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The screenplay: An accelerated critical history¹

A recurrent scene near the beginning of several Sherlock Holmes stories presents the following sequence of events: (1) Holmes gives a seemingly brilliant illustration of his powers; (2) Watson is amazed; (3) Holmes explains that it is a simple matter of empirical observation and logical inference; (4) Watson then asks Holmes for his thoughts on the case in hand, presumably expecting some repetition of (1) and (3); but (5) Holmes points out that '[i]t is a capital mistake to theorise before you have all the evidence' (Doyle 2008: 27). Of course, the idea that one should follow the facts and not theories is itself a theory. For instance, Holmes assumes that 'evidence' is circumscribed: it is possible to get *all* of it. But new data may arise that will occasion the rewriting of the theory, while beyond the confines of the fictional detective's world what *counts* as evidence, let alone the methodological strategies that lead to its interpretation and the shaping of it into narratives and arguments, is always open to question. One theory may lead the investigator to hunt for data that another theory would dismiss as quite worthless.

1. This article has its genetic origins in a paper delivered at the Fourth International Screenwriting Research Network Conference at Brussels in September 2011. In rewriting it for publication I am indebted to the comments of several delegates, especially Paul Wells and Margot Nash.

Screenwriting research encounters these problems in specific forms. For instance, it examines texts that have properties distinct from those appropriate to literary studies. With important exceptions screenplays are, in general, collaborative works-for-hire written for quasi-industrial organizations, and overtly anticipate realization in a medium (cinema) distinct from their own (writing). As their anticipated readership is almost invariably confined to those working within the film industry, only a tiny fraction of the material that screenwriting researchers may be interested in has been published; much of the remainder is either unavailable, available only in a single library collection or simply unknown. Ownership and copyright issues mean that little of this material can be legally disseminated either in digital or in print form, while cuts in funding for libraries and universities threaten both the archives themselves and those who may wish to visit them. The first way in which the field has an accelerated critical history, then, is that it has started to accumulate its materials – its evidence – very late in the day, compared to cognate fields such as literary criticism and film studies, and it is doing so without the ready access to the kinds of stable, published texts that those disciplines, at least until relatively recently, had assumed unproblematically to be overwhelmingly their most important primary resources.

But screenwriting research also has an accelerated history in a different sense: as an emerging field, it is still in the process of formulating methodologies appropriate to the investigation of its materials. Its theories are still busy being born, and have profited from coming after theories in other disciplines that have been tried and tested and in crucial respects found wanting. The first published, book-length study of screenplay texts that pursues the kind of rigorous critical methodology that we would expect from an academic analysis only appeared some fifteen years ago (Sternberg 1997), and no organizational framework for its study existed before Ian Macdonald set up the Screenwriting Research Network in 2006. In short, screenwriting is a latecomer to the research party, and the following discussion aims to show that this lateness, this historical fact of coming after the event, has created both problems and opportunities.

Because the field is inter- and multi-disciplinary in nature, and all of us are going to know more about some of those disciplines than others, it may be helpful to follow Steven Maras in borrowing Robert M. Entman's definition of 'framing': 'To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text*' (quoted in Maras 2009: 10, original emphasis). The corollary is that it will *not* select some aspects of a perceived reality, and/or will make them less salient. In what follows I shall outline, somewhat arbitrarily, four 'frames' that are currently shaping investigations into screenwriting. These are (1) the discourses surrounding screenwriting; (2) the practitioner's frame; (3) research and scholarship; and (4) criticism and interpretation. The frames could easily be subdivided, and many others proposed, notably that of the screenwriting manual. (For a much more extensive set of discriminations, see Maras (2011).) For reasons that will become clear, I shall concentrate on the final pair – research and scholarship, and criticism and interpretation – and the problematic relations between them, in particular via some closing observations on the French genetic criticism that is emerging as the dominant paradigm within the field.

Frame 1: Steven Maras' 2009 book *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice* provides among many other things an invaluable survey of the historical emergence and development of many of the 'discourses' surrounding screenwriting:



Figure 1: Keynote Speaker Steven Price, Bangor University.

A discourse frame focuses on the way screenwriting has been shaped and talked about in particular ways. [...] Paying attention to discourse means being attentive to what people say about screenwriting, how they make sense of it and the way this shapes practice and what is possible in the world of scripting. [...] The history of screenwriting is inseparable from a history of discourses that surround and constitute screenwriting.
(2009: 12–15)

Among the many things that this exceptionally erudite study has brought to the field are a historical awareness of, and necessary critical self-consciousness regarding, the ways in which screenwriting scholars conceive of the field and their own relationships to it. The aspect that it most conspicuously marginalizes, meanwhile, is the screenplay text itself, which is almost completely absent from the book. This is not necessarily a problem in a study of the discourses *surrounding* screenwriting, but I would introduce three caveats: first, that the production of screenwriting texts is a contribution to those discourses, which therefore do not just *surround* screenwriting, but emanate from within it; second, that while screenplays are certainly separable from screenwriting, in Maras's definition of those terms, written texts still constitute a subset of screenwriting and can be investigated as such; and third, that while screenplays are not autonomous, they nevertheless need not be seen

exclusively within their screenwriting or production contexts. The last of these observations seems the most contentious.

Frame 2: Screenwriters writing about screenwriting is a familiar subset of the discourses that both surround and emanate from within the writing process. Of these, Jean-Claude Carrière's account is perhaps the most salient, particularly in the context of his keynote address to the Screenwriting Research Network conference in Brussels in September 2011, in which he reiterated a view of the screenplay circulated most widely in *The Secret Language of Film*. In that book, Carrière proposes that '[o]nce the film exists, the screenplay is no more. [...] [I]t is fated to undergo metamorphosis, to disappear, to melt into another form, the final form. [...] I have often compared this metamorphosis to the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly' (1995: 148, 150).

This metaphor is in keeping with a history of writing about screenplays that focuses on their translation into another medium; Andrey Tarkovsky (himself a writer as well as a director), for example, similarly argues that '[t]he scenario dies in the film. [...] The literary element in a film is *smelted*; it ceases to be literature once the film has been made' (1989: 134, original emphasis). For present purposes it need only be noted that, like the discourse surrounding screenwriting, these metaphors render any residue – any written texts – imperceptible, as if screenplays were among the 'invisible literatures' come suffocatingly to life in a Ballardian dystopia of future pointlessness:

Invisible literatures proliferate around us today – faxes and electronic mail, press releases and office memoranda, obscure genre fictions wrapped in metallized jackets that we scarcely notice on the way to the duty-free shop. One day in the near future [...] anthologies of twentieth-century inter-office memos may be as treasured as the correspondence of Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot.

(Ballard 1996: 76)

There are certainly some who regard screenplays as being very like inter-office memos: as '*nothing more than a set of notes to a production crew*' (Luttrell 1998: 10, original emphasis). And in the meantime, even one of the most eminent of the writers who compose them affirms that 'when shooting is over, screenplays generally end up in studio wastebaskets. They are discarded, quickly done away with; they have turned into something else; they no longer have any kind of existence' (Carrière 1995: 150).

Frame 3: But even if we were to agree that '[t]he screenplay is not the last stage of a literary journey[,] [i]t is the first stage of a film' (Carrière 1995: 151), it can still have an existence, an afterlife, as the first (or last, or intermediate) stage of the research of scholars, for whom it may be valuable in, for example, aiding the understanding of the relationships between screenwriting and film production. This would include most of the readership of and contributors to the *Journal of Screenwriting*, for whom the study of the screenplay text is likely to be not only a professional necessity, but an important way of understanding a vitally important cultural medium.

To take just one example of the value of such research: in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Janet Staiger cites the published 'Proceedings of the Research Council, Quarterly Meeting, December 15, 1932', which proposed the 'standardization of format of scripts'. Staiger argues that '[t]he form that

eventually became standard (the master-scene) was a combination of theatrical and pre-sound film scripts, a variant of the continuity synopsis used in the 1920s' (Bordwell et al. 1985: 323). The book reproduces a facsimile of two pages from a 1938 script for the Warner Brothers film *Juarez* (1939). Aside from the numbering of scenes, this is indeed very close to what we would recognize today as the master-scene format. The implications of Staiger's argument are that the Research Council succeeded in introducing standardization, that this standard form is similar to that seen in the pages from *Juarez*, and that the master-scene script was therefore dominant by the late 1930s. Such standardization would be in keeping with the influential view that Hollywood functioned as a quasi-Fordist system of production.

Claudia Sternberg, by contrast, in her analysis of 43 American scripts, states that 'screenplays up to the 1950s tended to contain more detailed camera and shot instructions. Since then the *master scene* script format, which only registers changes of place and time, has become the standard form' (1997: 75, original emphasis). At the very least, this posits a date for the standardization of format some twenty years later than that implied in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*. There is not space here to explore this question in any detail, but while my own research for a forthcoming *History of the Screenplay* tends to lend more support to Sternberg's view, in general the picture appears a great deal messier, with some evidence of a degree of standardization *within* studios, but little *between* them. The tightest degree of regularization and control appears to have been exerted at MGM, while a kind of house style is also apparent at other studios such as Warner Bros. and Paramount. But inconsistencies abound. A minority of scripts divide the screenplay into an alphabetized series of sequences (e.g. A–H), not unlike the act divisions of a play. Very occasionally one finds a screenplay for a fiction film that divides the page into two columns, in documentary-script style, the left reserved for the scene text and the right for dialogue text. Some scripts will use many parenthetical directions concerning the delivery of the dialogue, and others will not. There is enormous inconsistency in the content and format of slug lines, for example concerning specification of shot type, inclusion or not of the Day/Night element (especially in the 1930s), and style. Some scripts are prefaced with paratextual materials, especially concerning characterization. And there is extreme inconsistency regarding the numbering system that indicates the unit of segmentation, which is variously the scene, the shot or merely an indication of important detail. In most cases there is the additional complication of determining to what stage in the production process a given iteration of the screenplay belongs.

This is just a sketch, and some of the daunting volume of material held in American archives will doubtless lead future scholars to confirm, modify, question or overturn the provisional conclusions of current researchers. What can hardly be disputed is the value of undertaking primary research in the attempt to establish the ways in which the Hollywood studio system actually operated.

Frame 4: The final frame, that of criticism and interpretation, is the one that currently seems least amenable to screenwriting studies, partly because the field is currently and necessarily concerned much more with primary research into production than with reception, and partly because the screenplay seems in general less available to literary interpretation than other textual genres. The possibilities of a screenplay developing a creative afterlife are significantly lower than that of a play or a novel because, as Carrière and others observe, it is written specifically to enable a single realization in a different medium, after

which its job is to die, having in this respect a life cycle as reminiscent of the male praying mantis as of the caterpillar.

The theoretical justification for studying texts outside their production contexts nevertheless seems clear enough. It is bound up with what the currently highly unfashionable Jacques Derrida terms the 'general citationality' or 'general iterability' of language (1982: 325):

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), as a small or large unity, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts [...] What would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on the way?

(Derrida 1982: 320–21, original emphasis)

Once a text has been produced and circulated, it becomes detached from its producer and subject to whatever use anyone subsequently chooses to make of it.

The danger is that this opens up textual studies to pure subjectivity, which, particularly in the context of a new field attempting to establish valid 'frames' through which its object may be defined, may at best seem pointless. Perhaps the key site for the debate of this topic in literary studies is Stanley Fish's book *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. The title of the essay that in turn gave the book its title was prompted, Fish tells us, by an incident on his university campus when a student asked one of Fish's colleagues, 'in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?' (1980: 305). In other words, do we believe that the text produces meanings to which we respond, or do we, in effect, create the text by following the methodologies prescribed by the interpretive communities of which we are members? Fish argues for the latter, which helps to explain his devastating formulation in a different essay in the book: 'theories always work and they will always produce exactly the results they predict [...] Indeed, the trick would be to find a theory that *didn't* work' (Fish 1980: 68, original emphasis).

This cuts both ways. On the one hand, the student who does not believe in 'poems and things' has in an important sense made the text disappear, and risks bringing into being a critical world in which anything goes. She has committed what Sherlock Holmes identifies as the 'capital mistake' of 'twist[ing] facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts' (Doyle 2008: 431). On the other hand, 'theories always work' because they are a precondition of scholarship, helping to determine which facts to investigate and what value to attribute to them. Moreover, 'general iterability' is a condition of *all* texts, and all scholarship. Fish's 'interpretive communities' are very similar to the 'frames' of media and communications theory, which 'select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text'. They cannot be dispensed with: there is no position that is outside the frame that is not a member of some interpretive community. The only way we can halt this process of selection and interpretation is by *not citing*: by making the marks inaccessible or invisible or dead, or just ignoring them. We, however, have chosen to become members of a community dedicated to picking up those traces and making uses of them – even in ways that may be of no interest to those who produced them in the first place.

The attempt to reconcile scholarly research with a methodology informed by a critical engagement with recent theory is one of the things

that has drawn screenwriting research to French genetic criticism ('genetic' here referring to the genesis of the artwork). For example, many outstanding papers on work in progress delivered at the London Screenwriting Research Seminar series (Macdonald 2011; Rossholm 2012; Davies 2012) have exploited its methodology, and it is certain to inform several significant publications in the very near future. So far it has largely been applied to reconstructing the 'screen ideas' (Macdonald 2004) behind individual films; in time it may also enable broader, perhaps more collaborative approaches to a larger corpus of texts.

Both screenwriting studies and genetic criticism have emerged quite recently, towards the end of what might be described as a three-stage critical history that is shared by many disciplines in the humanities. This history is very familiar, but nevertheless worth briefly retracing here via Daniel Ferrer and Michael Groden's introduction to the influential 2004 anthology *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Texts*. The manuscript research of the first stage 'tended to be pragmatic and not theoretically self-conscious, to consider textuality and intention as unproblematic, and to see the manuscripts exclusively in relation to the subsequent published work' (Ferrer and Groden 2004: 5). Within literary studies, this confidence in the text as a stable, autonomous object, and in corresponding objectivity in reading, can be seen in the 'verbal icons' and 'well-wrought urns' of the 'New Criticism', which was highly influential between the 1920s and the 1950s. In the second stage, roughly from the late 1960s to the end of the 1980s, critical theory radically destabilizes the text, prompted by a structuralist 'conception of a synchronous or timelessly present text', for example, or of a 'post-structuralist idea that all texts are fields of free-playing signifiers'. In the third stage, scholarship returns to the world of 'historical development and context' (Ferrer and Groden 2004: 5), but now armed with methodologies influenced by the preceding theoretical phase. In this current stage much 'pure' critical theory appears outmoded, whereas genetic criticism 'has not only outlasted Roland Barthes's death, Tzvetan Todorov's retreat into ethics, and Gérard Genette's passage from narratology to general aesthetics, it is only now reaching maturity' (Ferrer and Groden 2004: 2).

A major reason for its current prominence is that it combines the virtues of primary archival research with a critical self-consciousness about the relationship between the research methodology and its object, and the instability of the latter:

Like old-fashioned philology or textual criticism, [genetic criticism] examines tangible documents such as writers' notes, drafts, and proof corrections, but its real object is something much more abstract – not the existing documents but the movement of writing that must be inferred from them. Then, too, it remains concrete, for it never posits an ideal text beyond those documents but rather strives to reconstruct, from all available evidence, the chain of events in a writing process.

(Ferrer and Groden 2004: 2)

This 'movement of writing' is the 'avant-texte', which is the defining insight of genetic criticism. The aim is 'to seize and describe a movement, a process of writing that can only be approximately inferred from the existing documents'; it 'pursues an immaterial object (a process) through the concrete analysis of the material traces left by that process' (Ferrer and Groden 2004: 11).

That sounds rather like much current work on screenplay texts, especially in relation to film production. The marriage is likely to prove especially fertile, because both genetic criticism and screenwriting research seek to bridge the gap between theory and research, bind the text to its moment of production, see the text(s) as unstable, encompass multiple media, and tend to position themselves as coming, as it were, after the event. Genetic criticism may also prove a peculiarly apposite means of approaching some of the problematics within screenwriting that distinguish it from other forms of 'literature', especially those of collaboration and the anticipated realization in another medium. Macdonald finesses what he has previously termed the 'screen idea' (2004) as the 'screen-text', by analogy with the *avant-texte*, and proposes to supplement this with study of the 'informing poetics':

if we can reconstitute not just the *screen-text* but also something of the *poetics* that informed the screenwriter, a study of their belief system rather than just the industrial context, we have something – an *informing poetics* – that we can use to understand that screenwriter's work.
(Macdonald 2010: 5, original emphasis)

The work of Macdonald and others in exploring screenwriting via genetic criticism is extremely significant, and wholly desirable as a means of reconciling theory with practice and textual scholarship. My aim in the remainder of this article is merely to suggest that, like any act of framing, it brings certain operations into sharper focus while marginalizing others, especially if we were to concur that 'you can[']t study individuals or scripts in isolation from [...] the "informing poetics" of that time and place' (Macdonald 2010: 12). First of all, this would, in keeping with Ferrer and Groden's arguments, make screenplay analysis a merely reconstructive activity, and one that would be both impossibly ambitious (there is no limit to the material we could determine as having some influence on the 'informing poetics') and impossibly limited (there is no way we can simply reconstruct that historical moment without in some way bringing in our own, for example, or without in some way conceding that the historical moment itself is not circumscribed). This is not so much a criticism as a restatement of an unavoidable condition: similar caveats could be raised against *any* act of critical framing, and critical framing is what all of us are doing all of the time.

More specifically, however, attempting to define the *avant-texte* could become another iteration of the original sin of screenwriting research, which has proceeded *from the beginning* on the assumption that there is an ontological problem surrounding its object (see Horne 1992; Price 2010: 43–53), without going through that long period of data collection and textual analysis that preceded the development of related arguments in literary studies. What Maras terms the 'object problem' is in part *produced* by the framing activities that affirm its existence, and to these can now be added the mystery of the *avant-texte*, the pursuit of which Macdonald (2011) compares to 'chasing rainbows'. In practice, however, there are pragmatic limitations beyond which the pursuit of the *avant-texte* is likely to show diminishing returns: it may be extremely useful in helping to trace a shaping narrative to the production of certain 'independent' films, for example, but less so in relation to the modular packages that have formed much of Hollywood's production since the late 1970s.

Finally, the possibilities opened up by the historical conjunction of genetic criticism and screenwriting studies could threaten to close down any

other possibilities that may emerge from studying screenplays *outside* their informing poetics. That the text can be detached from its original context and reinscribed within others that cause it to lose its origins will come as no surprise to screenwriters who are used to seeing their work rewritten by others. Meanwhile, there are critical and other readerships for screenplays that lie outside their moment of production. For example, several critics (e.g. Sternberg 1997: 71–76; Igelström 2011; Davies 2012) have noted the widespread variation between screenplays when it comes to the presence and extent of narratorial commentary, which logically ought to be absent if the text is indeed ‘nothing more than a set of notes to a production crew’.

In any case, the need to address that crew forms only one of the structures informing the organization of the text. Another is the screenplay’s *internal* organization: a line early in a screenplay will often be echoed by another later on, characters will be paired (hero and villain) and so on. Under the aegis of genetic criticism and its interest in tracing the creative process, we are perhaps *more* likely to make reference to the significations of images, combinations of words, recurrent tropes and so on, as they resonate not only for the writer(s), but – and this is where we would have to go beyond genetic criticism – for readers and audiences. To take a crude example, a Google search for ‘best one-liners in films’ threw up as the first sentence in the first hit: ‘We all know some of the famous on[e]-liners from the movies, but some of them are so commonplace that you may not even know that it’s a quote from a movie or from which movie it originated’ (Fitzgerald 2008). This phenomenon is one illustration of a creative afterlife of screenplays that detaches them from their original production to circulate in new contexts. And to take a single writer’s work to provide other examples, David Mamet’s screenplay for his own film *House of Games* (1987) was adapted by Richard Bean into a play staged at London’s Almeida theatre in 2010, while his script for *Wag the Dog* (directed by Barry Levinson, 1997) acquired new resonances when it appeared to anticipate some of the future actions of then-President Bill Clinton.

Perhaps these are chance exceptions to a general rule. But all scholarly writing about screenplays will always reinscribe them within new contexts provided by the scholar’s critical framing, including the newly discovered frame of the *avant-texte*, and there is no reason why that framing should always be reconstructive. To take one, final example: the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles holds a substantial archive relating to Mack Sennett, especially covering the Triangle-Keystone years between 1915 and 1917. This shows that the company would begin with story synopses that were then refined, often in great detail, and which generated further textual materials through to post-production. (Tom Stempel (1988) was the first to recognize the significance in the history of screenwriting of the Sennett and other scripts at the MHL.) But we could also detach these texts from their origins and frame them differently. For example, the company’s quasi-industrial methods of working generated a stream of texts that continually recycle and recombine the same elements: there is relentless repetition of similar situations, while characters have no identity (this is even more striking in the scripts than the films) and are reduced to mere ciphers, puppets to be used at the whim of those who control them. The repetitive dehumanization of the process brings to (my) mind the Marquis de Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom*, and more generally a theatre of cruelty encompassing at one extreme the present-day comedy of embarrassment (for instance, *The Office*), and at another the ‘theatre of the

absurd', such as the plays of Samuel Beckett, which routinely display their author's fascination with slapstick and silent film comedy. I could, perhaps, start to extend this into a theory about how screenplay texts are by their nature self-contradictory, creating characters that on the one hand are placed in situations that ask them to make choices, and on the other are mere victims of a set of instructions to a faceless industrial crew who will manipulate them for their own fun and profit. If I were to do that, however, I would always have to bear in mind that '[t]he temptation to form premature theories upon insufficient data is the bane of our profession' (Doyle 2008: 319).

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