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❖ **Maras, Steven - Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice, Wallflower Press London 2008, (pp 256) ISBN 1905674813**

Reviewed by Maryella Hatfield

Writing for the screen has a multitude of meanings, as Steven Maras sets out to prove to his readers. It will mean very different things to different people, in various contexts, and has done so now for a century or more. You may be a studio executive on the backlots of Hollywood trying to get a project greenlit, or a student preparing your project for shooting, or a writer/director like Mike Leigh, for whom a script is an ever-changing artefact that blossoms through an improvisational process of working with actors or "actuals", exploring real life situations. To each of these, the term 'screenwriting' will mean something quite different.

Perhaps you are a theorist, or a screen historian, in which case screenwriting may have a different meaning again, depending on time or place, the object that is the script or screenplay, its deployment and its reception. The physical screen itself is changing over time, from the cinema screen, to the domestic, to the very small. Defining what kind of screen, what kind of story is being told, whether it's a story at all or a series of images designed to convey an emotion or elicit a reaction, whether it's a script that is an artefact in its own right, whether or not anything is produced; these indicate some of the questions and considerations being canvassed by Maras in his book.

And this is the interesting thing. Up until now, books on screenwriting or scriptwriting have often had very clear purposes, applications, audiences or constituencies to whom they were relevant. (It was often the case that ne'er the twain shall meet.) A flood of screenwriting manuals that were very popular in the 90s, were pretty much designed for anyone wanting to write a "successful Hollywood script". Aimed at budding and seasoned film-makers, all eager to try their hand at getting a script "out in 21 days", or to "get it right" by following the tried and true "rules" of the three-act structure, with turning points situated at just the right moments, the reader was urged to avoid such hazards as the inevitable "dead zone" of the second act.

Seminars by Robert McKee (author of *Story*) were packed out (probably still are) to a point where his acolytes wrote him into their films. The film *Adaptation* was hilarious for its inclusion of a scene where the main characters go to one of McKee's scriptwriting seminars to resolve a writer's block. Here, McKee plays a bombastic version of himself, outlining the "proper way" to write a script. The protagonists had (up to that point) occupied a film that was funny, original and tightly scripted, but which subsequently became formulaic and clichéd up to its

unbelievable end. But that was the joke, right?

Filmmakers like George Miller extolled the virtues of Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, and drew on Joseph Campbell's anthropological study of story through many cultures and histories in *Hero With a Thousand Faces*. One often had the impression of filmmakers desperately in search of the magic potion that would deliver the magic result – a successful film, television series, animation, whatever – just something that works, that reaches an audience. "Something that makes them laugh, makes them cry, gives them hope," said John Seale, Cinematographer, at an AFTRS seminar, recounting to film students one of the Hollywood epithets that he'd heard time and time again.

What often goes unnoticed is the question of what a script, or a screenplay actually is. Is it a blueprint for a finished product, leading to the final film? Is it a finished product in its own right, whether or not it leads to production? Is it an item required for sign-off to the next stage, a bureaucratic requirement, a set of guidelines and directives rather than a creative map into the as-yet unrealised world of the imagination?

What about post-production, what if there are glaring omissions between the production script and the post-production script? What if many of the original writer's words never make it to the finished product, being waylaid by dialogue specialists and structuralists along the production line? What can be said about authorship, the integrity of a script or a screenplay then?

There are so many complexities, so many constituencies laying claim to expertise, so many readings of what screenwriting actually is, and Steven Maras acknowledges this in his first sentence. He explains that his purpose is to "challenge your understanding of screenwriting". He states that his book is not "a screenwriting handbook in the sense that may be familiar to many readers. It is not a manual to writing 'screenplays that sell', or a guide to writing technique, but rather a handbook for opening up questions about screenwriting practice beyond solely 'business' or 'storytelling issues'."

Maras goes on to explain that he is seeking to create a bridge between "scholarly work in film, media and screenwriting" on one hand, and on the other, "practitioner-orientated discussions of craft and industry issues". To the outside observer, it might appear astonishing that there is any such division, that a bridge should need to be built in the first place. It may seem obvious that whilst screenwriting is all about working towards a practical outcome, such as a film, surely there would also need to be a knowledge of the history and theory in order for the work to be at all developed or sophisticated? By the same token, the theorists would surely be cognisant of the practical requirements and demands of the screenwriting process, and therefore perfectly capable of bridging any perceived gaps with ease! And yet, the fact that Maras has been able to sketch out in his book a vast array of theorists, historians, practitioners who are all dealing with screenwriting, yet so often from such completely different perspectives, is an indicator of how much a script is a complex industrial cultural artefact, and that it is going to be the subject of debate for many years to come.

Steven Maras assembles a dazzling array of practitioners and theorists alike, to mention a few – Dziga Vertov, Adrian Martin, Janet Staiger all on the same page – and presents in cases, some highly detailed explanations of how certain assumptions have emerged. In others, he has to skim across the surface, simply because there is so much to cover. And here is the tantalising thing about this book: because his subject is vast, Maras has had to be tremendously selective, as any author must.

Maras has had to summarise complex debates into a sentence. He has chosen to define his

area of exploration, as mainly "North American feature film-making and the discourse surrounding the screenplay in the US", whilst acknowledging the role of other forms of screenwriting to a lesser extent. One traverses cinema history in moments, national cinemas in a second, complex debates in a paragraph.

In referencing Ken Dancyger's work, *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules*, Maras indicates moments where screenwriting has had to move well beyond Hollywood's usual formulae to reach audiences, with original approaches. It's interesting that Dancyger's thesis in *Alternative Scriptwriting* (in part, exploring alternatives to Hollywood's adherence to traditional narrative structures), was that North American cinema was increasingly becoming more heavily influenced by films from independents, European cinema, Australian cinema, Asian cinema – anywhere but traditional Hollywood. By looking at independent and foreign films that were having an influence on Hollywood, Dancyger explored how films of North America were being forced into re-invention, in the effort to find new audiences, and to keep current audiences engaged.

When it comes to theory, Maras asserts that "film studies does not always know what to do with screenwriting, and screenwriting studies can have an ambivalent relationship to mainstream approaches within film studies. There seems to be a lack of recognition between the two areas ... the place of the script and writing in the production process, the format of what is being written is not extensively considered." He cites Janet Staiger as an exception to this for "firstly, her rigorous account of the emergence of the studio system and the separation of conception and execution. Secondly, her researches (sic) into the division of labour in the Hollywood mode of production (which) have led to a careful examination of changes in scripting practices in relation to changing systems of film practice."

This is certainly an area where I agree there could be much greater attention for future research and discourse: how the rigours of systems of production and reception influence screenwriting from conception, through structural development, and final output. This is often a very opaque process to any other than the real insiders. Outsiders rarely see the inner workings of script development, those who are involved or what factors determine the changes required. And despite certain production formats requiring specific structural approaches, it is important to examine projects individually, to understand exactly how each screenplay differs from or may be similar to another.

Whilst reading, I was reminded of an experience I had attending one of Robert McKee's Story courses. This in turn reminded me of the split I often felt between the industrial/business requirements of screenwriting and processes that more directly utilise the creative tools of cinema to express a story or idea. Anyone who has done McKee's Story course, will attest to his passionate commitment to narrative structure, his pursuit of "excellence" in screenwriting and attention to rules on what makes a scene function "correctly". Sitting all day through his scene-by-scene, line-by-line analysis of *Casablanca*, is one of those life experiences I'll probably never forget.

Nevertheless I was left with some niggling doubts as to the "rules" of good scriptwriting as espoused by McKee. I took the moment to speak with him in the afternoon break about his definitions of "pure cinema". I mentioned Wim Wenders' classic film, *Wings of Desire*. McKee dismissed the film as not making the grade, being in his view an example of an unresolved narrative. "Does that matter?" I tried to ask, "isn't it more important to see what works for audiences in practice? Wenders uses the language of the moving camera and audio woven together to create unforgettable experiences (without the usual lines of dialogue between

characters one has come to expect in Hollywood films). What about the opening sequence, where the camera and audio bring the audience into as “pure” a cinematic experience as one is likely to have? The audience enters into the mind and worldview of an angel descending into Berlin, as he travels through the clouds, overhearing a multitude voices, languages, on the radio airwaves. The audience is with him as he flies through apartment windows, and weaves in and out of people’s innermost thoughts and dilemmas through the masterful use of floating camera and sound. This is difficult to capture in a script, yet on screen it conveys such a powerful set of emotions and experiences...” McKee didn’t agree and I realised how culturally specific the notion of good cinema can be.

In my view, no scriptwriter was going to get all that down on paper and communicate it effectively to a studio executive for sign off. This scene was an example of Wim Wenders’ filmmaking mind on display, going full speed, writing with camera, using sound recording and design, building character and concept seamlessly, all in one go through split second impressions. In later interviews, Wenders described his first impressions of returning to Berlin after many years working in the US, how he wished to capture those first fresh moments on film through the vehicle of his own experience translated into his very specific fictional narrative, using camera and sound. Personal experience translated through metaphor, to me this was an example where conventions on screenwriting can only help tell part of the story.

Other filmmakers such as Andre Bresson sprang to mind. In his Notes On Cinematography, Bresson expounds strict guidelines on screenwriting. His films have been upheld by some as the “purest” examples of cinema in history. On one hand, some wished to see his guidelines and suggestions given greater acknowledgement for helping to creating a transcendent form of cinema, influencing filmmakers like Tarkovsky et al. On the other side, were those who believed he created movies and performances that were stultifying boring. Here is the stuff of debate, bring it on!

Another area that could do with future attention, is writing for TV and what can be learned about the industrial process of screenwriting for that medium. The current rise of the writer/producer is intriguing, especially in response to perceived and actual loss of power in the industrial landscape following the 2007-2008 writers’ strike in the US.

A show like 30 Rock is a potential case study. Some may dismiss it as merely TV comedy fluff, but actually there is much more on display. It incisively and irreverently reveals the inner workings of corporate broadcasters, and the way teams of writers and producers work together, particularly in TV comedy. It pulls no punches in exposing the power relations between the corporate boss as played by Alec Baldwin and his rebellious minions, played and led by actor/producer/writer Tina Fey. Are we seeing the emergence or the rise of the Screenwriter/Performer/Producer, whose commentaries, parodies and incisive insights into corporate and political culture often go way beyond the pale, (only you don’t get the joke til ten lines later?) Or is Tina Fey just a freak of nature?

It’s interesting to note where teams of screenwriters, performers and producers get together and do well. In Australia, it’s also TV comedy where it seems to have worked particularly well, The D-Generation, Frontline, The Hollowmen, with Working Dog probably the most successful example of this kind of teamwork, with Kath and Kim, (Riley Turner Productions) following close behind.

In the US, I observed feature film screenwriting to be an industrial process; a process of structural engineering. Stage one addresses issues of plot and structure. Once that’s resolved, bring on the dialogue writers and secondary character writers. Then there are the minor

narrative arc writers. And maybe we need someone at the end to polish it all up and make sure the thing still hangs together. This can happen in a way that would horrify most Australian screenwriters, yet in the US it is often the norm.

Steven Maras' Screenwriting History, Theory, Practice is not an easy book for novices: it assumes a considerable level of prior knowledge of history and theory of film, scriptwriting, and screenwriting. It is very well researched and presents as a strong reference point for future explorations, debates and discussions on the subject of screenwriting and the bridges needing to be built between theory, history and practice.

For me the book really zings when it discusses specific examples to illustrate a principle. For something as creative, culturally diverse, yet industrially demanding as the screenplay and screenwriting, the book is really helped by these kinds of illustrations; examples that demonstrate the theory or the idea under discussion. Steven Maras' achievement is to set out a number of parameters and future signposts for focusing "on less well understood aspects of screen discourse", to raise the bar on informed exchanges that acknowledge these little understood aspects. He does well to bring these discourses to the attention of readers and to indicate pathways for future debates.

#### **About the Author**

Maryella Hatfield lectures in Media Arts Production at UWS. She has worked as a writer/director /producer for many years and is a graduate of the AFTRS. She was awarded an AFC Fellowship in Script Editing, which allowed her to spend five months at Hollywood studio New Line, working in script and project development, and to study Directing and Screenwriting at UCLA and Universal Studios. Her recent documentary, The Future Makers was broadcast on Discovery Channel Australia and the Asia Pacific in 2008/2009. It has just screened in the Toronto Planet in Focus Film Festival, won Highly Commended in the Asian TV Awards 2009 and is nominated for the Zayed Future Energy Prize.

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