noting:

Despite the collaborative nature of the film industry and the importance of screenplays as commodities of vital importance to the successful realization of marketable film products, the role of the screenwriter is both historically and contemporaneously superseded by that of the director. The pseudo authorship of films is generally accredited to directors (2012: 346).

Stam, writing about the folly of demanding fidelity from film adaptations of novels, outlines the differences in their modes of production, which is useful here in considering some of the practicalities behind cultures of script development. He points out ‘a novelist’s choices are relatively unconstrained by considerations of budget [while] films are from the outset immersed in technology and commerce’ (Stam 2005, p. 16). He later asserts, ‘While a novel can be written on napkins in prison, a film assumes a complex material infrastructure (camera, film stock, laboratories) simply in order to exist’ (Stam 2005: 16).

However, in coming back to the marginalisation of the screenplay in both industrial and academic discourse, it is perhaps worth noting that Stam's comparisons here do not make mention of the screenplay, although it is upon these pages where, arguably, the adaptation is conceived – pages that are equally capable of being written on napkins in prison as those of a novel. In further illustrating his points (and mine), Stam calls upon what he refers to as 'the John Ford adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* [1940]' (2005: 17), and not that of the screenwriter, Nunnally Johnson, even though, as Boozer points out, 'It is the screenplay, not the source text, that is the most direct foundation and fulcrum for any adapted film' (2008: 4). Moreover, legend has it that Ford 'claimed not to have read the novel at all' (Boozer 2008: 13) which would suggest, if true, that Ford's only claim to adaptation is that of any director working from a screenplay when considering 'Even non-adaptation fiction films adapt a **script**', therefore all films 'are mediated through intertextuality and writing' (Stam 2005: 45) (emphasis in original). However, as previously mentioned, literature around film adaptation is generally more inclusive of the concept of 'script development' (and acknowledging its marginalisation) than screenwriting scholarship more broadly.

It is possible, then, that script development is a process that remains largely uninterrogated in the filmmaking industry and within scholarly pieces, which may be attributable to its inadvertent absence from so many discussions on screen practice. Schock claims, (and it is interesting to note that at time of writing, her article is already twenty years old) 'There is a general awareness that the screenplay development process in Hollywood is terribly flawed' (1995). She has a long list of what she believes contributes to this broken system, including the fact that 'Writers have been historically undervalued in the film business, but today they are simply not included enough in the filmmaking process' (1995). Schock's assertion might be considered in the context of the oft documented processes of legendary director Alfred Hitchcock, who is quoted as saying, 'I do not let the writer go off on his [sic] own and just write a script that I will interpret... [the writer] becomes more than a writer, he [sic] becomes part maker of the picture' (Leitch 2008: 63). In describing further the different aspects of what screenwriters colloquially call 'development hell', Schock despairs that 'Anyone who has worked in development has heard the line, 'The character isn't sympathetic enough!'... By sympathetic characters, most development people mean stereotypes that filmgoers can easily identify with, role models rather than roles' (1995). Aside from the commercial aspects contributing to this cliché of script development (and the gendered ones, as I have written about elsewhere), there are, again, the restrictions of the form itself. Of narrative in literature, Mark Currie proposes 'We are more likely to sympathise with people when we have a lot of information about their inner lives, motivations, fears' (1998: 19) but this access to a character's interiority is limited in screenwriting practice. Stam is as dubious of this notion of 'sympathy' as he is about the aforementioned three-act structure popularised by 'The recycled, suburbanized Aristotelianism of the screenwriting manuals' which call for 'three-act structures, principal conflicts, coherent (and often sympathetic) characters, an inexorable narrative "arc" and final catharsis or happy end' (Stam 2005: 43). This tyranny of story is in marked contrast to the advice given in Grenville's previously mentioned writing guide, within which she challenges the 'whispering voices' that suggest 'Writing has to have a strong story' by

countering ‘How interesting is it to have someone tell you the plot of a book they’ve just read? Not very’ (1990: 3). However, in script development, there would appear to be no shortage of rigid structures by which screenplays are measured in development processes, and any deviation might lead to these being ‘corrected’ before any exploratory work is done. Screenwriter Raymond Chandler (*Double Indemnity* [1944]) once summed it up by saying: ‘There is little magic or emotion or situation which can remain alive after the incessant bonescraping revisions imposed on the Hollywood writer by the process of rule by decree’ (Conor 2013: 49).

Also to consider in the culture of script development is what Boozer identifies as ‘the service role that the Hollywood screenwriter plays in relation to the producer and director’ (2008: 6). Conor has written extensively on screenwriting in the context of creative labour, and identifies resonances in contemporary screenwriting industry:

screenwriting as lucrative but also compromised and thus impure; as commercially but not artistically legitimate. And these evoke ideal subjective traits for writers past and present – screenwriters must accept their secondary status and be supplicative; they must disinvest from their work at an early stage (2013: 52).

Interesting for our purposes is the advice given in a screenwriting guide that was published very recently (at time of writing), which suggests – astonishingly – that

Our [the authors’] strategy for coping with the necessity of collaboration is to resolve to always be a welcome presence through servitude to all. Someone needs to be the one to make the coffee and clean up the dishes. Why not you? (Peterson & Nicolosi 2015: 168),

and ‘A lot of the work that a writer will be asked to do... will be uncompensated. Do it anyway’ (Peterson & Nicolosi 2015: 191). And whilst Waldeback and Batty, in their book *The Creative Screenwriter* acknowledge ‘It can be a tricky balancing act between giving them what they’re expecting and writing what you feel the project needs’ (2012: 200), they maintain ‘even when writing to order, bringing your individual voice to a project is a crucial aspect of the work’ (Waldeback & Batty 2012: 200). These calls to agency might be considered rare, especially in light of the following:

Sometimes, the producer will be happy with things that go against a writer’s best instincts in terms of craft. Make the case where appropriate; but in the end, give them what they want (Peterson & Nicolosi 2015: 190).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has reviewed some of the existing scholarship, discourse and accounts from practitioners, in order to explore practices of script development, driven by commercial concerns, that may have become entrenched – practices that might unquestionably impose templates and rules ‘rather than a discovery driven uncertain process, in search of originality, story and meaning’ (Nash 2014). If, as Conor has discovered, the screenwriter has historically been ‘immediately alienated from her/his own labour’ (2013), then how might new approaches to script development liberate us

from (to risk stretching the ghostly metaphor) those specters of ingrained practices? In considering the marginalisation of the screenplay as a legitimate literary form, Jamie Sherry suggests, 'The textual analysis of the screenplay sees it framed within a discourse of its function compared to its 'intended' media, rather than as a discrete form with its own literary and poetic properties' (2014: 102). He believes that this is because 'Audience, critics and academics tend to privilege texts that are perceived to be produced in isolation by one artist, that exist in one form, that are not editable or available to change, or prone to decay and flux, and which are permanent rather than ephemeral' (Sherry 2014: 103). Boozer cites 'Hollywood's traditional low regard for the screenwriter generally' (2008: 2) in his argument against the disregarding of screenplays, which suggests that if both his and Sherry's claims are true, there are few discourses upholding the legitimacy of screenwriting practice.

Conversely, rather than elevating the legitimacy of the screenplay across different areas of writing, filmmaking and academic discourses, the process of script development might be seen to contribute to the undermining of screenwriting practice. As Boozer suggests, referring to adaptation studies, but I believe this applies overall, 'reasons for disregarding the screenplay... include the multiple revisions a script undergoes during development (at times by different hands)' (2008: 2). Stam in recalling Gérard Genette's terms to better understand film adaptations, explains that a hypertext 'transforms, modifies, elaborates, or extends' (2005: 31) the hypotext. In this way, the elements of hypertextuality could inspire ways of thinking more imaginatively about script development, whereby the aim for the original source material – the draft – might be any combination of transformation, modification, elaboration or extension. Price acknowledges,

screenplays exist as texts, but as they pass through production they are always in the process of transformation, to the point at which it is often difficult to speak of *the* screenplay of a film at all. This instability is compounded, particularly by film makers and theoreticians, in metaphors and rhetorical strategies that seek to eliminate the screenplay altogether (Price 2010: xi).

Perhaps the language of screenwriting practice and script development would benefit from a rewriting, whereby notions of transformation do not serve to eliminate the screenplay, but elaborate upon what it offers.

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