

## REVIEWS

### **SCREENWRITING: HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE, STEVEN MARAS (2009)**

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Steven Maras's *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice* is a significant and necessary book. Given the growth of screenwriting as an academic discipline, Maras's book is a timely attempt to trace its history and develop a clear analysis of what exactly is meant by writing for the screen. This is not a 'how-to' book to add to the hundreds that fill reading lists on screenwriting courses and bookshelves of screenwriters, would-be and actual. It is far more (and far more significantly) a 'what-is' book, which should prove a seminal text for the study of screenwriting.

Maras tackles an issue that our comparatively young and forlorn branch of film studies has been reluctant to address. A general consensus seems to have developed amongst those of us involved in the disciplines of writing, teaching or studying the screenplay; that we work in an important and much neglected area in the making of cinema, and that in foregrounding the screenplay we can give a different emphasis to the question of how films come into being. National film-policy bodies have contended that the problems and weaknesses of national cinemas are best addressed by improving the quality of the screenplay. In the United Kingdom in 2006, for example, Skillset

and the UK Film Council invested £675,000 in screenwriting training (Rolfe et al. 2007: 4). This much is, apparently, common ground. But when that apparent consensus is scrutinized we rapidly realize how fragile and insubstantial is the claim. We can, perhaps, agree that the subject of the screenplay is both neglected and necessary, but we are very far from agreement about what a screenplay is, let alone how it should be studied and practised.

Is screenwriting a form of writing, like other forms of dramatic writing? And if so what, if any, is the writer's relationship with others involved in making the film? How does the notion of the screenplay as text relate to the subsequent film made from that text (if there is one)? What is the status of unproduced screenplays, and can we develop an aesthetics or poetics of the screenplay, separate from other branches of film?

The ten chapters of Maras's book look at screenwriting as both practice and discourse. In it, Maras considers the early use of scripts as production plans and designs for narrative in both early Hollywood and Soviet cinema. He examines the development of screenplays as literature, and the conflict between the Eminent Authors imported by Sam Goldwyn to supply product (and what P.G. Wodehouse called 'a touch of class and whatnot'), and the established skilled scenario writers who were expected to transfer their words into 'screenable stories'. He describes the gradual professionalization of the screenwriter and looks at writings about the screenplay from early books on technique to the writings of those screenwriters (notably Dudley Nichols) who reflected on what was already recognized in the 1920s as the paradox of '*writing a picture*' (p. 150, original emphasis).

Maras puts this historical analysis into the context of debates – about texts and auteur theory – and looks at the history of the rules of screenwriting as described to would-be screenwriters. Finally he considers alternative models of writing for the screen, which do not rely on the separation between production and execution, especially those enabled by new technology, including pre-visualization, as well as editing and shooting simultaneously.

Maras proposes for this accumulation of information the term 'accretion', which, he contends, positions the screenplay as something that is necessarily changing on its journey to the eyes and ears of the audience. Writer-director Richard Kwietniowski seems to concur with this position, pointing out at a May 2009 conference on the screenplay at the London Film School that the original script is 'interpreted, performed, staged, recorded, fragmented and reassembled'. One might assume, then, that amongst the indicators of a successful screenplay are openness and resilience.

Maras also discusses other notions of writing which prefigure a finished film: the alternative approaches to scripting that include the improvisational techniques of Mike Leigh, 'the scriptment' or hybrid half-script half-treatment (used for example by James Cameron for *Terminator* (1984), and perhaps the more natural medium for

the writer-director), and other ways of scripting a film which don't necessarily involve the 120-page document typed in 12-point Courier beloved of the screenplay purists.

Maras has commenced the long overdue task of looking at screenwriting as a form of notation for what he quotes Ingmar Bergman as calling 'the inner structure of a film' (p. 125). In so doing he opens a very necessary debate about what a screenplay is *for*. He separates the various roles a screenplay has been historically expected to fulfil: the same piece of writing may be expected to serve as a guide for the industrial process of film-making; a legal document inventorizing the elements of the story that various parties have contracted to produce; a way to market the yet-to-be-made film to the readers; a document to attract producers and talent who will be needed to commit to it; and finally a description of the means of producing a set of emotions, ideas and images to be later experienced by an audience.

Maras's work brings to mind the words of Stanley Kubrick; 'a film is – or should be – more like music than like fiction. It should be a progression of moods and feelings. The theme, what's behind the emotion, the meaning, all that comes later' (Kagan 1989: 231). It is perhaps this ability to compress so many different purposes into one text that best epitomizes the 'craft' of screenwriting. Terry Rossio, co-author of *Shrek* (2001) and *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) writes in his *wordplayer.com* column;

People tend to think of screenplays the way they think of novels. In truth writing a script is much more like writing poetry. The form and structure are paramount, and the goal is to convey as much information as possible in as compact a form as possible. Not only does every word count, every syllable counts.

(Rossio 1997)

There are areas to which I feel Maras could have profitably paid more attention, specifically the special case of the writer-director, and the relationship between editing and writing in the making of collaborative narratives. I'd have liked more on improvisation and the role of actors in bringing the screenplay into being. There is little about pitching, and this could have opened a discussion of film as a process, which, as Paul Schrader has observed in a recent Guardian interview 'is closer to the oral tradition than it is to literature' (Schrader 2009: 5). But these are not serious flaws. The remarkable and insightful research that Maras has done into the history, theory and practice of this branch of cinema is necessary to take the study of the screenplay beyond anecdote and lay the foundations of a rigorous academic discipline. What Maras recognizes is that these interchanges are fundamentally about power; screenplays are implicit battles for control over the working process and thus, in every sense, the ownership of the finished piece.

It is this separation of the screenwriter from the process of film-making that Maras suggests needs to be reconceived. He stresses that we need to think about which practices from the past still haunt the way we think about and discuss the screenplay. In every screenplay two contradictory impulses are woven together – an implicit assertion of what the film will be, and an invitation to collaborate. Each film story is challenged to a greater or lesser degree by every collaborator it meets on its journey towards the screen. But it is in that dynamic struggle of telling and retelling that screenplays, in the process of becoming something different, achieve themselves.

In at last valuing the contributions of screenwriters to the making of cinema, we should not concentrate on writing as a narrowly conceived and isolated practice. Let us, as Maras proposes, adopt a pluralistic approach to the medium, which places the screenwriter as a key collaborator in a copious and variegated cinema.

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- Shrek* (2001), Wrs: Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Joe Stillman, Roger S.H. Schulman, Dirs: Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson, USA, 90 mins.
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