

1.

PUTTING HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE TOGETHER

This chapter explains the methodological approach of this book, and stresses the importance of a historically and theoretically informed account of practice. It identifies an interest in speaking about screenwriting in novel ways, beyond issues of 'story and structure', and suggests that a theoretical interest in particular 'problems' in screenwriting can be useful. The chapter explores an 'object problem' in screenwriting, which refers to the difficulty of pinning down an object of discussion and debate, but also flags the separation of conception and execution, and particularism, as key issues for discussion. There is arguably a dearth of analytical frames for looking at these kinds of problems and in this chapter I suggest a new frame linked to the idea of screenwriting as both practice and discourse. In the area of history, I attempt to build a bridge between revisionist film history and the post-1970s historiography of screenwriting by focusing attention on the historical identity of screenwriting, as well as the discursive boundaries of our contemporary understanding of screenwriting.

This book is written at an interesting time for those concerned with screenwriting issues. We have been bombarded with manuals outlining formulas and structures for screenwriting for so long that there is now general understanding that there is no magic formula for good scriptwriting. There is recognition that every project is challenging in its own way, involving a rethinking of the rules. There is also healthy scepticism – evident in films such as *Adaptation* (Dir. Spike Jonze, Writ. Charlie Kaufman, 2002) – surrounding notions such as the three-act structure, the commercialisa-

tion of the craft of screenwriting and the packaging of advice about screenwriting by so-called 'script gurus' such as Syd Field (see Castrique 1997). These trends are evidence of an interest in new ways of talking about screenwriting beyond well-worn concepts of story and structure (see Millard 2006a) and plot and character (Martin 2004). But there is a lack of tools to aid in this task, and the discussion can get easily bogged down in old arguments and conflicts. Faced with the recognition that 'manuals are not enough' (Macdonald 2004b), there is a desire to speak about screenwriting in different ways.

One of the tools that can be useful for talking about screenwriting in new ways is theory. While theory is often linked to 'high theory' work in literary studies (see Culler 2000), many screenwriters are already consumers of theory. Theory is embedded in many screenwriting manuals: from the mythic 'archetypal' analysis of Christopher Vogler, to the structuralist tendencies of Syd Field, to the new critical or formal analyses of Robert McKee. There is a general sense that Aristotelianism is alive and well in Hollywood (see Hiltunen 2002). Were it not for an almost total absence of references to literary studies, screenwriting could almost be described as an applied sub-branch of the academic area of narrative studies.

Thinking about the uses of theory in relation to screenwriting can lead down at least two paths. The first path has to do with more diverse kinds of theory and philosophy, works of politics, history, culture and society, for instance, leading to a more informed screenwriting. Many screenwriters are open to this form of research-led practice, and keen to explore deeper aspects of the social and political issues and events they write about.

The second path has to do with teasing out in more detail theoretical issues and 'problems' (in the mathematical sense of the term) that are already present in screenwriting – and I have already alluded to some of these, including the separation of conception and execution, the intermediality of the script and the two senses of screenwriting discussed earlier. There are other 'problems' that exist, such as the difficulty of identifying an object in screenwriting (which is closely related to the issue of the separation of conception and execution, and to which I shall turn in a moment) and what I term below 'particularism', a tendency to align screenwriting with particular groups.

One obstacle to thinking about screenwriting in novel ways is a dearth of analytical frames through which to engage with screenwriting.⁸ The term 'frame' here is borrowed from an approach in media and communication studies called frame analysis, where it refers to ideas of selection and salience: 'To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text*' (Entman 1993: 52; emphasis in original). The term is often used to discuss media coverage of a particular event or issue. There are some very familiar frames through which to engage with screenwriting: among them are the practitioner frame, the story and structure frame, the business frame and the anti-screenwriting frame. Each of

these frames highlights particular aspects of screenwriting. The practitioner frame tends to be about advice, experience and the so-called 'creative process'. The story and structure frame is primarily concerned with dramatic principles and storytelling problems. The business frame focuses on deals and pitching a project. The anti-screenwriting frame is suspicious of the literary dimension of filmmaking and tends to 'beat down' the writer.

Each of these frames produces a different perspective on screenwriting, at times even competing with one another. A business frame might focus on the script as package or property, while a story and structure frame might provide a different aesthetic focus that may be in conflict with particular marketing ideas. Different frames can change over time. The business frame of 1920s Hollywood (which itself could vary across companies specialising in gangster pictures, melodrama or musicals) looks different to that of today. While today the practitioner frame is dominated by discussion of screenplays and feature films, in the past it related to plots of action and photoplays.

Clarifying the 'Object Problem': Screenwriting as Practice and Discourse

A key issue arises at this point, which is that screenwriting, while intensely discussed and debated, is rarely fully defined. The 'object' of the above frames is underspecified. It could be argued that there is in fact a good reason for this, that screenwriting is not an 'object' in any straightforward sense: it is a practice, and as such it draws on a set of processes, techniques and devices that get arranged differently at different times. While this arrangement relates to what can be seen as an 'object' – say a script or a film – it is not clear that either the script or film is best treated as an 'object' in this context: scripts are in transition all through film production, they vary in form and function across different modes of filmmaking; and films are more than final products or outputs that only exist at the end of the process. The line between where the script stops and where the film starts can, furthermore, be mysterious and blurry.

What I term the 'object problem' in screenwriting refers to the difficulty of both defining screenwriting as an object, and identifying an object for screenwriting. Is the 'object' of screenwriting on the page or the screen? Does the script or its realisation exist independently from the film? Is the 'script' the final product of the screenwriting process, or just one aspect of the filmmaking process? Are we dealing with two objects (the script as read and film as distributed) or one? And what should be made of discrepancies between the script and film and then published script? If the screenplay is the object, how did it emerge and develop? These questions are not easily answered, and the 'object problem' not easily resolvable because of the unique relationship between script and film. The frames mentioned above do not always illuminate the problem well – although the practitioner and anti-screenwriting frame can

produce some important insights (see Carrière 1995). The more one grapples with the complicated object-status of screenwriting, the more it becomes apparent that no one frame can fully account for it.

What would be helpful in this context is an approach that focuses on the changing nature of screenwriting practice, the status of the film and script in that process and the nuances of the object problem. Ideally, it would accommodate a historical perspective open to different received understandings of screenwriting, and not be prescriptive about how writing or scripting should be defined, or the place of writing in production. Also, it should be flexible enough to allow us to look at different frames together, and how they interact to construct a sense of an object (or different senses of an object) that maps onto the space of screenwriting. The perspective or frame I want to put forward is to think about screenwriting as a discourse. A discourse frame focuses on the way screenwriting has been shaped and talked about in particular ways. The concept of discourse does not solve the object problem entirely, but it allows us to clarify it, to focus on it more carefully, as well as to look at particular frames and what they say about screenwriting. Through the concept of discourse it is possible to grapple with the fluidity of screenwriting, the way it has changed over time and gets seen in different ways.

Elaborating on this approach further: screenwriting is a practice of writing, but it is also a discourse that constructs or imagines the process of writing in particular ways. Indeed, strictly speaking, discourses and practices are inseparable; the two meld together in skills and bodies, understandings and ways of speaking about the craft. Practice, here, is not something 'out there' beyond language or discourse. Instead of describing and analysing practice as a 'doing', separate from 'theory', I see practice as constituted in action, ideas and language. Screenwriting is thus a layered activity, drawing together skills, performance, concepts, experiences and histories – individuals and groups encounter and 'know' screenwriting through these constructs.

Thinking about discourse and practice together involves considering the very identity or make-up of a form of practice. In *On the History of Film Style*, David Bordwell comes close to a discourse approach to media practice when he focuses on stylistic norms, techniques and group style (see 1997: 118, 121). He comes closer still when he outlines a 'problem/solution model [that] recognises that individual action takes place within a social situation' (1997: 150). 'The filmmaker pursues goals; stylistic choices help achieve them. But no filmmaker comes innocent to the job. Task and functions are, more often than not, supplied by tradition' (1997: 151). However, filmmakers themselves are not blank slates, and often come primed with particular speaking positions in respect to 'the industry'. Bordwell's focus on tradition as 'supply' lacks a broader account of discourse and communication, and how that discourse (in)forms media practice.

A useful question to consider at this point is: 'What does analysing discourse involve?' 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. As such, manuals and handbooks are especially rich sources for statements that shape the discourse. An awareness of historical changes in writing is important: screenwriting is not singular or static through time. Because screenwriting does not exist in a vacuum, also important are the 'border disputes' that can occur between different craft areas (thus, directors and producers can be seen as contributors to screenwriting discourse). More specifically, analysing screenwriting discourse involves thinking about speaking position (who is saying what at which time), working with the terminology or jargon used in screenwriting (how things are said), appreciating the different objects of scripting (what is spoken about, including formats of script and the nature of the work), as well as the way different individuals imagine the craft (giving us a sense of the broader field and its rules and norms).

Thinking about the discourse of screenwriting is not a process of focusing on discourse over here (what people say) and practice over there (what people do). What people say is shaped by doing, and vice versa; practice is shaped by discourse. Looking at screenwriting through a discourse frame involves exploring how the practice of screenwriting is constructed or constituted through statements that circulate through institutions, handbooks, trade magazines, academic studies, promotional materials and other writings. Using statements from writers and theorists to illustrate particular ideas or assumptions, I shall examine different 'ways of speaking' about the script and screenwriting in this 'archive'. This book can in a sense be thought of as a primer in how to tune into and listen to screenwriting discourse as it has emerged in the US and taken hold internationally, picking up on tropes and ideas that reoccur over time. I focus on what I consider to be many of the main tropes, but this is by no means a final analysis.⁹

Thinking about screenwriting in this way, it becomes apparent that screenwriting discourse in fact has a long history and that discourses about screenwriting already exist and circulate. In this sense, one challenge of a critical reflection on screenwriting is to think about the area differently (in terms of different time frames and conceptions or norms of writing). One particular discourse will be familiar to some readers, in the form of an account of the experience of writers from the East Coast of the US as they encounter the Hollywood studio system from 1930–1940. In *West of Eden: Writers in Hollywood, 1928–1940*, Richard Fine identifies some common themes in this account, including discrimination against writers and the philistinism of producers (1993: 107–115), as well as a gesture whereby one conception of writing and literary work is pitted against the efforts of scenario writers as the 'lowliest and most ignoble' kinds of labourers (1993: 72). Literary workers with established reputations in New York 'would quickly learn that in Hollywood the "writer" was defined not only differently, but diametrically so' (1993: 104). As a result, a powerful discourse about Hollywood emerges, intermingled with ideas about screenwriting.

Distinguishing between different levels or layers of discourse can be difficult, especially in an area such as filmmaking that involves the collaboration of many craft workers from different areas. Ultimately I am not interested in policing a rigid formal distinction between discourses *about* and *of* screenwriting. But I am interested in key differentiators such as practice, the object and also speaking position, in that they help us identify different discursive formations. For example, the discussion of screenwriting in *West of Eden* is often about the studios, producers or Los Angeles. It also emerges from writers who do not in the first instance derive their standing as writers from screenwriting but rather from other kinds of literary production. It is crucial to pay attention to speaking position. As Fine notes: 'this "writer's view" of the studio system cannot be taken as an accurate or objective description of the system; it is not how the studios *really* worked. Rather, it is evidence of the fundamental beliefs, attitudes, and values *shared by these writers* which determined the way they, as *writers*, viewed their world' (1993: 104; emphasis in original). Not all New York writers are subject to this perspective, however. Writers such as Dudley Nichols and Sidney Howard, whom I shall look at more carefully in what follows, can be seen as contributors to this dominant discourse of screenwriting, but a closer reading of aspects of their work shows they are part of a different perspective on screenwriting as well.

Significantly, the term 'discourse' provides a link between thinking about screenwriting and recent developments in film studies. While it has become commonplace to see film history as involving three major forces – technology, social and economic conditions, and aesthetics and style – language and discourse forms a fourth crucial but less developed area. It has become common in the literature to hear about larger cultural and institutional discourses framing particular developments (see Decherney 2005: 42), 'public discourse' (Hansen 1985: 322), even 'critical' or 'industrial' discourse (Higashi 1994: 191, 195). Tom Gunning draws extensively on the concept of discourse in his study of D. W. Griffith and the origins of American narrative film. There, 'narrative discourse is precisely the text itself – the actual arrangement of signifiers that communicate the story – words in literature, moving images and written titles in silent films' (1991: 15). But the concept has a much broader function in his work, which is to get away from a closed notion of the text and connect it to social and industrial concepts; indeed a whole 'sea of discourse'. For Gunning, the notion interacts with others such as 'signifying system' and 'filmic system' to produce a highly nuanced approach to signification and its links to social forces. This enables an approach to works 'which acknowledges their aesthetic identity but is also attuned to their function as social discourse' (1991: 11).

The concept of discourse allows Gunning to range across aesthetic forms as well as modes of production, distribution and exhibition. Whereas for Gunning the focus is on individual films, in this book the focus is screenwriting discourse itself, on understandings of the craft and statements about writing. In this respect, discourse will not

be linked to the idea of a filmic system or a particular idea of context or reception, so much as a concept of media practice.

A discourse frame focuses on the way screenwriting has been structured in particular ways. Because the practice and discourse of screenwriting is interwoven, the history of screenwriting is inseparable from a history of discourses that surround and constitute screenwriting. Approaching screenwriting as a way of speaking about texts, writing and production allows us to question received understandings of what screenwriting should or could be. This focus goes against a dominant tendency in screenwriting circles to speak about 'the Script' (singular), and screenwriting, in very authoritative ways. It allows us to look at how screenwriting is 'discursively constructed', as cultural critics say. It also allows us to focus on an essential and neglected aspect of the history of screenwriting practice: which is how critics and writers invented a practice in discourse. The invention of screenwriting occurs through particular terms and constructs such as 'writing for the screen', the idea of the script as a 'blueprint' and the notion of the screenplay. As I hope to show, many handbooks and writings by screenwriters, film theorists and critics have sought to redefine and renovate film writing.

Taking History Seriously

This book could not have been written without the efforts, carried out by a range of authors since the 1970s, to pay more attention to screenwriting and redress a perceived neglect of the area (one exacerbated by auteur theory). Of course, the corporate history of screenwriting dates from before the 1970s (see Ross 1941; Sands 1973; Wheaton 1973; Ceplair & Englund 1980; Schwartz 1982; Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson 1985; Bielby & Bielby 1996; Buckland 2003), and an understanding of this history is useful to the study of screenwriting practice and issues related to screenwriters (such as the emergence of the Guild, and the Blacklist). Since the time that story became a priority in motion pictures the writer has been embroiled in a conflict of authority with the director and later the producer, a struggle for recognition of their expertise and craft and in some cases direct creative control. For William Goldman, 'writers have always been secondary in Hollywood' (1983: 52). But rather than get bogged down in grievance and even resentment, our understanding of this area can be extended in a critical fashion.

History is important in this book because it helps us understand that the story film did not arise in a vacuum, and the invention of screenwriting took place within a complex set of cultural and institutional practices and conditions. Part of the challenge of approaching screenwriting in a more analytical fashion is to get serious about the history and historiography of screenwriting. There are many forms of historical writing. For some readers, the term history will evoke a 'life and times' chronology of screenwriting from its earliest days to the present, identifying specific, different, periods of

screenwriting and mapping the contributions of key figures onto its progress. Such an approach, however, can overlook important issues to do with how screenwriting works and functions. As Edward Azlant notes: 'Even the richest history of screenwriting may not tell us everything about the nature and structure of the screenplay' (1980: 6).

Since the 1970s, the area of film history has become highly sophisticated, imagining the technological, representational and socio-cultural aspects of screen practice in a relationship of 'constant, interrelated change' (Musser 1990: 16). A distinction between an early and 'primitive' cinema and a more mature narrative cinema, for example, has been problematised. Scholars looking at the cinema of the late 1890s and early 1900s highlight the presentational approaches surrounding the screen, often borrowed from lectures, travel shows and vaudeville. Film critics and historians attempt to explore an interaction between what Charles Musser calls cinema's mode of production (how it is made) and the mode of representation (how a story is told or subject represented) (see 1990: 7). One can imagine that screenwriting is of central importance to this interaction, as it is part of the process of making and central to representation. However, an emphasis on scenes, shots, editing and the visual aspects of film, has meant that screenwriting is rarely treated with the kind of specific attention to detail that is given to film form. A group of dedicated historians (among them Tom Stempel and Edward Azlant) have begun to address this situation by focusing on the history of screenwriting and screenwriters, but their work does not always pick up on the techniques of contemporary film history, is sometimes focused around a 'life and times' approach looking at who did what and when, and does not always build on or go beyond established historical sources (see McGilligan 1989).

In this book I present a purposive history that seeks to foreground some of the conceptual frameworks within which screenwriting is understood. Although this study draws on archive and historical material – especially early handbooks – it is not a detailed empirical investigation of actual examples of screenwriting practice and its variations through different production companies. Nor does it undertake a comparison of different writing styles or genres of screenwriting. Taking precedence over these approaches is an interest in the historical identity of screenwriting. As I have suggested above, rather than give a complete history of screenwriting to the present day, the historical scope of this book is defined by three key anchoring points: the emergence and institutionalisation of a notion of 'writing for the screen' as the hallmark of screenwriting, the 'invention' of the screenplay and, finally, the idea that the script is a kind of blueprint for production. In other words, I want to explore how a particular idea of writing for the screen came to be institutionalised, how the screenplay became page-based and how the idea of the script as a 'blueprint' operates in screenwriting discourse. Putting these three notions together, the book traces the way 'writing for the screen', the form of the screenplay and the notion of the script as blueprint define the discursive foundations and boundaries of a contemporary understanding of screenwriting.

Since the late 1970s, film scholars and critics have paid increasing attention to the history of screenwriting, especially early screenwriting. This book draws on that work, but it also wants to open up questions around the kind of history being written. In particular, I want to challenge approaches to history that do not open up issues to do with the conceptualisation of screenwriting. The history writing that concerns me is based on notions of the screenplay and screenwriting that have not been fully examined or theorised, and are projected back onto the past, thus obscuring important aspects of screenwriting history.

It will be useful to briefly describe some of the works in this area.¹⁰ A well-known study is Tom Stempel's *FrameWork: A History of Screenwriting in the American Film* (first published in 1988) – which has its own origins in his 1980 book on screenwriter Nunnally Johnson. Other key works include Edward Azlant's 1980 doctoral thesis, *The Theory, History, and Practice of Screenwriting, 1897–1920*,¹¹ John Brady's introduction to *The Craft of the Screenwriter: Interviews with Six Celebrated Screenwriters* (1981); Richard Corliss's edited collection *The Hollywood Screenwriters* (1972a) and his *Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema, 1927–1973* (1974).¹² Ian Hamilton's *Writers in Hollywood, 1915–1951* (1990), while arriving later than the aforementioned works, and drawing on them, shares most of their preoccupations in its evaluation of different writers at different periods of Hollywood's development.¹³ Lizzie Francke's *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood* (1994) forms a response to the masculinist slant of the history, as does Marsha McCreadie's *The Women Who Write the Movies: From Frances Marion to Nora Ephron* (1994) and Cari Beauchamp's *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* (1997).¹⁴

Pat McGilligan's important 'Backstory' project should be mentioned here. Although its focus on interviews gives it a different standing, it goes some way to investigating conditions of screenwriting at varying times and in particular contexts. As McGilligan explains in the introduction to the third volume (1997), the project started life as a single volume devoted to the stories, reminiscences, craft method and point of view of some of the best screenwriters from the Golden Age of Hollywood. It has evolved into a running series but was never intended to be a scholarly or historical work, and McGilligan characterises it as 'part biography, part historical record, part anecdote, and part instructional seminar' (1997: 1). Or, as he explains in the introduction to the fourth volume, it is an 'informal history of screenwriting' constituted through the life stories of a representative cross-section of high achievers (2006: 1).

The history-writing around screenwriting that has emerged since the 1970s has an odd relationship to the revisionist film historiography that has been a powerful force in film studies in recent years. Thomas Elsaesser describes a new historicism, largely emerging from the US, but interlinked with research in the UK and Europe, that began to question the received, often anecdotal, history of cinema 'as the story of fearless pioneers, of "firsts", of adventure and discovery, of great masters

and masterpieces' (Elsaesser 1990: 3; see also Bordwell 1997: 103). The earlier generation of historians looked at film in terms of demographic, economic, technological and industrial determinants. As John Belton notes, revisionist historiography 'differs from traditional paradigms for the writing of film history in its attempt to understand the cinema as a system and to identify the various practices that define this system' (1997: 226). Revisionist history attempts to synthesise traditionally separated areas such as technology, aesthetics, audiences and business (Pople & Kember 2004: 24). Revisionist film history has had a unique impact in the study of early film, which was particularly limited by a narrow focus on technology, 'great figures' and a division between early and later cinema that cast early cinema in a 'primitive' realm.

David Bordwell characterises revisionist history as 'piecemeal history', because it deviates from the idea of one scholar writing a 'comprehensive history of style across the world', but also because it builds up very detailed accounts of film development from particular investigations into film technique and collective norms (1997: 118–19). 'Focusing on a narrower time span, viewing films in bulk, and tracing shifts in terms and concepts allowed revisionist historians to construct fresh contexts for explaining stylistic continuity and change' (1997: 124). However, as Belton notes, 'revisionist historians have yet to write a history of screenwriting practices' (1997: 226). This is a significant issue, for while it has an interest in practice much (non-revisionist) historiography of screenwriting relies heavily on a biographical, humanist approach to history and the studio. Practice is through questions of who wrote what, for which star or producer, credits and general stylistic issues. For all of the discussion of the passage of the story through the studio, different studios and writers, and the interaction between writers, directors, actors and producers, the historiography of screenwriting has not always paid detailed attention to different modes of film practice and their institutionalisation. It generally remains tied to either an evolutionary account of the development of screenwriting, and narrative, in the studio, or an individual life and times approach.¹⁵

Few historiographers of screenwriting have explored the implications of the new historicism on their research in the way that Janet Staiger (1979; 1980; 1983; 1985) and Patrick Loughney (1990; 1997a; 1997b) have sought to do. Stempel cites some work by Musser, and Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson in passing. In the case of Azlant's 1980 dissertation – which was written prior to the publication of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's work on modes of film practice and classical Hollywood (1985) – his account relies heavily on the standard works in film history that revisionists seek to move away from (see 1980: 114, n. 3). He draws on production histories in order to 'establish the historical presence of screenwriters and their works' (1980: 10). Tracing the refinement of the 'craft' of screenwriting 'within the studios' (1980: 160), he draws on a concept of 'narrative design' to 'pursue the origins of the screenplay through film's evolving complexities of materials, features, schemes of

development, and production circumstances' (1980: 58), but this falls short of a full account of modes of practice in the studio of the kind offered by Staiger.

One implication of the new historicism is a much closer attention to practices and their institutional contexts, although the lens through which this practice is analysed can often be very specific. Take, for instance, a common focus on 'economic and signifying practices'. This joining of the two forms of practices is one of the strengths of the revisionist approach. In one instance of this approach from Staiger, a culture's signifying practices can be said to include 'ideologies of representation, its conventions, its aesthetics' (1980: 12). Within this, a key area of focus has been on 'historically particular representational systems' (ibid.), and in Staiger's case the main concern is with the classical Hollywood representational system of narrative and continuity. Approaching signifying practices in this way is crucial to understanding the interaction between economics and a system of representation in Hollywood. Staiger wants to show how economic processes 'might be related to the development of representational systems' (1980: 13). But other ways of approaching practice are possible – and Staiger herself explains that her focus is the dominant practices not the options which might have been. I would suggest that looking at scripts and scriptwriting as illustrations of the system, and instances of it, as Staiger does, is important; but also that an analysis of screenwriting on its own terms raises different issues. Looking at the discourse of screenwriting shifts the emphasis slightly away from representational systems to the construction of the practice in non-systemic, and less functional, ways. It involves approaching signifying practices from a different direction, in terms of the space of writing and identity of practice.

Staiger's work on the history of the Hollywood system, as carried out through numerous articles, and her study with David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985), is of unique importance to the study of screenwriting. While not directly writing in the historiography of screenwriting, Staiger's work is important for two reasons: firstly, for its rigorous account of the emergence of the studio system and the separation of conception and execution. Secondly, her researches into the division of labour in the Hollywood mode of production have led to a careful examination of changes in scripting practices in relation to changing systems of film practice. As Andrew Horton notes (1992: 14), historians of screenwriting could do well to build on Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's study.

Film scholars and historians have become adept at looking beyond the film as text and appreciating industrial and production conditions as well as technological and trade discourses (especially exhibitor discourses) supporting film practice. They have even begun to talk about screenwriting manuals. But they have been less successful in exploring screenwriting discourse, generally using writing handbooks to elaborate upon or illustrate points of film style or narrative (see Bowser 1990: 257; Thompson 1999: 11, 15, 21).¹⁶ In this context, historical work on screenwriting is obviously

important to expanding our understanding of screenwriting practice, and can form something of an antidote to the shortfalls of revisionist film histories. However, the historiography of screenwriting has not always been in tune with 'revisionist' film history approaches that seek a more complex idea of practice and discourse. This book is a contribution, then, towards finding a middle ground between revisionist film history and still-emergent currents in the historiography of screenwriting.

Standing next to, but to one side of, revisionist film history, the emergence of a historiography of screenwriting at a particular point in time is itself a curious phenomenon. It is worth asking, 'Why did it arise in the 1970s?' I suggest that there are two key factors. The first is the rise of auteur theory in the US, and its perceived devaluing of the contribution of the screenwriter (see Froug 1972: ix–xix; Hamilton 1990: vii). Received in the context of a long-standing struggle to gain credit for the work of the writer in the filmmaking process, it has come about that auteurism can only be regarded as a usurpation of the writer's claim to authorship. Thus, for William Goldman, auteurism is taken to mean that 'it is the director who *creates* the film' (1984: 100; emphasis in original). The sense of grievance activated by auteurism has had powerful effects, leading to much debate. In this sense, as William Froug notes, 'the screenwriter does owe a debt of gratitude to the auteurs' (1972: xvii). Sometimes for political purposes, at other times for the purposes of granting long-overdue recognition, this focus on the writer has motivated close examination of earlier periods in which the writer was not so valued. Auteur theory has prompted a more careful evaluation of the work of screenwriting, and also gaps in dominant accounts, such as to do with ethnicity (see Harris 1996). The re-evaluation of screenwriting by women is also related to this ferment around authorship. There is a perception of a double oppression for women screenwriters. As Nora Ephron states: 'It is the writer's job to get screwed ... Writers are the women of the movie business' (quoted in McCreddie 1994: 3, 186).

A second motivating factor is a change in the screen culture of Hollywood itself, placing a great deal of emphasis on the script as a key part of the package. As Thompson notes: 'with the rise of package production since the 1970s ... free-lance scriptwriting has enjoyed a resurgence and a flood of manuals has appeared to cater to aspiring authors' (1999: 11). This approach is linked to the emergence of the so-called 'movie-brats' (see Pye & Myles 1979; also Madsen 1975; Hillier 1993). That is, film school-educated, 'cine-literate', directors and screenwriters who engineered a rethinking of the status of ideas, the importance of a good script and the role of creative people (see Stempel 2000: 197). Michael Pye and Lynda Myles associate the emergence of these filmmakers with a change in production conditions and the traditional creative and technical division of labour (1979: 85–6). Although film theorists have been careful not to overstate the differences between 'old' and 'new' Hollywood (see Tasker 1996; Thompson 1999: 6–8; Bordwell 2006: 5–10), this is regarded as a time when the power of the studio executive was fading, the

cost of moviemaking was rising dramatically (leading to less production) and proven actors were becoming more discriminatory about their commitment to a project (see Brady 1981: 24). The emphasis on a quality script as a key component of the 'package' during this period extends a much earlier tendency that stresses the importance of story and storytelling as a way of creating 'quality' drama. It has led to curiosity about writers. It has also generated a popular interest in writing 'on spec' – that is, writing a screenplay for speculation without prior commercial commitment – that continues to fuel the publication of countless screenwriting handbooks, magazines and websites on the topic (see Field 1984, 1994; Horton 1992; Fragale 1994; Seger 1994).

Considering both of these developments together, it is fair to say that the 1970s and 1980s were a time for re-evaluation of the role of the writer in US film culture. This has led to the publication of screenplays as books in their own right, and promoted greater public interest in 'America's storytellers', resulting in magazines, books of interviews, podcasts and coffee-table books of photographic portraits (see Lumme & Manninen 1999). Writing issues are more widely discussed. Aligned with changes in the film industry, this has led to the rise of the 'script guru' touring the world promoting their approach to screenplay writing.

It is not my intention to suggest that these two factors had no relation to what came before in the domain of filmmaking, or that they are totally distinct from one another. On the contrary, the auteur controversy has everything to do with the battles over credit that took place in the industrial structure of the 'old' Hollywood: a period that preoccupies many screenwriters of the 1930s and 1940s, through to the present debates over the 'film by' or possessory credit. Corliss is thus able to suggest that 'the effect of auteur theory was to steal back whatever authority (and authorship) the writers had usurped' (1974: xxvii).

Screenwriting and the Separation of Conception and Execution

Bearing on the object-problem in screenwriting is the issue of the separation of conception and execution in film production, forcing particular approaches to practice and creativity. One of the useful aspects of the concept of scripting introduced in the preface is that it is highly processual and thereby resists the prising apart of a product (script) and the practices of composition supporting it (writing). It is a dynamic way to approach scriptwriting that is not solely focused on the end manuscript. But this emphasis on the 'writerly' rather than the product aspect of scripting goes against a dominant logic of the studio system, organised around the separation of the work of conception and execution. This separation tends to see the work of acting and shooting as functions on the 'execution' side of the separation, not the conception side. This arrangement influences how we talk about performance and style. The separation is institutionalised by dividing production into stages (pre-production, shooting, post-

production), and introduces a logic that makes it difficult to see execution in terms of scripting (which tends to be posited at an earlier stage of production).

The division of functions and tasks in the studio influences the nature of screenwriting itself. Unlike other forms of literary production, the space of screenwriting can be highly segmented and subject to what Staiger calls a 'division of writing' between creation and rewriting (1985: 190). The work of writing is distributed between different 'subspecies' of writers: gag, continuity, treatment, adaptors, title writers and so on (McGilligan 1986: 1). In the 1930s the distinction between constructionists and dialoguers emerged (see Fine 1993: 74). These developments impacted on the space of conception and influenced relations between writers, directors and producers especially.

The separation of conception and execution permeates our ideas about the script. The script is supposedly written and then shot as planned. One myth surrounding scripts at the Ince studios held that, once approved, each script was stamped 'Shoot as Written' (see Staiger 1979; Bowser 1990: 222), thus formalising a distinction between creative and constructive phases. Today, the script is commonly seen as a kind of blueprint, with production being modelled closely on the building of a house. But the blueprint idea of the script is also being challenged and our notions of screenwriting may need updating.

Not all forms of production rely on a single moment of conceptualisation or scripting, and scripting can happen across the entire process of production. In addition, different technologies are disturbing the separation of conception and execution. Once understood narrowly in terms of digital effects, digital technology is now seen more broadly as an 'alternative production path for solving practical film problems' (McQuire 1997: 37). Reflecting on digital filmmaking, George Lucas speaks of a shift from linear processes to layering (see Kelly & Parisi 1997). According to Scott McQuire, digitally-orientated film production no longer follows an assembly 'line', but rather happens in a parallel development, whereby work that may traditionally have been seen as 'post-production' happens during the shooting phase (1997: 36). Digital filmmaking techniques not only potentially rework the separation of conception and execution, but also the relationship between words and images and the nature of scripting itself (through animatics and pre-visualisations).

If the traditional separation of conception and execution has reached a limit and is mutating, and is today being challenged by filmmaking approaches that do not follow the linearity of the assembly line, then this has important ramifications for screenwriting which now needs to grapple with new forms and sites of scripting. A novel account of scripting beyond the separation of traditional models of conception and execution is needed, as well as new ways of comprehending the shifts taking place. Questions arise, however, around the place of screenwriting in this new environment, and the adequacy of current frameworks. Contemporary discourses of screenwriting were forged in the context of a separation of conception and execution as it impacted

on the division of labour in Hollywood studios. There is much to celebrate and value about screenwriting and the efforts of screenwriters to gain both recognition for their craft and improved working conditions. When I write of these matters it is in testament to the real creativity of writers. Nonetheless, careful consideration needs to be given to the impact of the separation of conception and execution on our ideas about writing. In the following I explore the possibility that while some key ideas of screenwriting (such as those articulated by Dudley Nichols) emerge in reaction to the separation of conception and execution, our discourses of screenwriting may also be heavily invested in this separation, and perhaps dependent on it. In a two-fold process, it may be necessary to reflect on the way screenwriting is invested in the separation of conception and execution, but also at the same time consider and revalue forms of scripting that may not be subject to this separation in the same way.

Particularism: Players and Non-players

Walk into most bookshops today and you can find an abundance of material on the practice of filmmaking as understood by filmmakers; books and journals about the practice of screenplay writing; and more specifically screenplays as books (see Horton 1992). A survey of screenwriting manuals in the early 1980s describes a bullish market for scriptwriters, with many universities and colleges offering screenwriting courses (see Leff 1981: 281). This literature plays a key role in promoting screenwriting, but it also provides an insight into the sets of relationships and interactions surrounding the 'object', which in turn contribute to ideas about the identity of screenwriting.

From a media industries perspective, it could be argued that the proliferation of books about scriptwriting is incidental or marginal to the process of making films – a kind of secondary industry or publishing spin-off. However, this overlooks the extent to which the script/screenplay does not exist outside of institutions and history, but is fundamentally a discursive entity. The discourse of screenwriting is constituted in the interaction and interference of different formations of creativity, narrative, industry and production, theory and practice. By analysing these formations it is possible to get an insight into the way the industry is imaged and imagined by its practitioners. More specifically, we get an idea of who can or cannot speak with authority about screenwriting, and what forms 'proper' screenwriting practice.

This approach sees 'the industry' itself as a discursive entity. While the conventional approach is to define an industry quantitatively and organisationally in terms of its profits and losses and corporate structure, it is possible to view industry as constituted through ways of talking (sets of jargon), and constructed in the interaction and interference of different ideas about creativity, narrative, industry and production, theory and practice. Approaching industry as a discourse it is possible to gain an insight into the way the industry is maintained, imagined and contested by its

members, often through frameworks that are taken as a given, often 'assumed or explained' but not questioned see (Macdonald 2004a: 96; 2004b).

The work of French philosopher Michèle Le Dœuff might seem an unlikely point of reference here, but it offers a useful framework for exploring the 'imaginary' that shapes the film industry. In her analysis of philosophy, Le Dœuff describes a process whereby a social minority or group wraps social discourse around itself, by differentiating between masters and apprentices, 'players' and 'non-players', and manipulating the conditions for access and entry into the institution (see 1989; 1991). For Le Dœuff, this process involves using metaphors and images to construct philosophy as a space in which women have a secondary place. They are allocated the space of simile ('truth is like a woman', for instance), instead of agency. Le Dœuff describes this move as a form of 'particularism'. History with a masculinist bias could be seen as particularist in this sense. However, particularism is not limited to conventional formations of sexism, racism, colonialism or religious intolerance, and the concept can be applied to the world of film production.

Le Dœuff's work on metaphors and discursive 'imaginaries' is useful for describing the operation whereby screenwriting is defined or imagined around the figure of the writer and the blueprint. The theme of particularism is relevant in a study of screenwriting because it helps us understand how one particular group can shape, and speak for, writing defined in a particular way. This in turn gives us an idea about the limits and borders that define screenwriting practice.

As an example I want to turn to famous screenwriter of the 1920s, and Cecil B. DeMille¹⁷ collaborator, Jeanie Macpherson, and her 1922 article 'Functions of the Continuity Writer'. When she writes that 'the continuity IS the photodrama, the very soul of it – preconceived and fully worked out on paper by the photodramatist' (1922: 25), Macpherson is wrapping the discourse of film around the unique labour of the photodramatist, to the exclusion of other film workers and from those not qualified to do the work. The screenwriter emerges from this position as grand 'architect' – knower of the laws of screen drama – and differentiated from the 'amateur' and the 'hack' writer. Drawing on building metaphors, Macpherson explains that the writer, like the architect, is concerned with 'foundations'. The metaphor sets up ways of relating to the director, as 'master builder', handling raw materials and fitting them into place. At the same time, Macpherson addresses the reader in a particular way. The reader is an 'outsider, looking in', seeking to become an 'insider looking out' (1922: 32). This issue is not exclusive to the US. In 1936, Soviet theorist Osip Brik identified a similar problem, and saw the script as a key object of debate between different film personnel and between the arts. 'There is a tendency', he writes, 'to declare the group of film workers a closed caste reigning over the secrets of cinematic expertise' (1974: 95).

It is easy to associate particularist strategies of this kind with exclusion, and a potentially reductive idea of the politics of screen writing in which the writer keeps

novices out and co-workers in their place. The more complex reality is that writers have had (and often still do have) a tenuous place in the mode of production. In Macpherson's case, she is trying to define a legitimate space for the screenwriter as craftsperson.

Macpherson's text is one example of a wider phenomenon of works offering screenwriting advice to a public eager for success in the movies. This genre of writing offers a glimpse of the way practitioners package themselves and their craft for the public, but it also provides a way to imagine the industry. Indeed, much discussion of the script invokes a whole protocol for dealing with industry: one that sets up presuppositions for interaction with the craft, and modes of interaction between industry, practitioners and lay-people. Screenwriting, as a space where stories and industrial processes intersect, is particularly abundant with regulatory norms and filtering gestures. The fact that the majority of script books speak to novices is particularly important here; the bulk of 'how-to' books are, after all, primers to screenwriting that define writing for the screen, and access to it, in a particular way. This particularism works to define the shape of what qualifies, or does not, as industrial practice, as well as legitimate screenwriting; in other words, it regulates who can speak with authority and who cannot.

Less abstractly, these speaking positions are in fact linked to processes of funding, and narrative theories circulating within funding cultures and agencies are ushered in to bolster or define particular views. Within industry, these perceptions and understandings work to reproduce particular ideas about the object. As Sue Castrique suggests: 'Producers now sit down at script meetings with three questions: Where's the main character? Where's the through line? And where's the three acts?' (1997: 102). They can contribute to what Adrian Martin calls a 'culture of decisions' in which these decisions are made by individuals heavily invested in particular models of scriptwriting. 'And what are these people saying or writing? Things on the order of: "this script lacks a strong second act" ... "the hero is unlikeable" ... "there is not enough driving conflict" ... "this character has no journey"' (Martin 1999; see also 2004: 84). This culture of decisions, needless to say, has a direct impact on the kinds of films that can be made, and is part of a gatekeeping function. As Erik Knudsen notes: 'the systems created will favour those who speak the same "language" and know how to play the right "game"' (2004: 185). What I call a theory/funding nexus, drawing on particular ideas about screenwriting, thus shapes our screen culture (see Maras 2005).

In this chapter, I have sought to flesh out in more detail the methodology of this book, and its rationale for linking history, theory and practice. I have suggested that each of these terms – 'history', 'theory' and 'practice' – become key sites for rethinking screenwriting in different ways. I have sought to clarify what I have called the 'object problem' of screenwriting, the difficulty of fixing an 'object' of screenwriting,

by proposing a different frame linked to the concept of discourse. But, the object problem discussed above manifests itself in different ways on the level of history, theory and practice. In terms of history, the objects of analysis, the script forms and practices linked to it, change a great deal. In terms of theory, it is important to develop frameworks for screenwriting that can accommodate different approaches to scripting. In terms of practice, screenwriting as an object itself needs closer analysis in terms of the way that screenwriting is linked to particular production conditions, forms such as the screenplay and discourses that shape the nature of writing. In the next chapter, I look at a foundational issue in screenwriting, which is how the script is situated in film production.

2.

SITUATING THE SCRIPT IN FILM PRODUCTION

*This chapter examines the issue of the place of the script in film production. This is a topic that has drawn different responses over time, but which is important because it goes to the heart of assumptions about the nature of the script and scriptwriting that underpin different views about screenwriting. Readers might come to this chapter with the expectation that there is a single story of how the script should be situated in production. Here I examine a number of different ways of approaching the problem, from an emphasis on the written plan in the history writing on screenwriting, to debates in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, and also the work of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*.*

Production Plans and Early Film

Histories of screenwriting often begin with an account of the earliest form of scripts. Of course, this task is difficult because over time nomenclature changes (from scenario, to continuity, to screenplay), film jargon develops and the format becomes more codified – all of which need to be factored into our understanding of the development of screenwriting. I want to resist this tendency, or at least complicate it, by bringing production issues into the picture. Scriptwriting today is understood to have a particular place in the production process; an important aspect of the study of screenwriting