

**‘An account and analysis of the culture and practices of screenplay  
development in the UK’**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at screenplay development as an industrial process, worthy of critically rigorous industry-level study. It analyses in particular how screenwriters, producers and development executives in the UK industry make knowledge claims, how they talk about gaining this knowledge and how they talk about the aims and practices of screenplay development – all through the prism of in-depth interviews. In doing so it contributes to Production Studies debates around film, specifically by arguing for and illustrating the importance of the development process. This analysis further leads to a new model of film screenplay development as a separate field of cultural production, one whose norms, conventions and constitution have a great bearing on the industry as a whole. This thesis also adds to the current debates around screenwriting and the screenplay. In particular, in addition to explicating how those practitioners engaged in the work see the process, this study proposes a new way of looking at the purpose of the screenplay that has hitherto been underplayed.

## List of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
Contents Description	10
 <b>Part I - Context</b> 	
<b>Chapter One – Academic Context and Methodology</b>	<b>14</b>
Production/Industry Studies	14
David Hesmondhalgh or John T Caldwell	16
Screenwriting Research Network	22
Theoretical/Analytical Framework	24
The Current Study	25
Research Questions	28
Methodology	29
Why interviews?	30
Access	33
Interviewee Selection – Quantitative or Qualitative	35
The Missing Director	37
Interviews	38
Interview Specifics	40
Auto-ethnography	42
Ethics	44
A Note on Working Definitions	47
Development	47
The Market and The Audience	47
The Screenplay/Script	47
Professional Roles	48
Screenwriter	48
Development/Script Executive	49
Producer	49

## **Chapter Two – Industrial Context and the Field of Screenplay Development 52**

Introduction	52
Producing	52
Financing Production	53
An Example	57
Developing a Film	59
A Legal Distinction	59
Financing Development	61
The Development ‘Sector’ Recognised	63
The Field of feature film development: a sub-field?	66
Narrowing the Field	68
A Story of Distinction	69
Conclusion	74

## **Part II – Culture**

### **Chapter Three – Origin Stories 75**

Introduction	75
Origin Stories	76
The Control Narrative – Producing	79
The Destiny Narrative – Writing	83
The Evolutionary Narrative – Developing	86
Mixed Narratives	89
A ‘Special’ Industry	93
The Missing Link – motivation	96
Conclusion	98

### **Chapter Four – Development Knowledge 101**

Introduction	101
--------------	-----

1. Knowledge of the Audience	104
By the numbers	107
The personal touch	114
2. Knowledge of the Screenplay	119
What is good screenplay?	120
A Personal Analysis	123
Screenplay Coverage	124
Story is King	130
Where does it come from and how is it claimed?	133
Formal Education	133
Art Versus Craft in screenwriting	137
Script Manuals/Short Courses/Training	140
Experience	144
An Exception	145
Screenplay and Audience	147
3. Knowledge of the Industry	148
Taste and Sensibility	149
Behaviour	155
Diplomacy	156
Benefits of a University Education	158
Taste and Behaviour	160
A Concluding note on Knowledge in Development	161

### **Part III – Practice**

<b>Chapter Five – The Purpose of the Screenplay</b>	<b>163</b>
Introduction	163
The Purpose of the Screenplay	163

1. Screenplay as Blueprint	164
Story Blueprint	167
A Note of the Screenplay as Literature	169
2. Screenplay as Financial Prospectus	170
The Package	175
3. Screenplay as Love Letter	177
Filmmaking first	182
Conclusion	183
 <b>Chapter Six – The Creation of the Screenplay</b>	 <b>187</b>
Introduction	187
Process	187
1. Conception	189
A Production Company Executive	190
A Production Company Account	192
Director as Producer	197
Adaptation	199
Adaptation versus Original	201
Field Generated	203
2. Execution	204
Preliminaries	204
Being On the Same Page	205
Interstitial Documents	208
Payment and Assignment	209
The First Draft	211
Replacing the Writer	213
More Drafts	214
Art World	215
Other Models of Creativity	216
3. The Screenplay out in the Field.	218
More Development	219
Conclusion	221

## **Part IV – Implications**

<b>Chapter Seven – Authorship</b>	<b>223</b>
Introduction	223
The Debate	223
A Film By	226
Alternative Models	228
Joint Authorship	228
The Producer as Creative Leader	230
 <b>Chapter Eight – Conclusion</b>	 <b>238</b>
Separate and Distinct	239
Culture	241
A Narrow Field	243
Education	246
Practice	248
Policy Implications	251
The Way Forward – Research	253
End Words	257
 <b>Appendix A</b>	 <b>259</b>
 <b>Bibliography</b>	 <b>261</b>

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## **Introduction**

I have worked in the film industry for the last fourteen years, moving from assistant to script reader to development executive/consultant. At one level or another I've been involved in the on-going development and/or assessment of creative material, in particular screenplays. I had no formal training for this before I got work and little since. Like most of my colleagues, I was expected to 'pick up' the necessary knowledge through experience and listening to others.

Making the move into scholarship, though, involved a rethink of the whole process of screenplay development and my involvement in it. What was it I had in fact 'picked up'? What makes a good script, a successful project or a pass? What is the best way to take a story and guide a project through from an initial idea to a screenplay? How is such 'knowledge' constructed? And what are the cultural mores and values that underpin the whole field of screenplay development?

Moving into academia also gave me a chance to see how scholars had attempted to account for the development process, a process that through my experience I had previously thought so central and important to the whole filmmaking process. It turned out that such an account wasn't readily forthcoming, that film studies in particular and academia in general hadn't grappled with this issue to nearly the extent that I thought necessary. As Ian W. Macdonald (2003, 33-34) said: 'further investigation is required, particularly of the whole process of development and of the elements that drive it: the current market, industrial custom and practices, and the roles and personalities within those practices.'

In the following section, I shall look in more detail at the academic context of this thesis – the burgeoning fields of production studies, critical industry studies and screenwriting studies. But what I felt strongly when I started on this research project, which is still the case after gathering my evidence, is that the voices and views of the people carrying out the work of development haven't been sufficiently taken into account thus far – certainly not as regards screenplay development (especially in film as opposed to television) as an industrial process in UK.

Consequently, I intend to analyse how development practitioners in the UK industry a) make knowledge claims, b) talk about gaining this knowledge and c) talk about the aims and practices of screenplay development – all through the prism of in-depth interviews. In doing so I will contribute to Production Studies debates around film, specifically by arguing for (and hopefully illustrating) the importance of the development process. This analysis further leads to a new model of film screenplay development as a separate field of cultural production, one whose norms and conventions have a great bearing on the industry as a whole.

In doing so, this thesis will also add to the current debates around screenwriting and the screenplay. In particular, in addition to explicating how those practitioners engaged in the work see the process, this study proposes a new way of looking at the purpose of the screenplay that has hitherto been underplayed. Again, based on the claims of practitioners, this thesis seeks to add to the ongoing debates around the screenplay as regards authorship, creative control and ontology – which are not only academic concerns, but also industrial ones as evidenced by the pronouncements from the likes of the Writers Guild of Great Britain (WGGB 2009) and The Federation of Screenwriters in Europe (FSE 2006).

Screenplay development is an absolutely crucial phase in the production of any film. It is the stage of the process where the very film itself is first conceived, and then developed from a germ of an idea to a screenplay that raises finance and is ready to shoot. As this thesis will attest, a raft of creatively central decisions are made during this process and the personalities involved in the creation of the screenplay – far beyond simply the writer – have key roles to play in the very nature of that screenplay (and consequently, any film that is subsequently produced.) This fact, more than anything else, is the spur for and purpose of this thesis. A fuller understanding of feature film production would be incomplete without an account and analysis of the screenplay development process. By interviewing a portfolio of significant industry practitioners, covering the major areas of film production in the UK, I hope to provide such an account and analysis.

## Contents Description

In Part I of this thesis, I'll outline the context of this study. Chapter One will outline methodology and look at the academic context for this study. In particular, I will argue that while the fairly new tradition of Production Studies – as exemplified by the likes of David Hesmondhalgh (2007; 2009; 2010; 2013) and John T Caldwell (2006; 2008; 2009) among many others – has begun the analysis and dissection of the cultures that underpin cultural production, until now little of this work has yet sufficiently accounted for screenplay development. I will argue in this thesis that to better understand the culture of production, we need to understand the culture around the conception stage of production.

Conversely, there is also an emerging tradition in Screenwriting Studies that looks to analyse the screenplay and practices surrounding its writing. Much of this scholarship, especially work by Macdonald (2003; 2004; 2013) and Steven Maras (2009), has broken new ground. In the case of Macdonald (2003; 2004), he took the steps to actually identify and talk to 'screenreaders' about what they do, while Maras – following from Janet Staiger (1979; 1983; 1985) – has done important work outlining the historical schism between conception and execution, and questioning the implications of this for what the screenplay is, and what it means for filmmaking. However, I will argue in Chapters One and Two that greater attention needs to be paid to the *industrial processes* behind screenplay development and that film screenplay development (in the UK at least) should be looked as a quite separate endeavour from television screenplay development. It further needs to be considered as a separate field not only from television but also from film production.

In Chapter Two, Industrial Context, I give an overview of the landscape involved in the development and hopefully production of feature films in the UK. Following from this, I argue that film screenplay development is a distinct and separate field that deserves study in its own right; further, that it can be conceived as a 'field of cultural production' in the sense initially proposed and springing from ideas developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 1990; 1993; 1996). This new model of screenplay development, as a Bourdieu field, allows me to contribute further to production

studies debates by giving a critically robust account of how power operates and interacts with individual agency in the conceptual stage of film production.

Part II comprises of a detailed look at the ‘culture’ of this field. Chapter Three, Origin Stories, gives an analysis of three types of origin narrative of the practitioners I interviewed and shows what the structure and style of these narratives can tell us about both how the respondents view their own roles in the field, but also the kind of attitudes that may be needed to enter and thrive in that very field. This further develops, deepens and contributes to the approach to ‘trade stories’ taken by Caldwell (2008) and other production studies work on practitioner narratives, such as Miranda J Banks (2014).

In Chapter Four I investigate how knowledge is used and constructed in the field, arising directly out of my research questions. Breaking this down into three sections, knowledge of the audience, knowledge of screenplays and industry knowledge, I argue that the claims to knowledge rely primarily on information gleaned from the field itself, and that knowledge and information coming from outside the field is often marginalised or deemed irrelevant to success in the field, despite the fact that the products of the field are ultimately intended for large audiences outside the field. Feature film development is a world talking to itself. It is a field, furthermore, whose practitioners do not readily acknowledge the skills brought to the field from pre-existing *habitus*. This new evidence will also contribute to debates around diversity and plurality in the film industry.

Part III deals with the practices of screenplay development. Chapter Five will show how the practitioners view the purpose of the screenplay that they create; I will add significantly to the scholarship – from the likes of Maras (2009), Kathryn Millard (2011) Ted Nannicelli (2013) and Steven Price (2010) – surrounding the notion of what a screenplay is for, by arguing that in the UK industry its chief function is that of a love letter. Such a function has been little recognised thus far, but has profound implications for screenplay content.

Chapter Six deals with the creation of the screenplay. Using the notion of an art world as proposed by Howard Becker (1982/2008), I will argue that the creation of the

screenplay – right down to the initial conception – is in almost every instance a collective, collaborative effort; that screenplays are the product of the processes of the screenplay development field, and are created by that field in order to meet its needs. Following from the evidence of the ‘knowledge’ chapter, however, I will also argue that the practices of development rely heavily on practitioners being of a like mind, having similar tastes and dispositions, and that such a reliance inevitably narrows the content of screenplays and consequently films. Finally, despite the use of Becker, I will return to Bourdieu once more to say that ultimately screenplays (and their producers) have to struggle in a very competitive field for limited resources.

In Part III I will look at some of the implications of this evidence. In particular, in Chapter Seven I will discuss notions of Authorship. Scholars have long debated this subject, and models range from no author, to joint authorship, to director to screenwriter. While pushing forward a model of joint authorship, in this chapter I also propose a re-evaluation of the role of producer – I argue for the notion of the Producer as Creative Leader, and while this has been put forward before, I further argue that the best evidence for such a position lies in the development process.

In Chapter Eight, I will seek to sum up the evidence of the thesis in the Conclusion, look at some of the implications for policy, as well as looking at ways in which the study of development can and should be taken further.

## **Part I - Context**

### **Chapter One: Academic Context and Methodology**

#### **Production/Industry Studies**

As the split in the heading suggests, analysis and examination of media production is an area of academic study where definitions are contested and new traditions are emerging. What is perhaps a little more certain is that, as David Hesmondhalgh (2010, 145) says, ‘The study of media production is booming.’ He goes on to argue (2010, 145) convincingly that this is right and proper, given that production is one of ‘the three moments of communication, along with reception and texts.’ Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz and Serra Tinic (2009, 234) use a slightly different terminology for this triumvirate – their split is into the ‘general areas of industry, text, and audience.’ Despite the different terms, though, these thinkers agree that until recent times the former of these categories – whether it’s called ‘industry’ or ‘production’ – has been neglected.

There is now a large and growing body of scholars who are tackling this field of production specifically. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J Banks and John T Caldwell (2009, 2) state their concerns simply: ‘We are interested in how media producers make culture, and, in the process, make themselves into particular kinds of workers in modern, mediated societies.’ As we shall see below, these production studies scholars are particularly interested in ensuring a critical approach to the study of production – framing their quest in terms of a ‘Critical Industry Studies’ (Mayer, Banks & Caldwell 2009, 7) – but the focus on the producers (in the widest sense of that word) is still key. Indeed, one of the common features of much of the latest work on production and producers is still to ensure that there is a critical and political basis to the work. Havens, Lotz and Tinic (2009) explicitly state this as one of their aims, delineating what they call ‘Critical Media Industry Studies.’ Hesmondhalgh (2009,

246), too, shares this concern with bringing critical theory to any study of production – in his eyes, such studies should have social justice as one of their underlying aims.

Though we may say, with Hesmondhalgh (2010, 146), that ‘the study of media production examines the people (producers) and processes (production) that cause media to take the forms they do,’ this doesn’t mean that since the serious analysis of production started everyone has looked at it in the same way. Much of the early work focussed particularly on the examination and analysis of the ownership, conglomeration and links to policy makers of media organisations. Hesmondhalgh (2009, 249) calls this the Schiller-McChesney tradition and characterises it as being particularly concerned with the politics of power as it is evidenced in the media, adding thinkers like Noam Chomsky into this cadre. Media ownership (of production and distribution) is a key theme in works such as Robert W. McChesney (1992) and Herbert I. Schiller (1989) for example. What’s certainly the case about such scholarship is that it takes a macro look at media industries, generally with an eye to understanding how capital exercises power in the media. This last concern is also paramount in the work of such writers as Bernard Miège (1989), Nicholas Garnham (1990), Bill Ryan (1992), Graham Murdock and Peter Golding (1997). Again, though, this work is characterised more often than not by a concentration on how the media industries are structured, with a particular reference to power within these structures.

Such thinkers are primarily concerned with corporate and institutional structures and systems and how they interact with the strictures of the state. They highlight the fact that cultural production takes place within a capitalist system and is in the words of Douglas Kellner (2009, 101) consequently ‘shaped according to the dominant relations of production.’ Murdock and Golding (2005, 61), for example, hold these structural issues to be more important than the everyday meaning making work of producers. Garnham (1990, 21) argues that such structural studies are politically imperative in an age of ‘increasing international consolidation’ of media companies. And while Ryan (1992, 2) balks at some of the Marxist terminology used by Garnham, Murdock and Golding, he too sets out to investigate the ‘corporate form of capitalist cultural commodity production.’ His focus, in other words, is also on the institutional structures that underpin cultural production.

While the contributions of such ‘political economy’ thinking is not to be underestimated – and indeed has been taken on by many of the scholars mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this chapter – there was an undeniable gap in this structural level thinking. Here was the situation: On the one hand, scholars of film and television, sociology and culture were engaging in critical analysis of both texts and their reception (especially in the light of the Roland Barthes (1968) heralded ‘death of the author’, throwing the spotlight of study firmly on the text and its ‘readers’.) And on the other hand, studies of cultural/media production were operating on a ‘jet plane’ level (Havens, Lotz and Tinic 2009, 239), looking at the flow of capital and power from a structural and macro-organizational level. While neither approach is in itself wrong, what neither did was investigate the area in between. As Garnham (2005, 481-2) himself recognised:

First, the denial of authorship removed intentionality from the cultural text. Second, the emphasis on the text led to the neglect of the very really material constraints involved in the mobilization of resources for the realization of any signifying practice....The intentionality of a work, and its eventual expression in a distributable, interpretable symbolic form, is always mediated by material considerations of this sort. Williams was always and rightly very firm on this point. Thus in my view central to any full analysis of capitalist cultural production and its possible social effects is the study of production and of the specialists within the division of labour responsible for that production.

While it may be unsurprising that Garnham, as a former television producer himself, calls for the study of producers it is nevertheless an exhortation that has been readily – and increasingly extensively – met by scholars in the field.

### **David Hesmondhalgh or John T. Caldwell?**

This increased focus on cultural producers (and the cultures within which they work,) and the scholarly work arising from it can perhaps most helpfully for this study be divided into two loose groupings. I should point out that the proposed division is not a



confrontational one, rather a difference in emphasis (many of the concerns are shared, as are the methodologies and sites of study.) The first of these schools can best be described as looking at cultural producers and workers in terms of defining their work as *labour*. Coming predominately out of the UK (Canadian Matt Stahl (2008) is one notable exception), this is scholarly work that particularly looks at the conditions of cultural workers and what it means to be a cultural worker, often setting this in the context of work in general. David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2011), in a comparative work, look into cultural labour from the perspective of ‘good versus bad’ work and which division cultural work falls within. The focus here is consequently on ‘what it’s like’ to work in three different cultural industries (television production, music production and magazine publishing.) The attempt is to place cultural labour within the wider context of analysis of work full stop, thus comparing it to work in general as well as to work across different cultural industries.

Other, earlier, work in this vein includes much of the collection of Andrew Beck (2003) such as Jason Toynbee (2003) and Mick Jones (2003). As Beck (2003, 37) explicitly states, one of the ‘key aims...is to demonstrate that cultural work is, above all else, work.’ Angela McRobbie (2002, 97) is another thinker interested in the conditions under which cultural workers operate. She poses research questions such as ‘*From Holloway to Hollywood: happiness at work in the new cultural economy?*’ McRobbie’s research is, like Hesmondhalgh’s, conducted over more than one industry. Previously, for example (McRobbie 1998, 4), she examined London’s fashion industry practitioners where she explicitly asks the questions ‘who the cultural intermediaries actually are, what precisely they do, and what the conditions of their labour are?’ She looks at the practices and conditions of the workers again through the prisms of labour in general and the new cultural economy.

Gillian Ursell is another working in this lineage, her concentration on UK television notwithstanding. She writes (2000, 810-11):

The task of explaining what makes for inequality remains. In the context of labour process theorization, that task inevitably attends to the material structures of work, employment and market exchange. Let that task, informed by the above debate, now be attempted in regard to the

particular case of UK television production as it has changed in work and employment practices over the past 15 years.

As one can tell from this quotation, the emphasis is on employment process and practice albeit confined to television (unlike some of her contemporaries, who take a wider look at cultural labour.)

I mentioned earlier that there were two rough groupings looking at the work and culture of creative practitioners. If the first group, approximately equating to the study of creative work as labour, can be said to be largely operating out of the UK we can equally say that the second tradition is roughly identified with scholarship coming out of North America. There is a certain shift in focus, even while sharing much of the tropes of this UK scholarship (the focus on cultural practitioners is similar, as is much of the methodology – interviews, participant observation and the like.) Alternatively named Critical Media (Industry) Studies (Havens, Lotz and Tinic 2009, 234), Media Industry Studies (Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren 2009, 2), or Critical Industry Studies (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell 2009, 7) these approaches share enough in common to look at them as part of the same grouping.

The roots of this emerging tradition can be traced back primarily to the pioneering interview-based work of Todd Gitlin (1983) and Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley (1983). Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time*, in particular, is a touchstone for the Mayer, Banks and Caldwell 2009 volume. There had been many books on 'Hollywood' before this, though few from an academic position. Hortense Powdermaker (1951) and Leo Rosten (1941) are two that had a more academic bent than most. The former of these was a traditional anthropologist's look at 'the tribe' of movie makers in Hollywood, with no real critical vigour turned towards the output of the studios, while the later was deemed a fairly uncritical view of the 'business' from an ex-screenwriter.

Although John L. Sullivan (2009, 50) does credit Rosten with introducing the notion 'that cultural production is firmly situated within social and economic networks should be a key starting point for contemporary analyses of media.' In the late 1960s and early 1970s Muriel G. Cantor (1971) began to take a somewhat more critical view of industry practitioners, in her case the 'Hollywood TV Producer'. She conducted an

extensive number of anonymous interviews with television producers, working in a broadly sociologic framework (1971, 4-6).

However, it was Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time* that was much more influential on subsequent scholars in terms of production studies. It makes great use of anecdote and interview to elucidate the workings of prime time television in the US in the 1970s and 1980s but early on in the study, Gitlin (1983, 13) makes clear what the spur was for the whole enterprise. 'I could not hope to understand why network television was what it was unless I understood who put the images on the small screen and for what reasons.' And, even more illuminating: 'I could not hope to understand the ways producers and networks decided to treat social issues unless I understood the ways they decided to treat everything else' (1983, 13).

That is, he embarked on an industry level study in order to answer a specific question, namely how television treats social issues. Furthermore, Gitlin worked on the assumption that certain social issues had disappeared from network television screens as part of some kind of hegemonic process led by executives/producers. As Lotz (2009, 32) says, this led subsequent scholars to use interviews and observation to 'theorize how conventional practices reveal the hegemony of certain industrial norms and, in turn, contribute to the hegemony of textual content.'

Thus, although his methodology was firmly grounded in the practical interviews of producers – and, indeed, to some even appeared to be but another entry in the more gossipy, industry-style texts that have always been produced, partly to promote Hollywood – Gitlin's study nevertheless contained a theoretical backdrop. He wasn't simply reporting what his respondents said, he was situating this evidence in a framework of political power: that is, he was questioning the extent to which the power relationships in the making of television affect the content and (therefore) how such content contributes to reinforcing cultural hegemony. As Caldwell (2008, 12) says:

By synthesizing and intercutting numerous interviews together under the general framework of cultural hegemony, Gitlin framed personal interview

disclosures as examples of how dominant culture manages and controls the daily decisions made by film/TV practitioners.

Newcomb and Alley (1983) took a similar starting point, interviewing producers as a means to finding out about the subsequent content. They make a strong case for the people behind the production of television being a valid subject of study. In particular, they intended the interviews to act as additional resource for the critical understanding of texts (1983, xv). It is clear that these studies led the way in some sense for the afore cited current scholars such as Caldwell, Mayer, Banks, Lotz, Havens, Tinic, Perren and Holt.

Applying critical tools to the study of specific industry production cultures – such as Gitlin and Newcomb and Alley did – also led to a number of studies that involved engaging directly with practitioners, from scholars such Julie D’Acci (1994) – a case study of the production of successful US cop TV show *Cagney and Lacy* through a feminist lens; to Barry Dornfeld’s (1997) account of working in public television; Herman Gray’s (1995) *Watching Race*; Richard Ohmann’s (1996) *Making and Selling Culture*; right up to the work of Caldwell and then Mayer (2011) and her study of below-the-line workers in the television industry.

One of the key things that these studies have in common relates to what Havens, Lotz and Tinic (2009, 234) refer to as the ‘helicopter’ view, gleaning much valuable detail about how workers actually function within their industries. As they go on to argue, this is complementary to wider, structural analysis rather than replacing it. And as I mentioned above, the emphasis of the broadly US-based approach is on how the culture of production, and the practices of the producers, affects the texts; whilst much of the UK work has tended to focus on cultural producers as labourers.

An exception to this rather general US-UK division is some of the work of the UK-based Keith Negus (2002; 2010) into popular music. In his essay on the marginalisation of black and female acts by record companies, Negus (2002, 115-131) shows how this was a direct result of the embedded cultural assumptions and practices of the executives, rather than because of any economic imperative. Indeed, this marginalisation actively ran counter to the economic interests of the record

companies. He argues ‘that what often appear to be fundamentally economic or commercial decisions (which artists to sign; how much to invest in them; how to market them) are based on a series of historically specific cultural values, beliefs and prejudices’ (2002, 116). What’s particularly interesting about Negus’ work in this context is that he was able to draw conclusions about executive decision-making (i.e. act selection and support) based off the back of studying the culture of record companies and the people that work in them (often via interviews.) In many ways this kind of study fits in exactly with the US models of production studies outlined above, in that Negus reads directly from the culture of the producers to what texts are actually produced and distributed.

The fact that Negus isn’t readily cited by US scholars in this area in my view highlights the need for additional work within the tradition. On the one hand, much of the US production studies work is based particularly on television and to a lesser extent film. Such a focus would automatically preclude Negus. Holt and Perren (2009, 2) put out an entire collection on media industries, for example, that confines itself to audio-visual media and the Mayer, Banks and Caldwell (2009) likewise focusses almost exclusively on television and film. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the vastness of America’s television and film production ecology, and not a particular worry for my current study. It is crucial to note, however, that within this concentration on film and television, there has been a lack of engagement with the developmental processes involved in creating drama-based content – particularly where film is concerned. Stephen Zafirau (2009) discusses how Hollywood film executives/producers construct knowledge of the audience but this is one of the few pieces of work within the tradition that attempts to grapple with this key stage of production in terms of film. (Oli Mould (2009, 203-213) also touches upon it with reference to the Australian film industry.)

This recent US-based production studies tradition is also exactly that, i.e. US-based. As Michael Curtin (2009, 108) points out, ‘most [media industry studies] research focuses on media industries in the United States.’ As pointed out above, there has been a lot of research into cultural labour in the UK and work done on television in a

similar sociological vein<sup>1</sup> - but there isn't much that looks into UK film with the critical media industry studies angle favoured by scholars such as Caldwell, Lotz et al in the US or, I would argue, the likes of Negus in the UK into popular music.

### **Screenwriting Research Network**

Screenwriting studies is in a process of catch-up with other areas of film studies. As Jill Nelmes (2011, 1) points out, the screenplay has received little academic attention. This is changing. Recent work emanating out of the Screenwriting Research Network, led by the likes of Macdonald (most recently 2013), Nelmes (2011), Maras (2009), Millard (2011) and Price (2010) as well as Bridget Conor (2013) have begun to ask some searching and serious questions about the screenplay, both historically (building on the work of people such as Staiger (1979; 1983; 1985a; 1985b) and Claudia Sternberg (1997)) and seeking to contextualise the screenplay in the present day.

The work coming out of the *Journal of Screenwriting* is also contributing much in this area, including work on the changing nature of the screenplay in the digital age Millard (2010), to questions about screenwriting as creative labour, Conor (2010), as well as examining the role of the director in screenwriting, Isabelle Gourdin-Sanguard (2010); to the decision-making process in Hollywood, through Alexander G. Ross (2011) as well as ongoing work on TV development from the likes of Adam Ganz (e.g. 2012).

As already mentioned, Macdonald (2010, 2013) has also done some significant work developing the notion of the Screen Idea in relation to the Screen Idea Work Group. There is an acknowledgement here that work on screen ideas is 'a complex process' in an arena 'fraught with social complexities, industrial and cultural conventions and individual habitus "masquerading as sound judgement"' (Macdonald 2010, 55.) Part of the point of this thesis is to help flesh out and illuminate the culture of the screenplay development area, to see what lies beneath such complexities and conventions.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Jeremy Tunstall (1993), Georgina Born (2004)

There has also been some recent work coming out of this network, looking at development dynamics in the creation of high-end television drama. In the Danish context, Eva Novrup Redvall (2013) examines the rise of Danish drama and how they have been created and developed out of writer's rooms rather than sole creators – despite the current success partly being sparked by two film directors taking the helm of drama production (2013, 17-18.) There is undoubtedly cross-over from film in this televisual context because, as Redvall points out, Danish television drama was materially influenced by work at the Danish film school and by the Dogma tradition.

However, further on in this thesis I intend to draw a distinction between television and film development. While Redvall's work is invaluable in many ways, including the relationship between the group dynamic involved in development, the thrust of her arguments (2013) rest almost entirely on the creation and development of series dramas, not one-offs. This is signally different from screenplay development in the UK film industry, which is concentrated on one stand-alone film at a time. Even when the hope is that a film may lead to a sequel, such are the chances of making even one film successful, development work rarely if ever takes place until the first film has been made. Developing a series of dramas is very different.

As part of the various ongoing scholarship on screenwriting, questions are also being asked as to the status of the screenplay. Is it a work of literature as Winston (1973), for example, argued? What's its ontological status? What relationship does it have to the finished film? Questions go further into authorship – does the author of the screenplay have a claim to be author of the film? How are they read? What is meant by screenwriting at all? What *is* a screenplay?

Such concerns aren't always the sole preserve of academics either. In the last ten years there have been moves by screenwriters in the UK (as well as in Europe) to specifically assert their role in the filmmaking process, both in trying to gain more rights (and power) but particularly in the areas around authorship. The Federation of Screenwriters in Europe, for example, produced a manifesto in 2006 that explicitly affirms the screenwriter as 'an author of the film, a primary creator of the audiovisual work' (FSE 2006). In the UK specifically, the Writers Guide of Great Britain's most

recent guide to good practice in film development includes a clause arguing that a screenwriter's 'moral rights' in the screenplay should be inalienable – currently, it is the practice for most writers in the UK to waive these rights (WGGB 2009, 16). These authorship claims are based on who created the screenplay.

The fact that there has been a blossoming of theoretical scholarship on the screenplay and the practice of screenwriting is most welcome. This critical work helps us to understand screenwriting beyond simply these manuals, or the interviews with successful screenwriters in books such as Alistair Owen (2003) or Joel Engel (2000; 2003) and places screenwriting more in an academic context. As this thesis also hopes to show, the screenplay is a vital document in the creation of film; a document whose importance is consistently underrated by academics and critics. Yet it is an area of film production that, as this thesis will illustrate, deserves this further study.

In this thesis, I hope to contribute to these debates by further explicating and analysing the practitioners' own account of the screenplay development process and by proposing a new way of looking at the purpose of the screenplay document, at least in the eyes of those charged with creating it.

### **Theoretical/Analytical Frame**

In the forthcoming thesis two thinkers, in particular, inform the framing of my arguments. In Chapter Six on the creation of the screenplay, I will engage with Howard Becker and his notion of *Art Worlds*. The other thinker that has greatly informed the theoretical framework of this thesis, however, is Pierre Bourdieu.

It wasn't until after I collated much of my data that I had any real understanding of Bourdieu as a thinker, or his notions of fields of cultural production. It was only after a consideration of this, combined with his notion of *habitus*, that I started to view screenplay development as a field in the Bourdieu sense. In the next chapter, on Industrial Context, I will argue that development can indeed be seen in such a light.



As we shall see in the next chapter, Macdonald (2004, 10) makes explicit a connection between screenwriting and Bourdieu's ideas of field, Hesmondhalgh (2006b, 217-219) also utilises the idea when talking about restricted fields of cultural production (in my argument, the screenplay development field is very much restricted) and Helen Blair (2009, 117) finds the notion of Bourdieu's field to be a 'useful resource' when talking about film and television. Indeed, even Bourdieu himself (quoted in L. D. Wacquant 1989, 50) claims to be offering us a vital set of 'thinking tools.'

I found myself using some of these tools in the analysis of the data, and in the writing of this thesis. As I say, however, Chapter Two is where I develop this argument (of development as a Bourdieu style field) more fully and subsequently throughout the thesis.

### **The Current Study**

While the continuing scholarship referred to above – in all its manifestations, in particular the work of Macdonald as well as the work out of the US exemplified by Caldwell – is very important, I argue that there has been a lack of attention paid to the development stage of production, particularly in film as opposed to television, and particularly in regards to the *industrial* processes of that production phase. It is my contention that this is a vital phase of any film's production. While the recent work on screenwriting is most welcome, much of it fails to take into account fully the culture and practices of the field from which the screenplays come. Understandably, these studies tend focus on 'screenwriting' and what that might mean for the screenwriter rather than looking at the process from an industrial point of view.

For 'development' is certainly a process, one that revolves around research, negotiation and the continual exchange of ideas between writers, producers and executives. Compared to what the industry calls the production phase (i.e. the shoot) which is tightly scheduled and run to strict, pre-agreed timetables and budgets, the development phase is awash with contention, argument, dead ends, changes of direction and flux. Industry accounts by screenwriters such as the journalistic

interviews of Owen (2003) illustrate this point. As Macdonald (2003, 35) says, it is a 'dynamic and complex process [the understanding of which] is made complicated and raised to another level by the personal interactions that occur.'

The process is also the phase of production where many of the creative decisions are made. The nature of the story, its genre, its lead characters, setting and themes are all agreed upon as part of the journey towards a screenplay. While there is a plethora of mostly industry-based literature – 'how-to' manuals on screenwriting, copies of produced screenplays and now, recently, even the release of the annotated screenplays of classic movies (Lisa Campbell, 2012) – there is far less of an understanding of how the development process works in a detailed way, either from academics or from the wider community.

Journalistic discourses around the development of screenplays often tend either to centre on the work of the 'writer', or else the process is characterised as 'development hell' (for example Davis Hughes (2003), the BBC radio show *Development Hell* (2011) and numerous websites, such as *Screenrant*.) Academics, meanwhile, often fail to appreciate the importance of the process. Neil Coe and Jennifer Jones (2004, 189), for example, argue that an over emphasis on 'production' in local contexts in studies of film ignores the key power base of distribution and marketing and obscures concentration on the bigger picture of how such marketing power operates. Yet, as I shall argue, much of this marketing and distribution power is actually exercised *in* the development phase of production. Once a film is completed – with the often large associated financial outlay – it is too late to radically change the content, yet a distribution company will still have to try to make some money back from the film (i.e. release it in some form) to recover at least some of their costs, whatever they think of the movie. As we shall see, it is in the development process – therefore – where such marketing logic is (and has to be) brought to bear.

Development in the UK film industry as an area of endeavour is not only economically important – according to a UK Film Council commissioned report by Attentional (2007) in 2006 approximately £50 million pounds was invested in the development of screenplays with the average length of the process (for a produced movie) estimated at 3.4 years (2007, 4-8) – but creatively crucial. The same report

(2007, 34) found that most projects are initiated ‘in-house.’ In other words, it is the production companies (and the producers and development executives who work there) who often come up with the initial starting points for developing screenplays, not screenwriters or directors.

Some of the scholars in the aforementioned production studies tradition (out of the US in particular) have grappled to a limited extent with the development process of drama/entertainment in television but few from this school have gone into how this works in film, other than very tangentially. I argue that while the continuing production studies scholarship referred to here is very important, there needs to be a re-balancing of examination that takes into account the (so far) underestimated importance of the development (i.e. conception) process.

Additionally, while the ongoing scholarship on the screenplay is important and necessary, there needs to be a fuller explanation and analysis of the conditions of the field from which screenplays – in particular film screenplays – come from. I argue that screenwriting in the UK can better be understood, if we also understand the process of screenplay development. Further, as the following study will show, in the UK at least there is significant differences in the culture and practices of feature film development (as opposed to television), and these difference have material effects on the content of the screenplays produced.

This study, therefore, is an attempt to intervene in the critical media/industry studies debates around production with the specific aim of highlighting the importance of the film development process. By doing so, I hope to contribute to these debates by explicating and analysing the process in a UK context, via an examination of the practitioners involved. As a consequence of this, I shall also contribute to the burgeoning debates around screenwriting and the screenplay, by giving an account and analysis of how this happens in the UK, at least according to those chiefly engaged in the practice. I will further contribute to these screenplay debates by investigating how development practitioners not only view their own practice, but

how they view the purpose of the screenplay document, which will add richness and a new insight into these functional debates.<sup>2</sup>

## **Research Questions**

Given the position of the scholarship up until now, and how I intend to contribute as outlined above and in the introduction, I shall define my key research questions as follows:

How do screenplay development practitioners construct knowledge: what do they need to know, how do they come to know it and how do they use it once they've got it?

And

How do these practitioners account for the aims and practices of screenplay development, as they experience them?

Investigating these questions will lead to further questions:

What can such an investigation tell us about the actual practices and culture of the screenplay development process in the UK? And consequently what are the implications for academics, policy-makers and the industry?

These were the questions that guided me going in to this study, and in the following thesis I intend to explore some possible answers and further go in to some of the implications of these answers, both in terms of the field of screenplay development, and the film industry and film studies as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> This may additionally contribute to the philosophical debates around the screenplay, as in Nannicelli (2013, 14). While I don't intend to offer a philosophically exhaustive account of the nature of the screenplay, understanding what it is intended to do in practice (by its creators) will help us understand it more fully than has hitherto been the case.

## Methodology

One of the aspects that characterises much of the recent work in production studies is its use of methodologies borrowed from other disciplines, in particular those of anthropology and ethnography. This is hardly surprising given the shift in focus to human subjects (i.e. cultural practitioners.) The differing techniques and approaches within this (ranging from participant and/or site observation, practitioner interviews, and ethnographer-as-practitioner in the case of Dornfeld (1998) for example) reflect on the one hand the panoply of research questions and aims but also, perhaps, point to the various and diffuse nature of the media as well as the challenges of studying it.

Caldwell (2008) is a good example of a scholar in the production studies tradition using a variety of methods to answer his questions. In this study of industry reflexivity and cultural practice, Caldwell (2008, 4) advocates a ‘synthetic’ approach that uses four differing registers of analysis: ‘textual analysis of trade and worker artefact; interviews with film/TV workers; ethnographic field observation...; and economic/industry analysis.’ By working in these different registers, Caldwell hopes to off-set any deficiency in any one single mode. He’s particularly wary of the veracity of those interviewed ‘above-the-line’ (i.e. producers, directors, executives.) Newcomb, writing long after his initial work with Alley on television producers, is even more explicit in calling for a synthetic approach to methodology when studying production. In his view (Newcomb 2009, 268), ‘every media industry study is a case study.’ The point he makes is that the state of the media industries is fluid and constantly bucking fixed down definitions. Consequently, researchers have to be flexible with their methods but also should be motivated to get onto ‘the floor’ in order to fully understand the everyday complexities of media production.

Newcomb is a touchstone, as he’s one of those scholars that started life as a scriptwriter – that is, like me, not only does he come from an industry background but also a *development* one. In Newcomb (2009, 269-270), he recounts an extended anecdote about his involvement in the development of a screenplay that has – so far – never been produced. He does this through critically analytic eyes and it is indicative of how one might approach one’s own past experiences, as I intend to do here.

Newcomb's major scholarly work (with Alley) was an interview-based study, a study that utilised his insider knowledge. I too, following Caldwell, hope to synthesise techniques to come to a richer understanding of the practices and processes of the development community. I can't escape the first of these methods in that I've been a practitioner myself for the last fourteen years. In other words, there has to be an element of auto-ethnography in this study. It would be both dishonest, misleading and impossible if I had tried to conduct this research project *without* acknowledging my own experience of the field. I shall go into the implications, and limitations, of auto-ethnography below. Suffice to say at this point that it is the secondary methodological approach used in this study.

The primary methodological approach for this study is in-depth, semi-structured practitioner interview.

### **Why Interviews?**

The interview has long been a key technique for anthropology and ethnography, either as part of participant observation or stand-alone, whereby scholars attempt to account for and analyse a particular culture or group of people. As I mentioned above, one of the characteristics of many recent production studies has been the utilisation of ethnographic techniques and in particular the interview. The primary data in these studies is thus the words of the producers (in its wider sense, to include executives, producers, directors, writers and – for example in the case of Caldwell (2008) – other workers such as camera or lighting crew.) Zafirau (2009, 199) exemplifies the viewpoint of this tradition of scholarship when he says, 'grounded ethnographic and interview evidence is capable of improving models of popular culture production, giving more nuance to key concepts and assumptions.'

When studying development practitioners and what they do, the interview as a technique is absolutely critical as there are few other avenues to potential information sources. The only publicly available 'evidence' of the work that goes on in development, for example, is the movie itself – or in rare cases the 'shooting' screenplay is published. (Even in this instance, though, the screenplay that is

published is to some extent a transcription of the completed film, rather than being a copy of the document with which the shoot started.) Yet to study such evidence alone would be an inadequate way to either reconstruct or analyse the far-away development process. The completed movie has already undergone a further two ‘processes’, in terms of production and then post-production, and thus to assess only the development process using the final film – without accounting for these two separate areas of endeavour – would be inappropriate. The intent of this study is to look at the process involved in film production *before* it undergoes physical- and post-production.

There are other documents generated by the development process (treatments, notes, emails, early drafts of the screenplay) but even if one were fortunate enough to get hold of them as a scholar (and allowed to make them public), they would not sufficiently help in accounting for the activities of development and how those activities are talked about; alone, they wouldn’t give an adequate account of the field. Development is, by its very nature, a process of negotiation and this negotiation is as we shall see most often played out in meetings between screenwriters, producers and executives. Ideas are, in the words of William Goldman (2001, 161-163) ‘spit-balled’, criticisms delivered and future plans finalised in such meetings. Thus much of the knowledge needed to get a handle on the process resides in the minds and memories of the people who work within it.

Also much of this study revolves around the activity of writers and writing. As Banks (2014, 546) points out, observing writers at work isn’t going to provide much data. I agree with her when she says: ‘As a scholar interested in media production, I examine stories.’ Like her, I’ll be examining stories – the stories of those who create the stories that we ultimately experience when we watch films.

This is why the interviews took the form of semi-structured but in-depth exchanges between myself and the respondents. They were intended to be a joint exploration into the issues. There’s been a deal of methodological discussion around the ‘unstructured’, ‘informal’, ‘semi-structured’ or what Howard Becker and Blanche Geer (1969, 246) call ‘the detailed and conversational’ interview. While the interviews I conducted could possibly be described by any one of these terms, I’ve

chosen to follow Madeleine Leonard's terminology and call them 'semi-structured'. As Leonard (2003, 167) terms it, the semi-structured interview is 'mainly discursive' but one where the interviewer uses at least an aide-memoire to help them cover the themes they needed to cover. I worked in this way, in that there were areas I wished to cover in the interview (most obviously knowledge) but I wanted to be flexible enough to allow the interviewee to go where they wished. In this sense, though as the researcher I wanted to talk about certain themes, I wanted to 'activate' the interviewees in the way inspired by Elliot Mishler (1986) and subsequently followed by the likes of Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2002, 14) and make my respondents involved in the 'active co-construction of the content of the interview' as Thomas Schwandt (2007, 162) put it.

One of the points of the semi-structured interview is to get beyond stock answers of instinct or taste and try to get to some notion of what the foundations are for such judgements and views. Ultimately, in order to find out how these practitioners construct knowledge in their jobs, and how they view the aims and practices of screenplay development, I had to ask them.

The interviews as 'exchanges' is a particularly important aspect of this study, because this is one of the ways in which I can go beyond what is publicly available and into a more critically rigorous space. Some of my respondents were used to being interviewed about the films in which they've been involved (screenwriters and, to a lesser extent, the producers for example.) But this kind of journalistic enterprise is almost always in the service of marketing the particular film of the moment. Either the interview will be on the DVD extras, or it is planned to appear on some other media outlet with a view to gaining publicity for the latest film. Film marketing being what it is, such exchanges tend to focus on 'key names' rather than looking at processes often undertaken by those unfamiliar to the general public.

But if one were to construct an account and analysis of the development process from such industry or journalistic sources already available, there would be a danger of missing out much of the experience of development. For such accounts tend to be connected to an already produced film – that is, in development terms they are only talking about the successful minority. Attentional (2007, 42) approximates an average



of 18% of projects in development will make it into production. In addition to this, there's a high chance of 'reverse engineering' – that is, once a process has been completed successfully there is a tendency to look at it more favourably (and possibly less critically.) If we remember that by far the majority of projects in development *never* make it into films, then a methodology that only looks at accounts of the successful (i.e. minority) development experiences is in danger of missing out much of the work of the practitioners. Interviewing them directly, when they aren't in the process of promoting a film will consequently allow me to explore the development process as a process, rather than as a stand-alone case (i.e. film) specific account.

The best way to 'get at' the culture and practices of the development community – to investigate how they construct and use their knowledge and how they see the process – is thus to ask some of the practitioners in an in-depth, semi-structured and 'peer-to-peer' manner. Such an interview style might not have worked as well if, for example, they were handled by a researcher unfamiliar with the workings of the film industry. This isn't to say that interviewing in this context (or in any context) is unproblematic, rather that it was the best approach to get at the culture of the field.

I will go into some of these problems below, but before we get to the problems of interviewing, I first needed to gain access to the respondents.

## **Access**

As a number of academics have remarked – e.g. Caldwell (2009), Mimi White and James Schwoch (2006), Elizabeth Taube (1996), Sherry B. Ortner (2009) – there's a history of mistrust between cultural practitioners in the film industry and scholars. Hollywood is especially resistant to studies of its inner workings, preferring to tightly control access. There are some practical reasons for this, namely confidentiality. As Ortner found, almost all studio-based producers simply refused to return her calls – as the one person (through a personal contact) who did talk to her, James Schamus, told her would be the case (2009, 179). There's simply too much intellectual property flying around a film office for a producer to want to let anyone in the door.

This perhaps explains why so many major production studies have been undertaken by industry ‘insiders’ – either continuing or ex-practitioners, still connected to the film or television production communities to a lesser or greater degree, such as Cantor (1971), Rosten (1941), Newcomb and Alley (1983), Caldwell (2008) and Macdonald (2013). As former Hollywood assistant Erin Hall says to Caldwell, she felt it was vital that she could say to her respondents that she was part of the industry and she ‘got it’ (Mayer Banks and Caldwell 2009, 220-222).

Whilst the problem of access is most acute in terms of participant observation<sup>3</sup>, something not proposed for this study,<sup>4</sup> it is still an issue to be aware of for interviewing in this sector. Yet I didn’t come across quite the same difficulties (of access) as some of these stymied scholars of Hollywood for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, as a member of the film industry’s development sector for the last fourteen years I had built up a number of personal contacts that aided greatly in securing access. I did not need to find anyone to vouch for me, at least for a significant number of participants. Interviewing one’s peers brings with it some of its own problems<sup>5</sup>, but access wasn’t one of them. Even the interviewees I didn’t know personally still agreed to speak to me, perhaps because of my status as someone who ‘knows something about the industry.’

A second factor that made access easier for me than for the likes of Ortner and another scholar of Hollywood Zafirau (2009, 192), who accessed studio executives by enrolling in ‘industry’ seminars, was that the UK film industry is much smaller and less stratified than its American counterpart. Even the biggest production companies (e.g. Working Title) are but outposts of the studio system. There were no high studio walls to scale in London, if you discard the broadcasters.

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<sup>3</sup> Barry Dornfeld actually had to work full time as a production researcher in order to get the access he needed to study a TV show in Dornfeld (1998).

<sup>4</sup> Given the often elongated timescales involved in development, participant observation in the field could also take a very long time to get significant results. Furthermore, as I’m a trying to find out what the practitioners *think* about what they do, observing them do it doesn’t necessarily answer this question.

<sup>5</sup> See Jennifer Platt (1981) for example, though in this case her troubles were caused by the fact that her interviewees were fellow academics – and thus tended to try to answer, anticipate or challenge her position before or instead of answering her questions. They tried to anticipate her *academic analysis*, in other words. Such an agenda wasn’t evident in my own interviewees, unsurprisingly, since none of them are currently academics.

Access wasn't a problem for me, in other words. This is not to say that there aren't potential problems associated with my own dual status as industry practitioner/scholar – and I hope to deal with some of these below. It perhaps should be noted that if I had tried to conduct a study about working conditions, and cultural work as labour, then access might have been more difficult. It is one thing for a respondent to tell an otherwise unknown researcher that they are 'worried about their job' or that they routinely lie to their boss or whatever the revelation might be<sup>6</sup>, it is a totally different ball game to tell someone they know – or that they have friends in common with – these kind of more personal details. However, given the parameters of my study, such problems did not arise.

### **Interviewee Selection – Qualitative not Quantitative**

After drawing a near blank in the corridors of studio power Ortner (2009) finally managed to start her interviewing process in other areas, such as festivals and independent cinema. The observation that resonates here is 'the important factor in someone agreeing to talk to me was "interest," either practical (not much here) or intellectual. And as I broke through and began doing interviews, it seemed clear to me that that was the main reason people were doing this' (2009, 183). In other words, she got the most out of those interviewees who were interested in the study in itself – rather than doing it for reasons of friendship or politeness. Before I started this study, I felt sure that there were many in the industry who would indeed be willing to talk to me, especially those working in the development executive roles who rarely get asked their views. And this proved to be the case.

This current study is not about racking up huge numbers of respondents, however, for it is intended to be qualitative rather than quantitative and 'intensive rather than extensive' in the words of Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, 15-16). There is a need for quantitative data surrounding the development process. Throughout this thesis I refer to the little that exists on the field, either from independent academic sources or from UKFC/BFI/Creative Skillset commissioned reports. Such numbers and surveys

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<sup>6</sup> See David Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) for examples.

are useful. However, they cannot tell us what the practitioners think and feel about their jobs; they can't tell us how these practitioners acquire and use knowledge in the development process; and while a quantitative approach might add data, it cannot adequately answer the questions posed at the outset of this thesis.

Hence the guiding principle in the selection of respondents was to speak to those who, once approached, expressed an interest in exploring the issues – I wanted my interviews to be as qualitatively rich as possible, to create a large 'sea swell of meaning making' as Carolyn Ellis and Leigh Berger (2002, 853) put it. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers to the questions I was putting to my respondents, no boxes to tick, and consequently the more likely an interviewee was to engage fully in the issues, the more heightened their interest, the better. As Carol Warren (2002, 83) says of qualitative interviewing in general, I too was looking to 'derive interpretations... from respondent talk.' The reasons for a respondent's interest may vary widely, of course, and may certainly diverge from that of the researcher<sup>7</sup> but it seemed to be a good starting point – where possible – to connect with those who wanted to talk on the subject.

Secondly, given that this study is predicated on investigating, and delineating, the work of three distinct roles within the screenplay development process, I made an effort to have a fairly equal spread of practitioners over the three professional roles: screenwriter, producer, development executive. While this is not a quantitative study, the fact remains that although I am investigating the screenplay development process and the practitioners who do it, these three roles each have *different* roles within that process. In other words, although overall they are all engaged in the same task (creating screenplays) within that process they have different responsibilities. Consequently, I wanted to make sure I had a spread of perspectives.

We'll see further on in this thesis a discussion of the context of film production in the UK, but I should mention here how this context impacted on the selection of interviewees. In addition to the points made above, in choosing who to interview I sought to 'cover the bases' of some of the most important locations for film

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<sup>7</sup> This is interestingly evidenced in Mills (2008).

development in the UK. See Appendix A for a full list of the seventeen interviewees – all interviewed between September 2012 and May 2013 – including a breakdown of their gender, race and education. But it's worth making some additional remarks as to why I approached who I approached.

My portfolio of interviews includes screenwriters who have worked between them on a wide spectrum from small, 'art-house' films right through to big budget movies; they have worked in the commercial sector, as well as being commissioned by public funders such as the BBC, the UKFC/BFI and Film Four; and many of them have worked in other media prior to film. In a similar vein, the executives and producers comprise of those with very significant experience both at commercially driven companies, such as the country's major development funder Working Title Films, as well organisations like BBC Films and the BFI, where priorities may be different. Between them, my portfolio of interviews – while limited in size – covers the various major elements of independent film development and production in the UK (as outlined in the next chapter) in significant detail.

Between these seventeen interviewees, in other words, is a significant degree of knowledge and experience about how the screenplay development field works in the UK. As we shall see, the field is not a huge one in terms of numbers, and is dominated by the kinds of organisations who my interviewees have either worked for or with over the years. Hence their presence in this study.

### **The missing director**

Some readers may be wondering at this point why I chose *not* to interview directors as part of this study. A consideration of the thesis in the round will make this clearer, but it is worth briefly setting down my initial reasons for making this decision. Much of the work of development goes on without directors involved. One of my interviewees even stated that they 'had never worked on a project that didn't have at least two directors attached before someone else ended up directing it.' Indeed, as we shall see later in this thesis, one of the chief purposes of screenplay development is to attract a director to the project.

I wanted this study to focus on the day-to-day work of screenplay development, the processes and practices that constitute this field of activity, and consequently I chose to speak to the practitioners primarily engaged in this activity. Furthermore, I wanted to give a voice to those not often heard, to hear the stories that come from the lesser known sectors of the industry. During a film's release and subsequently its critical and academic reception, the director (along with the lead actors) tends to be the 'go to' voice that everyone wants to hear – why did they make the decisions they did? Why did they want to tell this story and the like? The director gets asked these kind of questions, their views are listened to and fixated upon – often to the exclusion of screenwriters, producers and executives. One of the motivations for this study is to redress this balance.

In the fullness of time, and given further scope and remit to study, an adjunct to this current research may indeed be to look at how directors interact with screenplay material (and the screenplay development process.) Part of the point of this study, however, is to shine a light on quite how much conceptual work goes on in the film industry without the (required) presence of the director. As a final observation on this point, I should say my interviewees weren't surprised at my decision not to interview directors. It was perfectly natural to them to consider the process without directors, given that so much of their work does indeed happen before a director is involved.

## **Interviews**

As mentioned above, there are some specific difficulties associated with interviewing respondents so well versed in story-telling. Much of the criticism of Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time*, for example, hinged on the idea that Gitlin had become too close to his interviewees and, indeed, swallowed their lies. Elayne Rapping (1985, 18) attacks his 'palsy-walsy acceptance of what the writers and producers present to him as their "idealistic" intentions.' Another reviewer, Elihu Katz (1985, 1371), characterises the book as 'a Universal Studios Tour of decision-making.'

There is nothing new here. As Caldwell (2006, 114) points out, industry studies from Powdermaker (1951) on have followed the same pattern: access granted, stories told, behind the scenes knowledge gained and then the scholar (and the study) subsequently challenged and written off on the basis that the researcher has been duped by skilled communicators. Caldwell elsewhere points out the difficulty: ‘ethnographic disclosures to scholars (and journalists) by professionals are inevitably stylised and “scripted”, but are seldom acknowledged as such’ (2009, 171). Film industry professionals, particularly those that work in developing screenplays, are skilled in the art of story-telling; in addition, another key industry skill is being able to talk. Talk about yourself, talk about the stories you’re trying to tell and talk about the projects you’re trying to sell.

These criticisms of past studies have tended to be couched in terms of an academic incorrectly applying and transferring interviewing techniques that might have worked with one group onto this other, ‘special’ group (i.e. the film industry) who have skills in narrative and self-presentation. Powdermaker, as an academic anthropologist who had no previous experience in the film world, was charged with this very fault (Robert Bierstadt 1951, 124). Yet as a researcher I had no previous experience of interviewing people in any other context. I will not be ‘reading across’ from other studies of different control groups. Thus I judged and analysed the interviews as unique events in themselves, rather than in any kind of comparative sense.

The key point in dealing with respondents who may have certain skillsets is to be aware of what those skills and abilities might be, as both Caldwell (2008, 12) and Gitlin (1983, 22) acknowledge. The importance of being aware and reflexive about the results of interviews with film practitioners is one that should extend to the results of the interviews as interviews in themselves. All such exchanges, regardless of the background of the interviewees, have their difficulties.

Scholars such as Ann Oakley (1981) and Sue Jones (1985), have long argued that interviews can still be informative and mutually co-operative events. As Mishler (1986, 2) argued, language is not a precise tool, and that ‘too much can be inferred from answers taken at face value to questions of dubious merit... all answers depend upon the way a question is formulated.’ Mishler (1986, 96) goes on to say that

interviews are a form of discourse and that ‘narratives are co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee.’ This view is now shared by many, such as Charles Briggs (1986) and more recently Barbara Sherman Heyl (2001) and Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey (2005.) Ellis and Berger (2002, 851) echo this point.

Interviews now are commonly understood as collaborative, communicative events that evolve their own norms and rules. As a result, researchers who use interviews should not focus solely on the outcomes – the words spoken by interviewees – but should examine the collaborative activities from which these outcomes are produced.

Consequently, ‘The interview process becomes less a conduit of information from informants to researchers that represents how things are, and more a sea swell of meaning making’ (2002, 853). In other words, what an interview ‘means’ is always going to be an issue that needs to be the subject of analysis and close study – the lesson is not to give up on interviewing as a research technique, rather to be aware both of the issues involved and to be critically rigorous in analyzing the results of the interviews themselves. This is the key point – each interview will be a text in itself, an exploratory discourse that I will then subsequently use as material for analysis.

Many scholars in the production studies tradition continue to use interviews with cultural practitioners – be they expert storytellers or not – and as long as one takes the necessary, self-reflexive precautions there is no reason why these shouldn’t bear fruit. In this study, consequently, I will take note of the industrial context of my interviews, and my own relationship with the interviewee. If a producer is talking about a project they’ve just released, for example, or one that they are hoping to get off the ground, then pointing out such a thing may further illuminate the interview evidence. Being vigilant about the possible industrial contexts (and therefore agendas) of my interviewees, will help guard against the kind of unthinking acceptance that the likes of Rapping (1985) and Katz (1985) warned against.

### **Interview Specifics**



See Appendix A for the times and venues of the interviews. All the in-person interviews took place in London, except for Ayub Khan Din who I interviewed at his home in Spain. I contacted potential interviewees primarily by e-mail, though on one occasion this contact happened in person in the first instance, while in a couple of instances the initial approach was made by a third party (for example, Amelia Granger of Working Title introduced me to the writer William Nicholson.) In every instance I gave the interviewee a choice of time and venue. My stipulations were that I needed to record the interview, and that I would look for at least an hour if possible. I also stated that I while I'd be happy to give them a general feel of what I'd want to ask them about, that I wouldn't supply them with questions beforehand (although nobody asked for pre-sent questions.)

When the interviews themselves took place, all but one of them stretched well beyond the hour. My initial aims were – in keeping with the ambition to create a semi-structured interview – to put the respondents at ease and to create a relaxed atmosphere. I did not go into these interviews with a list of specific questions I wanted to ask. Rather, I went in with themes I wished to cover and these themes are reflected in the structure of this thesis.

The three central themes that provided the staging points for the interviews, consequently, were Knowledge, Practice and Authorship. I wanted my interviewees to talk about these three areas – the first two in particular – as a means to illuminate the issues behind my research questions. I felt that the third of these questions, Authorship, would help me link back the research to a lot of previous scholarship in film studies.

The fruits of these interviews are contained within the following thesis, as are the themes that emerged most strongly. For example while I had wanted to explore the knowledge base of my respondents, the themes around how they talked about their backgrounds were somewhat unexpected in their prominence. This can be seen more fully in Chapter 3. Conversely, there was much less debate and discussion around the notion of Authorship. As can be seen in Chapter Seven, my respondents had remarkably similar views and its importance as a topic came through as more of a political issue rather than a conceptual one.

Consequently, in the main I analyzed the interviews through the prism of these three category areas, with respect at all times to the aforementioned research questions.

There is also a further source of evidence used in this thesis, namely my own experience in the field.

### **Auto-Ethnography**

As mentioned above, the primary mode of investigation into this topic is the practitioner interview. However, as a researcher I will also be using ‘myself’ and my past experience as an additional resource. In the first place, my experience came into play even before I started the interviews – in interview selection and access, for example. If I did not give some account of myself in this thesis, furthermore, it would be to deny the undoubted influence my past work has had on the study.

I’ve worked in the film industry for the last fourteen years, in roles including assistant, script reader and development executive/consultant. I’ve worked for the major UK public funder, a London-based American distributor and the most successful production company in Europe as well as various other production companies, broadcasters and distributors. Most of this work at one level or another involved the on-going development and/or assessment of creative material, in particular screenplays but also books. I had no formal training for this before I broke into the industry, an undergraduate degree in Philosophy notwithstanding, and but for a couple of courses in ‘script reading’ a year or so into my first job, not much since. From an anecdotal knowledge base, my route into the industry was similar to many of my colleagues – in that I was based in London and had a family contact from which to access my first jobs.

In addition to this short summary, I intend to interrogate my own experience to add to the accounts of my interviewees in a couple of ways. Firstly, to compare and contrast my subsequent work as an academic with my role in the film industry (see Chapter Four) – as we shall see, this is an illustrative comparison that was not open to my interviewees. Secondly, I use my past experiences in an integrated way with the

forthcoming research. That is, my relevant experience and knowledge is used over the subject areas covered – and during the interviews themselves – rather than as a stand-alone ‘block’ of data about me.

This is not to say there aren’t problems inherent in researchers embarking on a study of a group of which they form a part. The chief among these may be that I will fall into the role of being a spokesperson or cheerleader for the group I am studying, given my ‘membership’ of the said group.

In one sense, I *am* a spokesperson for the *process* of development – one of the primary motivations for this very study at all is to investigate the contention that the process of development is more important than has hitherto been recognised by production studies scholars. As the literature review above points out, I believe that the academic discourse surrounding this area of production has been insufficient and so – by implication – this means that I am in some sense speaking up for development.

This does not mean, however, that I am therefore biased towards or privileging any particular group of practitioners who work within this process. If, as an executive, I had studied only other executives and made the case for this group of people being the most important in the process then perhaps a charge of prejudice may be levelled. But the whole point here is to go on an exploration with fellow – and disparate – practitioners within the field as a whole. Screenwriters, producers and executives who each have their own take on the process. As outlined above, development is a contentious field. The roles within it are flexible and often in competition; the practitioners within it fulfil different roles with different aims at different times; I anticipate that the very nature of the field, in short, is so varied and contested that the notion of ‘speaking up’ for the practitioners – beyond the initial point of speaking up for the process – does not necessarily apply, because they are so often at odds with themselves.

As a wider point, the purpose of this study is not to pass ethical judgement on development practitioners, or to assess whether or not they do a ‘good job’, or to privilege their work over that of anyone else. Rather the aim is to account for and

analyse how they talk about what they actually do, both in terms of the various individual roles and in terms of the process as a whole.

In the context of self-reflexive ethnographic study, where the researcher's own experiences are used, Anselma Gallinat (2010, 29) points out: 'By making the junctures at which our memories come into play explicit it is possible to subject these memories to our own and others' analytical inspection.' And this is a key point in terms of the current study: the evidence here is in the form of co-constructed interviews between myself and the respondents and thus my experience will be openly acknowledged and open to analysis, just as is that of the interviewees.

Beyond this, there are of course further dangers associated with the wearing of the 'two hats' of academia and industry. 'Over-rapport', as Erin Hill states in her interview in Mayer, Banks and Caldwell (2009, 222), is a potential problem, the over-identifying with subjects. She tries to address this issue by a continual negotiation of the space between being a practitioner and an academic and hopes to site herself 'never fully in one camp or the other.' Felicia D. Henderson, interviewed in the same volume (2009, 226-229), is a screenwriter and academic and gives another example of this kind of difficulty – of being personally invested in the area which one is studying – when she talks of even declining to publish a paper, partly because she did not want to offend or dismay the 'showrunner' of a series she was critiquing.

The responses of Henderson (and Hill) in dealing with these kind of difficulties in the film and television world chime with the wider work in self-reflexive ethnography as evidenced, for example, in Collins and Gallinat (2010). That is, one has to be as vigilant, explicit and transparent as possible. Certainly, there was no instance for me as difficult as the one highlighted by Henderson, but I have highlighted such issues when they arise in the following study. Treading the line between the identities of the self as researcher (and subsequently writer), as participant, or as informant is a task that requires constant negotiation and recognition; nevertheless it is one that is possible, as the likes of Caldwell, Newcomb, Jones, Garnham, Dornfeld, Rosten, Cantor, Ryan et al. have shown.

## **Ethics**

There is always an ethical dimension to a research project that deals directly with human subjects, as is the case here. I went through the University of East Anglia's ethical procedures. My study and its methods were duly granted approval from the University's General Research Ethics Committee in September 2012 and I continued to work within their guidelines.

Each of my interviewees gave their permission to be quoted in all public outlets, by name. I communicated the broad aims and purposes of the study before they agreed to be interviewed. Some asked for more information on this point at the start of the interview, which I supplied. I recorded then transcribed each of the interviews, which took place at a time and location of their choosing. As a caveat, I informed them that any time they wanted to go 'off the record' they were free to do so. This happened infrequently but nevertheless, it did happen. Furthermore, I told my interviewees that if I wanted to use a quotation where they had referred to a specific person or project, I would double check the quotation with them. I wanted my interviewees to enter into the project trusting that I would not 'land them in hot water' with either past, present or potentially future colleagues.

However, it was important for me and for the project that they were on the record rather than anonymised. The chief reason for this was my own status as being partly of the industry. Firstly, as already mentioned, such an offer of anonymity has less force if the researcher is of the community. I couldn't have reasonably expected a higher degree of revelation and trust if I'd promised not to identify them, given that there is a chance (at least in their eyes) that I might very well be working with them or someone they might have been complaining about, or a company that I might end up working for. This problem Platt (1981, 82) identifies as one to do with 'continuing relationships', in that there is a high chance of seeing respondents again if you are of the same community. By putting each of my respondents on the record, by telling them that I wanted to quote what they had to say in public, this problem is obviated to some extent. I was happy to take these steps given, as already mentioned, I couldn't reasonably have expected a higher degree of revelation on working conditions (and possible complaints) if they were anonymised for the same reason.

Secondly, the interviews were intended as exchanges between peers or near peers, and certainly between fellow members of the field under investigation. Readers (of this thesis) would consequently be at a disadvantage if they knew the industrial position of only one half of these exchanges. The reader would always know who I am, but if they couldn't accurately gauge the contextual position of the interviewee, this would unbalance the interview data as an exchange. By making public both interlocutors, I hope to avoid such an unbalancing.

Despite these precautions, as John W. Creswell (2007, 140) writes, interviews are a 'hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical distribution of power between interviewer and interviewee.' Brett Mills (2009, 149-150) articulates this concern further, with particular regard to the fact that most ethical strictures surrounding interviewing refer to the interview itself, whereas there is also an ethical burden to be carried in the writing up of those interviews. It is here where the interviewer's power is most acute. But as Creswell (2007, 141) goes on to say, there are no easy answers to these questions around the exact nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and that the problems they raise need to be anticipated. I think my decision to openly acknowledge and contextualise the identity of my respondents, in this instance, goes some way to alleviating concerns around the power balance in the interviews by at least making it as explicit and transparent as possible.

Further, as to the question of 'writing up' after the interviews, there is no easy answer here either. In my writing I have tried, as Adrian Holliday (2007, 171) urges, to retain 'the humanity of the participant' by adopting a relaxed prose style in the interview sections (in particular Chapters Three-Seven) that reflects the life and energy of the actual interviews. By making this stylistic choice, I hope I have given a fairer reflection of the exchanges (and consequently my interviewees) than might otherwise be the case. I cannot avoid 'using' their evidence, for it is my primary data, but given the semi-structured and wide-ranging nature of the interviews, I have tried to avoid 'exploiting' them. Following on from Ellis and Berger (2002), Mishler (1986) Gubrium & Holst (2002), Schwandt (2007) et al, I have tried to conduct interviews that 'co-create' meaning rather than simply using them as evidence for any pre-conceived argument.

## **A note on ‘working’ definitions**

### **Development**

In terms of making decisions about who to interview and as an initial starting point I defined development as all the work that goes into creating, modifying and assessing screenplays up until the point where production finance has been secured. Changes to the screenplay go on after production has been set in train, of course, but it is arguable that these changes constitute part of the production process rather than the ‘development’ phase as such.

### **The Market and the Audience**

In certain contexts, there is a difference between the ‘market’ and the ‘audience’. We shall see in Chapter Five on the purposes of the screenplay that the ‘market’ for a screenplay is very different from the market for a finished film. However, in the context of Chapter Four – in particular on knowledge of the audience – my respondents use the term ‘audience’ and ‘market’ fairly interchangeably. This is because in these sections of the interviews we were talking about the market for any completed film, in other words the potential audience (in demographic and size) for a proposed film or else the size and demographic of past audiences for films already released.

### **The Screenplay/Script**

For the avoidance of doubt, I use the term screenplay as the pre-production document on which planning for a feature film is based. This excludes television drama or other screenworks, although some of my findings may be applicable to other forms of screenwriting. Such a usage should not be taken to have any further implications: I am not making claims as to the similarity between the screenplay and a theatrical play. I chose this usage primarily because there are certain other usages of ‘script’ that at times might have been confusing. However, in industry parlance (certainly as regards

development<sup>8</sup>) screenplay and script are used interchangeably, the latter often more than the former. In the following interview excerpts, many of my respondents use the term ‘script’ as opposed to screenplay. Unless otherwise indicated, this should be taken to refer to the screenplay.

## **Professional Roles**

Given that the following study takes as its main plank interviews with currently practicing industry workers, initially I will use definitions that will hopefully be understood by my respondents. This concerns particularly what constitutes a ‘screenwriter’, a ‘producer’ and a ‘development executive’. I’ll take a moment to define what I mean here, as in some cases academics may be unsure of the industry usage or indeed they may have defined the terms totally differently (in the case of the ‘producer’ for example.)

### **Screenwriter**

This term refers to those practitioners who undertake writing work on a screenplay or treatment (for the avoidance of doubt, this means the creation of new material, rather than the cutting or rearranging of existing work) in a freelance capacity, for which they are contracted and paid (unless they’ve written a screenplay themselves, under their own steam, which means the payment will come after the fact of writing and not before.) Normally such a working arrangement would entail some form of final writing ‘credit’ on any finished film, though this is not always the case. For the purposes of this study, anyone who does ‘writing work’ in-house will be classified as a producer or executive unless they have negotiated or arranged a writing ‘credit’ for their work on the project in question.

There may very well be a degree of flexibility between these terms and many practitioners may fall into more than one category. Nevertheless, if screenwriting is so

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<sup>8</sup> A post production ‘script’ is different from a screenplay, for example, as it can include among other things time codes, music cues and a shot log.



defined (as above) this gave me a starting point for demarcating the different roles involved in development – certainly in terms of deciding who to initially approach.

### **Development/Script Executive**

For the purposes of this study, I use this term initially to encompass any of the roles that deal directly with the creative written material (other than writing new material) and the screenwriters, either in an assessment capacity (e.g. script reader/junior executive/adviser to financier) and/or as part of a feedback loop (e.g. development executive, script editor.)

In order to demarcate the role somewhat from that of producer (who would expect to also deal with the above), I will go further and define the Development Executive role as one who's *chief function* is fulfilled when the screenplay has been signed off and agreed by their employer (be they a producer or financier/broadcaster.) Another important distinction is that, for the purposes of this study, a Development Executive is someone who is *employed* in this position, someone who works either for a producer, a production company, a financing entity or even, in certain circumstances, the writer. A Development Executive who works for themselves, who develops their own material, is more accurately defined as a producer.

### **Producer**

While 'producer' is a common term in the film industry, its usage in academia is one that often diverges from an industry definition. Leaving aside the more general term of 'cultural producer' (which can encompass almost everyone involved in production), there is still a branch of academia that would define a producer in the context of film in a different way from what might be termed industry parlance. Angela McRobbie (2002, 108), for example, talks of *The Full Monty* as being 'written in the UK but produced in the US.' As an industry practitioner, my initial reaction to this line was that the film wasn't 'produced' in the USA at all: the screenplay was initially developed by Channel Four, it was written, directed and performed by Brits

and produced by a UK production company. The credited 'producer' was Italian. It was predominately financed, however, by an American company and this, ultimately, is how McRobbie uses the term 'production'. It comes out of a political economy tradition where, as John Hartley (2011, 212-13) points out, 'production is the locus of media power, control and thence social impact.' This current study is grounded in industry practice, however and thus my definition of producer will refer to the specific role of that occupation, as understood by those working in the industry.

Again, in academic writing there is a tendency to ascribe to the film producer specific roles to the exclusion of other elements. So, for example, Hartley (2011, 212) states that: 'In the movie business, producers are responsible for selecting a script and financing its production (often risking their own money, in which case they are called Executive Producers.)' He goes on to say that it is the director who 'manages' the project. Apart from the factual error (producers often risk their own money without getting an Executive Producer credit, while conversely many people credited as Executive Producers do not risk their own money) the definition, although partially correct, doesn't necessarily encompass all that a producer might see as their work. Or again, Hesmondhalgh (2007, 64), using Ryan's term, characterises film producers as 'Creative Managers' who's role is to act as mediators between the interests of owners and the interests of 'creative personnel.' This may indeed be part of their role but, I anticipate, many producers may see themselves also as 'creative personnel.'

I agree with Hartley to an extent, in that the producer has to decide which screenplay they want to put into production and then finance it. But his description is inadequate. 'Selecting' a screenplay suggests there are a number of completed screenplays ready to go and the producer simply picks one off the shelf; and 'financing' suggests that once the choice is made, the producer's role is simply to raise cash. In the same way, while Hesmondhalgh isn't necessarily wrong to think of film producers as managers, it is arguable that this term doesn't fully encompass the creative elements of their role (at least in some incarnations.)

By the end of this thesis, I hope to show that any definition of the film producer in the UK needs to take a full account of their role in the development process. By doing so, we may reach a new and fuller understanding of this role. There has been some recent

work in the UK seeking to re-evaluate and reclaim the role of the producer in Britain. The likes of Andrew Spicer (2004; 2010), Spicer and A.T. McKenna (2012), Vincent Porter (2012), Brian Hoyle (2012) and others are trying to expand the academic understanding of the producer's role in film production. In a 2012 edition of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, these thinkers and others called for more empirical research into the role of the producer in particular - averring in the words of Matthew Robinson (2012, 145) that up until that point, the role has been 'a neglected area of film studies.' Spicer observed in an earlier piece (2004, 33-47) that it is very hard to define what producers do.

In addition to the contributions outlined above in terms of production studies and screenwriting studies, I believe this thesis will provide much more evidence for those scholars (such as the ones mentioned here) seeking to gain a greater understanding of the role of the producer.

For the purposes of starting this study, though, I shall use a working definition of 'producer' that is grounded in my experience of industry practice. I shall thus define the producer as the person (or persons, there's often more than one) that is in charge of a film's production legally, contractually and financially. They are responsible for hiring and firing anyone who works on the production (including the writer or director.) They also own the copyright in the film (this may, and usually is, ceded as part of the financing but nevertheless it is the producer's to cede.) In order to go into production, the producer would have had to secure (and therefore own) the underlying rights to the screenplay and in almost all cases, would have had to develop this screenplay themselves. That is, they have taken an initial idea (be it a novel or an early draft or a treatment or a pitch) – that may be their own or someone else's – and managed the development of that idea into a shooting screenplay, contributing their own thoughts at every stage.

I shall revisit the role of the producer throughout this thesis and deal specifically with their creative impact in the chapter on authorship.

## Chapter Two: the industrial context of feature film development in the UK

### Introduction

The point of this chapter is to make the case for feature film development in the UK as being a field of cultural production, in the Bourdieu sense. However, before I make that argument – based on the qualitative data I’ve amassed during the course of this study – it’s important to illustrate the industrial context of feature film development and production in the UK, including the use of quantitative sources.

Film production in the UK is mostly undertaken by small companies (BFI 2014a, 212.) The BFI yearbook estimates that 95% of all workplaces in video and film production in the UK in 2013 had fewer than 10 employees (BFI 2014a, 232). The vast majority of these production companies are also based in London and the South East. There are smaller centres of production in Scotland, Yorkshire and the West Midlands but almost 70% of all production companies are concentrated in the south east (BFI 2014a, 216-217).

These (mostly small) companies are primarily in the business of developing, financing and producing film content. These companies would also be involved (normally with partners) in exploiting any film as much as possible, in maximising its commercial success. This involves marketing, distribution and ongoing rights management and exploitation – again, mostly with collaborators if at all possible. However, this work normally only comes once any film project has secured enough finance as to make it worthwhile to start promoting and exploiting a *finished* film. (In other words, the work of exploiting and promoting the film may start before the film is finished, though it rarely starts before there is a realistic chance of the film being made at all.)

### Producing

While the ‘production companies’ are small, producing a feature film itself is nevertheless in most cases a labour intensive exercise that can require upwards of hundreds of people working on it. Most of this labour (in terms of numbers of people) is however concentrated around the physical production of the film. In other words, around the actual shoot. A high number of usually freelance workers (crew members such as the camera and lighting teams, the costume department, production design and so forth) are hired for specific periods of time that cover preparation for the shoot and subsequently the shoot itself. So, for example, a location manager may be hired fairly early in the preparation (or pre-production) phase, as they would be required to help find the locations. They would also work through the shoot, to help manage those locations when they are in use but once the shoot is finished, there would be no need to keep a location manager on. Conversely, an actor isn’t normally contracted to work in the pre-production stage, save for possibly a short rehearsal period. Once their specified work is done, the actors leave the shoot and may not be needed again until it is time to publicise the film. Depending on their exact role, these different workers are only required to work on the film for a short time and would only in very rare instances (if at all) be employees of the production company itself.

Depending on the technical demands, there would be fewer post-production workers on the film. Nevertheless, their term of employment on a particular film would still cover only the time it took to complete the job on that project. These workers (colourists, composers, editors, special effects workers and so on) would also not be employees of the production company. Unlike many of the crew on the physical production, however, many post-production workers are employees of the post-production companies they work for and are much more likely to be on a permanent (rather than freelance) contract. Nevertheless, this doesn’t alter the fact that they’ll only work for the production company (via their employer) for the duration of the project on a specific film.

### **Financing Production**

In addition to being responsible for physically producing the film (i.e. producing either a digital copy, or a print, or other specified media, of a film of a minimum

specified length as per the delivery requirements of the financiers, investors and distributors<sup>9</sup>), one of the other tasks of the production company is to raise the money to finance this production. I want to take a brief moment to outline the different kinds of sources for production finance, as these are the types of sources that production companies have to interact with during the development process and leading up to production. The development process is intended to arrive at a point where a producer can secure financing for their film, thus it is worth taking a moment to consider the production finance sources in terms of the types of investment involved. For while this current thesis is dealing with the culture and practices of development, one of the chief aims of development (as we shall see later in the thesis) is to secure approval from these various sources – and therefore, the reader may better understand the culture of development if they have an awareness of this context, especially when we consider that such an understanding of production financing underpins the work of at least the producers and the development executives, even while they work on development.

UK feature films are financed in a variety of ways and it would be unusual to find any two films with exactly the same finance plan (Finney 2010, 61). Even at the top of the budget scale, when large production companies have output deals with major US studios (such as Working Title with Universal and Heyday with Warner Brothers), the exact financing structure varies from film to film. Even a producer who manages to secure funding from one source, say a wealthy individual, would in most cases still use at least the UK tax credit to lever extra money for the production. This itself would be a rare case. (See Adam Davies and Nicole Wistreich (2007, 16 and the whole of chapter three) for more detail on production financing in general.) In almost all instances, the finance of each new film in the UK is pieced together from scratch, and this piecing together is one of the tasks of the production company. This is not to say that a production company has to reinvent the wheel every single time, for there are common elements in terms of the types of funding that goes into a movie (and consequently the sources for such funding.) Almost all feature films in the UK will

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<sup>9</sup> Industry parlance usually refers to ‘physical production’ as the shooting stage of the film’s overall production. So, for example, the BFI employee in charge of overseeing all the practical aspects of the shooting of a film that the institute is financing (e.g. by monitoring cost and progress reports) is called ‘the Head of Physical Production.’

have at least one of following types of finance: Equity, Rights, License Fee, Grant, Tax Credit, or Loan. To go through them in order briefly:

**Equity** – in return for an investment, a production company would cede a proportion of the film's future revenue. This would involve both the repayment of the initial investment plus a share of any profits. An equity investor would therefore come to 'own' part of the film. (To clarify, an equity investor becomes a shareholder in the film – in return for their money, they have a share of the film's revenue and profits.) An equity investor may often tie their investment up with some other form of investment. So, for example, a film investment fund might cash flow the film's tax credit whilst also putting in extra money and taking an equity position. Or in the case of the BFI, the institute takes an equity position in the film – albeit often on worse terms than a commercial operator. Nevertheless, like any equity investor their position is such that their investment is structured to be recouped and then subsequently to be participating in future revenue/profit. This category covers anything from a large city funder to a private investor (or even, if an individual is making a film entirely off their own back in their bedroom, then they are the sole equity financier – investing their time – and have full ownership of the film with the ability to sell it as they choose.)

**License Fee** – this is also often tied up with Equity. A broadcaster (at the time of writing, the financing market in the UK for independent films means primarily the BBC or Channel 4, via their film arms BBC Films and Film Four)<sup>10</sup> invests in return for the rights to show the film a specified number of times on their television channels. Both BBC Films and Film Four very often take equity positions in the films they invest in, that is they put in additional monies on top of the license fee and consequently also hope to participate in future revenue. These two entities also invest in the development of projects.

**Rights** – sometimes known as pre-sales, essentially this is where the production company sells to a distributor the rights to distribute the film in a given territory for a

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<sup>10</sup> This fee would also be paid by other broadcasters such as ITV or Sky. The primary difference is that the BBC and Channel Four are much more likely to pay the license fee *before* production, and therefore their contribution forms part of the production finance. ITV, Sky and various other channels (and streaming services such as NetFlix) more usually purchase the rights of completed films – thereby forming part of the revenue stream rather than the production finance.

specified time. This can be in the home territory (i.e. the UK) as well as abroad. As the budget increases, so does the likelihood that the production company will have had to pre-sell at least one significant territory in order to raise the finance. Rights obviously form part of the revenue stream, and a buyer would look to make their money back (and more) through exploitation of the film in their territory. They would normally not participate in any profits gleaned from elsewhere (that is, they do not take an equity position.)

**Grant** – as the name suggests, this is an investment with no profit or recoupment position. Currently in the UK such grants tend to come in the form of inducements to carry out work in a particular region (e.g. Creative Scotland.) These investments tend not to form a large part of the overall budget, rather they contribute to local costs incurred (for example, helping with accommodation costs for crew.)

**Tax credit** – currently in the UK this amounts to a percentage of the film's production spend in the UK (or budget), which can be recouped after production. This source of funding often needs to be cashflowed by some other entity, as it's only payable after the production company can evidence the expenditure (in most cases, this happens after the completion of the film.) However, as long as the film satisfies the qualification criteria (it needs to qualify as a British Film as per the DCMS cultural test criteria,<sup>11</sup> as well as being intended for a cinema release) then the money is paid – there's no quality threshold, for example, or subsequent minimum distribution criteria. There are various technical requirements but no qualitative ones. For example, for films under £20 million budget, a production company can get relief of 25% of up to 80% of the budget, resulting in cashback of 20% of the total budget (Olswang 2009, 5).

**Loan** – sometimes called gap or bridge finance, in many cases these loans are taken out to help with cash flow (often a difficult problem in UK film production<sup>12</sup>) and in

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<sup>11</sup> A full list of the criteria is available from the BFI (2014c).

<sup>12</sup> In order to start the production of a film – the pre-production stage and then the shoot itself – a production company accrues various costs that need to be paid. However, due to the patchwork nature of the financing structures – and the uncertainty about getting the various financiers to agree on all the terms – often financiers are loathe to commit their cash too soon. Perhaps partly due to the nature of film production – financiers need to shell out money before they quite know what they are buying – getting the cash from said financiers is not always easy, certainly not in a timely fashion.



the case of banks are normally secured against future sales. It is a loan, in other words, with the film's future revenue acting as security. There is no equity position, however, rather the loans are paid back (if from a bank with consequent fees and interest) as soon as any money comes in (say from selling the rights to a foreign distributor.) The loan principle is also the same as a producer taking out a personal loans (say against their house), or putting their own money into the production.

While all these above categories apply to the UK Film Industry, a UK production company could also be involved in an international co-production and thus there would be similar sources of investment abroad (tax breaks for filming in a different country, for example, or cultural funding bodies such as France's CNC that fulfil a similar role to the BFI.)

These are the *types* of finance that a production company has to piece together in order to finance their film, regardless of the size of the budget. The aim of any company would be to secure as beneficial a blend as possible (so for example, securing investment from the BFI would often offer a better recoupment and revenue position for the company, while investment from a distributor would give the film a better chance of reaching an audience.) The production company therefore has to negotiate these various funding routes, with the aim ultimately of getting the film funded at all.

### **An Example**

A finance plan for a low to mid budget independent film in the UK might look something like this:

Total Budget £3 million

Broadcaster (Equity plus license fee)	£500,000
BFI (Equity)	£500,000
Tax Credit	£500,000

Pre-Sales (via a sales company)	£600,000
Private Equity	£500,000
Gap (i.e. loan against rest of sales)	£400,000

In this sample plan, what I've called 'Rights' above is represented in the Pre-sales figure – where the production company will sell the rights to distribute in certain territories. The rest of the budget is drawn from a combination of equity, license fee and a loan (termed 'Gap'.) This plan is very much a simplification, which doesn't take into account the implications in terms of recoupment (i.e. when each of these investors get their money back), cash flow schedule or the various conditions that different financiers put on their investments. For examples of quite how complicated this can get, producer Nik Powell provides an illuminating account of how he financed the film *Hollow Reed* in his diary for the BFI, in Petrie (1996, 5-6). Also see Finney (2010) and Bloore (2013, in particular 31-51) for more detail.

The point here is only to provide a brief picture of the mosaic that needs to be constructed by a production company (or producer) when financing a feature film in the UK. The differing nature of these funding sources also means that each source may very well have different priorities as well as different methods for assessing a project's viability. The Tax Credit, for example is awarded quite separately from any artistic, commercial or creative merit (and consequently the DCMS does not employ anyone to assess the merits of either the screenplay or the completed film); a distributor is assessing primarily the ability of the film to perform commercially both at the theatrical box office and ancillary, in the territories which they work; while a body such as the BFI or Film Four may place greater weight on the creative content and/or cultural cachet of the filmmakers involved (a measure of success for them might be, for example, wide critical acclaim or film festival appearances, rather than revenues.) Both these latter bodies, for instance, employ practitioners in specific 'development' roles with screenplay development competencies and backgrounds.

Consequently, these different sources of finance often have both different objectives but also (as a consequence) slightly different ways of assessing the viability of a film project. Nevertheless, except in the case of the Tax Credit and minor grants,

production company approaches to these sources normally involve the presentation of at the very least a creative document, most usually a screenplay.<sup>13</sup>

### **Developing a film**

A third chief task of a production company, along with financing the film and physically producing it, is in chronological terms usually the first one. In most cases, feature film development leads to a screenplay. Feature documentaries obviously aren't scripted to the same degree as fiction, and there are cases where another form of document might lead to a feature film being financed. This is rare for the latter, however, and if there isn't a screenplay in the traditional sense there will almost certainly be some other kind of 'creative' document in its stead. Even a notable exception, Mike Leigh (see note below) had to produce a four page document when the suggested budget for his *Untitled 98* film (later renamed *Topsy Turvy*) exceeded the usually relatively modest level at which he worked (DeWinter 2006, 59).

Without a project you have nothing to finance and nothing to produce. Therefore, first and foremost, a production company needs to either acquire or develop projects.

### **A legal distinction**

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<sup>13</sup> There are some exceptions to this – for example, many Mike Leigh films have been effectively financed before the script is written given his unusual way of developing the film stories in conjunction with actors. Needless to say, one of the factors involved in these financing decisions thus becomes the filmmakers themselves and the trust engendered by their previous track records. For an account of how Mike Leigh films have been financed, see Helen De Winter's interview with producer Simon Channing-Williams in DeWinter (2006, 54-62). Channing-Williams explains how he went about financing Mike Leigh's 1988 film *High Hopes*, which subsequently formed a model for the financing of all Leigh's films. In this model, Channing-Williams worked out a budget before there was a screenplay, and even raised the money before the screenplay existed. Leigh prefers to build up the screenplay via an extended and intensive rehearsal period with the actors. The only marker for the budget is the number of actors Leigh thinks he needs and they work from there. Channing-Williams also had an idea of the amount of money he was likely to be *able* to raise. Subsequently he raised the money before the screenplay existed. This is very unusual, however, and is a model that depends absolutely on the financier's belief in the track record of Channing-Williams and, in particular, Mike Leigh. In other words, they are handing over the responsibility of assessing the screenplay to Leigh as a director based on their assessment of his talent, and of the 'value' of a Mike Leigh film (regardless of the subject matter.) This is not the norm.

At this point, it's worth pointing out a legal distinction that operates in UK film production and development: Most films in this country are actually independent companies in their own right. Production companies set up Single Purpose Vehicles (SPVs) when they go into production. The sole purpose of this limited company is to make the film. It is the SPV that is the film in a legal sense, it is the SPV who contracts with most of the people who work on the film; it is the SPV that goes into profit or loss; it is the SPV, in other words, that is financed. The production company has developed the project and then raised the finance for this new 'company' (the film.) In this sense, the production company doesn't technically produce the film at all.

On the one hand this may be viewed as a technical or legal nicety. After all the production company has ceded its rights to this new SPV, the company directors/producers of the production company will be the company directors of the SPV and producers of the film. (That is, one of the production company producers will act as a company director of the SPV and will produce the movie). On the other hand it is a distinction that begins to point to the wider themes of this thesis and to the importance of screenplay development. For in some sense, film production companies in the UK are essentially *development* companies.

This legal split between conception and execution – one company conceives and develops the film project, the other (albeit run mostly by the same people) might be said to execute the project – echoes Janet Staiger (1979, 18; also 1983; 1985a; 1985b) on the evolution of the screenplay, where she points to a historical moment when conception and execution became separated in US studio production. This is an example of what Steven Maras (2009, 40-41), in his study of screenwriting, is at pains to try to disentangle. He rails against the split between conception and realisation in screenwriting (Maras 2009, 5). Yet, as I've just pointed out, such a split is enshrined in legal practice in the UK. While the people involved in the conception of a film and its realisation are often the same (or at least some of the personnel are the same), the legal and commercial entities that carry out the work are entirely separate. How such a legal position came about historically is beyond the scope of this study. The point here is simply that such a state of affairs exists today in the UK, neatly exemplifying

(in law and commercial practice) the conceptual distinction Maras speaks of with regards to the US industry.

As one of my interviewees said of their production company, ‘it is a research and development company’. All the film projects themselves, if successfully financed, become self-contained companies or concerns, making money (or not) for their investors. Or as Amelia Granger, Senior VP for development at Working Title told me: ‘the development process at the level that a company like WT is at with good resources is a bit like playing the stock market, working at an investment fund, you are taking punts on investments and our job is to try to identify the good ones that are going to be worth investing in.’

These ‘production’ companies research and develop ideas for new businesses (or films) and bring those businesses to market.

### **Financing Development**

These mostly small production companies, concerned with finding and developing projects that will ultimately prove producible (i.e. financeable as films) also need to find finance for their development activities. While production companies (and the producers who own them) themselves rarely take much of a fee for the development phase of their work (their fees normally come out of the production budget), rights need to be secured (for novels for adaptation, say, or true stories); and screenwriters are generally paid for their work, whether the film goes into production or not. Additional development costs might include employing a development executive or freelance script reader, along with associated research costs such as talent tracking, research assistants, going to the theatre and subscribing to trade press.

Like the production mosaic, development funding comes from a variety of sources and depends on many factors. In its simplest form, screenwriters themselves fund script development by writing ‘on spec’. (Derived from ‘speculation’, a writer writes a screenplay in the hope that a producer will subsequently take the project on.) Much has been written about the creative industries reliance on free labour: see for example

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, especially 114-116), Hesmondhalgh and Neil Percival (2014) and Ursell (2000). Such studies illustrate the need, especially at entry level, to work for nothing. More specifically, in development, as the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe (2008, 4) complained: ‘In effect, writers often subsidise project development.’ It’s certainly the case that there are many more screenplays written than are made, and there is also no doubt many speculative screenplays written, for which the writers never got paid.

However, for the purposes of this particular study it is perhaps not relevant to talk of the unpaid labour of screenwriters. None of my respondents write speculatively – most had *never* written a spec script and certainly weren’t in the practice of writing them now. Those that did, did so at the start of their career. At this stage in their working lives, they have accrued enough power that they don’t have to work for free (unlike even powerful producers.) Furthermore, as the following thesis will bear out, few speculative screenplays make it to production. In other words, to say that the film industry ‘relies’ on the unpaid labour of screenwriters is not necessarily a sustainable position and, even if it were, it is not sustainable by me based upon the portfolio of interviews in *this* study.

What it may do, more accurately, is rely on the unpaid development work of producers. We’ll revisit this point in the practice section of this thesis. Suffice to say at this point that the spectrum of development finance runs from no money, to millions of pounds. This latter case is rarer, especially in the UK, and almost always involves a production company being financed for such a project via a US studio. Working Title, for example, spend millions of pounds each year. ‘Double digit millions,’ according to the co-chairman Tim Bevan, of which he’s prepared to ‘write off the whole lot’ (DeWinter 2006, 95). This is spent on development funded via their relationship with Universal Studios. This is an example of a company ploughing revenues from previously produced films back into the development of future films.

Another common route to development finance is via the same production funders who a production company would then hope to finance production too. For example, the BFI, Film Four or the BBC, who all employ staff with ‘development’ responsibilities. These three organisations are key funders of independent

development in the UK, a fact reflected in my portfolio of interviewees – one of whom used to run BBC films, while all the producers and writers had worked with the BBC, the BFI and Film Four in their working lives in development. There are various other more commercially minded sources who are prepared to pay for the development of a project with a view to ultimately co-financing the production, such as Working Title Films, the largest development funder in the UK. (Again, this is reflected in my portfolio of interviews, where a number of the interviewees had previously worked in development at Working Title, while I also interviewed their current SVP in charge of Film.)

Development tends to be much less expensive than production but nevertheless, production companies still have to find this money – either in the form of slate funding (finance that covers a slew of their projects) or on a single project basis. Again, at the very least production companies have to invest if not their own money then at least their own time in development.

It takes less money to develop a feature film than to produce one – the Attentional report commissioned by the UKFC and Skillset in 2006/7 estimated that the UK industry spends approximately 4.3 % of production spend on development (2007, 19.) They estimated the equivalent Hollywood figure to be nearer 10% (2007, 20). As an investment development is risky. Currently, the only way to recoup a development investment is if the film is made. As the same report estimates, 82% of projects in development never make it into production (2007, 4).

### **The Development ‘Sector’ Recognised**

Development is a crucial component in the UK Film Industry. When the UK Film Council was first established in 2000, it had three chief ‘production’ funds that distributed money to filmmakers. The Premier Fund had ten million initially, the New Cinema Fund five and ‘the Development Fund’ five million also (UKFC 2000, 3). The importance of screenplay development was thereby explicitly recognised. Part of its strategic vision for the UK film industry was to encourage, foster and fund an active development sector as the relative size of the fund indicates. Indeed, the first

bullet point of the UKFC (2000, 13) priority list was ‘To improve the quality of scripts.’ The mission statement goes on to say that ‘The UK Film Council has identified the lack of support for script development as the single biggest problem affecting the ability of the UK industry to deliver a consistent flow of high quality films.’

This explicit recognition of screenplay development and its importance was further emphasised by the call for training programmes in particular for screenwriters and development executives (UKFC 2000, 16).

There is perhaps no stronger initial intimation of the sector’s importance than this, a newly constituted, well-funded quasi-governmental body in charge of all aspects of film policy states as one of its top priorities the improvement in screenplay development as well as signalling its importance to the wider industry. The establishment of a separate well-resourced development fund signalled this strongly. Of course, such a policy may not have been well-founded – nevertheless, its adoption points to if not the importance, then at least the perceived importance of the sector.

Six years later, the Council subsequently attempted to map the ‘development sector’, in conjunction with Skillset, showing its interest still further. The report, carried out by Attentional (2007), had the twin aims of garnering data about the development sector itself while also finding out how that sector interacted with the training environment and whether the connection could be improved.

It provided some valuable quantitative data that helps to situate the development process further. It estimated that £50 million was invested into development in the UK in 2006, while only 18% of developed projects are ultimately produced. Production companies on average employed 1.7 people in development roles, although the average climbs to 3.3 if you take into account employees with ‘some development responsibilities’ (Attentional 2007, 4). Creative Skillset (2012b) added to this data set further in 2012, when they concluded that 14% of the film production work force



works in ‘creative development’ – roughly 2,800 people.<sup>14</sup> Although it should be noted that this sector of ‘creative development’ excludes producers, who are counted in the ‘strategic management’ numbers.

The BFI also sporadically revisits aspects of the development sector as part of its statistical yearbook. Apart from noting the level of public investment in development which for 2013 was £10.9 million (BFI 2014a, 208), the yearbook looks at development generally through the prism of diversity issues and more often than not encompasses more than just development – for example, the BFI makes a point of highlighting the dearth of female writers and directors. It states that in 2013 only 14% of the writers credited on completed feature films were women, a figure it tracks each year (2014, 236). Though it should be noted that these figures relate to produced films, which make up for at most 20% of the development work at any one time – there are no accurate figures on how many female writers are currently employed.

These facts and figures are some of the few that help to indicate the size of the development sector and perhaps also that it exists at all. I reproduce them here not in an attempt to offer any kind of definitive or exhaustive account in a quantitative sense. Rather, I hope that they help to make the point that as a sector it exists in a significant form.

But while these statistical based reports tell us something about the existence and extent of the sector, they tell us little about the culture of this work or the people who do it. Who are these people who undertake such specialist work, creating screenplays? How do they talk about what they do, and what does it tell us? How do these people, in the words of Pat Bazeley (2013, 4) ‘experience, act on, or think about themselves’ and the world (or field) of screenplay development in which they work?

Now we’ve got a sense of the facts and figures of the industry, let’s take a more in depth look at the field of feature film development in particular.

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<sup>14</sup> The majority of the workforce in film production works in strategic management (38%), followed by business management (23%), production (15%) and creative development (14%) (Creative Skillset 2012a, 30).

### **The Field of Feature Film Development: a sub-field?**

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu (1993) writes specifically of the literary field but I think using some of the tools of his analysis of the Cultural Field can help us to understand the culture of film development in the UK. It may seem peculiar to extract development as a specific field from the wider field of film production, but I hope to show in the following that development is indeed a significant field in its own right, built up through ‘embedded’ contexts and meanings that lead to commonly adhered to practices. Agents within the field vie for prestige, consecration and recognition. Symbolic power is built using various forms of capital. And while many of those working in the field may claim a significant degree of personal agency (indeed, it’s often vital for their careers that they do so), nevertheless I will argue this agency is exercised within a structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force, much like Randall Johnson’s description of a Bourdieu field (1993, 5-7).

A field, using Bourdieu’s conception, is a network of structural relations, or a structured system of social positions, where struggles take place over specific resources. The resources at stake may be thought of in four categories of goods: economic, social, cultural or symbolic. In addition to this, his notion of *habitus* both constrains and enables the social actors within these fields – the *habitus* ‘allows an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation’ (Bourdieu 1984, 101). The *habitus* is an ‘acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted’ (Bourdieu 1977, 95). This system consists of dispositions and ‘classificatory schemes’ (Bourdieu 1990, 66-79) embodied in people. In other words, the actions of social actors in the field are partly determined by their *habitus*, their social and educational histories.

There are of course problems with Bourdieu’s conception of *habitus* and field in general. As Richard Jenkins, for example, points out, it is not entirely clear ‘how the existence of a field is to be determined or how fields are to be identified’ (Jenkins 1992, 89). Likewise, it is not always clear how Bourdieu thinks *habitus* is created – at

times, for instance, he suggests that each field generates its own *habitus*, whilst also claiming that agents bring their own *habitus* to the field (Jenkins 1992, 90).

There is also a more trenchant criticism of Bourdieu's work as it applies to cultural production in the form of Howard Becker and his notion of an art world. For Becker (1982/2008), Bourdieu's reliance on struggle doesn't adequately account for the cooperation and collaboration involved in creating works of art. Becker (2008, 379) insists his account of art creation is 'more empirically grounded' and furthermore that as a metaphor, 'field' is spatial and limiting in a way that 'world' is not.

We shall see later in this thesis how Becker (1982) and his conception of art creation might help us understand better certain aspects of screenplay development. In the chapter on the Creation of the Screenplay, I hope to show that while Becker's notion works on specific projects, those projects are nevertheless steered through (or struggle in) a field not dissimilar to the kind of fields Bourdieu outlines. Other criticisms of Bourdieu revolve around the vagueness not only of terms such as *habitus* and field, but also the same vagueness as regards the different types of capital and what constitutes a certain type of capital at any given time.

Hesmondhalgh (2006b) also questions the worth of Bourdieu's work on the mass media, pointing out not unreasonably that Bourdieu's work on fields of cultural production are almost exclusively centred on restricted cultural production and that he fails to account for mass media (2006b, 217-219). However, this current study is very much a study of a restricted field of cultural practice. The cultural product at the end of the screenplay development process, the activity of the field, is a screenplay. Although we may say that cinema is a mass medium, the screenplay certainly is not. The intended readership of a screenplay is, in its first and most important instance, very small. Screenplays (of completed films) are published for public consumption in some instances, but even if one could say that such a publication did represent the screenplay as an original document (rather than a transcript of the finished film) these publications do not exceed the reach of the film itself. More importantly, the screenplay is not written to be published.

As this study goes on, we will perhaps see in what ways the screenplay development field is analogous to a Bourdieu field, or not. However, at this stage we can perhaps use Bourdieu's concepts not as a grand theoretical justification so much as – at his suggestion – 'a set of thinking tools visible through the results they yield' (Bourdieu quoted in Wacquant 1989, 50). Indeed, I am not the only scholar of the film industry to take this approach. As Blair (2009, 117) says, and then illustrates in her writing on the television and film industries, Bourdieu is a 'useful resource.' Graham Murdock (2003, 32), without quoting Bourdieu, nevertheless also avers that: 'All sites of cultural production are fields of contest in which participants with differing stakes and resources jockey for position and advantage.'

Even more pertinently to this study, Macdonald (2004, 10) likened the screen development process to a Bourdieu field of cultural production, where the development of 'screen ideas' happens according to 'the habitus of those working in the field.' Part of the point of this study is to continue this work into the field and to see to what extent screenplay development can be said to be a separate field, and if so how that field operates.

### **Narrowing the field**

We've already seen how it is possible to demarcate development from production in the feature film sector. Not only is it conducted by separate companies in a legal sense, much of the work goes on quite separately from producing films themselves. How could it be otherwise, when we remember that only 18% of projects in development are actually produced as films? Similarly, we've seen how industry and government bodies (e.g. Skillset and the UKFC) treat it as a sector in its own right. Production companies, likewise, employ 'heads of development' (as a list of my interviewees shows.) As my interviews will also show as we go through the thesis, as far as the practitioners are concerned, the notion of being 'in development' is something quite separate and apart from 'in production'.

Now, while I follow Macdonald in treating the field as having Bourdieu-like characteristics, I should say that Macdonald takes as his field of study – both in the

2004 work and in his latest volume in 2013 – the development of ‘screen ideas’ for both television and film. Not only is this scholarship grappling with the development of the finished screenwork (rather than being tied to the development of a screenplay), his study – like the work of much of the screenwriting research network – attempts to tackle film and television idea development *as if they are part* of the same field. My particular study focusses on film only – and screenplay development in particular – as I believe over the course of my experience and interviews, this represents a quite separate field in its own right.

While there is nothing wrong with approaching both film and television screenplay development as part of the same field (there are undoubtedly similarities and certainly a degree of cross-over of practices and practitioners between the two) I will argue in the following that the differences in culture and practices are at times quite profound; furthermore, not only are there material differences that affect screenplay development and content, there is also a significant *perception* of difference as far as the practitioners are concerned.

Consider first this story of distinction from my own personal experience.

### **A story of distinction**

I worked in the film industry for many years before I became aware of any profound differences between film and television development. I’d done some minor work reading television scripts for the now defunct TAPS (a charity that provided advice and small awards to new writers) as well as a couple of TV companies, but the majority of my freelance engagements up until 2005/6 had been in film screenplay reading. I’d also worked for a production fund at the UKFC, in distribution at Fine Line and as a junior development executive at Working Title. In other words, over five or six years I’d accrued what I considered at the time to be very strong experience in the development field. Yet work isn’t always plentiful in the film industry and, during a hiatus, I considered looking for employment in television drama development and production. My perception then was that there was more work in television at the time.

I emailed various heads of development in large TV production companies, as well as senior development types at the BBC and Channel 4. All of whom agreed to meet me. At the time, I took this for granted – of course they would meet with me, I've worked for all these highly regarded film companies, how hard or different can television drama be, I reasoned. Looking back on this process now, through a critical lens that didn't really occur to me at the time, I can see that even getting as far as to meet and spend time with these people took a considerable amount of 'capital' as well as knowledge. I knew how to approach these people, learnt behaviour from my previous assisting roles as well as a life-time operating among what Elizabeth Traube (1996, xv) might call 'the knowledge class.' My approaches were well researched, my emails contained hooks, as often as not quoting mutual acquaintances or previous shared working experience (in essence, showing my social and cultural capital) and overall my approach conformed to a format that I'd picked up from my earlier industry experience. In short, the lesson was that if you want a job in the industry you should meet as many people as possible *before* an opportunity comes up rather than when it does. Many jobs aren't even advertised and I'd learnt (or rather, one of my first bosses had told me) that you need to be 'on people's radar' in order to get the best jobs. And there is undeniably a cross over between television drama development and feature film development, in terms of some key competencies: reading and analysing screenplays, for example, as well as being aware of emerging talent.

What I wasn't prepared for, after meeting these various kindly people who'd given up their time, was the differences between the two worlds. If I'd thought more deeply about it before going in, this may have been obvious to me but at the time I assumed that drama was drama – you either knew how to help people tell a story or you didn't.

My self-confidence didn't last long. What became clear to me – perhaps more in retrospect than at the time – was that whilst I possessed some of the competencies and skills that might be of interest, I simply did not know enough about television, or show that I liked it enough, to readily suggest myself as a potential employee. On the one hand I was probably an inexperienced interviewee (what prospective job candidate doesn't express enthusiasm?), but what struck me also was how much these

commissioners and developers *loved* television and not solely the kind of television they were currently working on. They'd almost all started their work on soap operas, for example, and still watched and liked them (and expected anyone who worked for them to essentially feel the same way.) Indeed, the impression I got was that to 'fit in' with their working environment, huge enthusiasm for television regularly expressed seemed a pre-requisite, as did a deep knowledge of all forms of television drama (that went well beyond mine.) I sensed in those I met a (well-founded) mistrust that I was actually an interloper from the film world, more interested in working on projects that were in essence 'films' made for TV rather than in the medium itself.

This experience came back to me when I was interviewing screenwriter and novelist Frank Cottrell Boyce. We were talking about his route into screenwriting and how he worked on *Brookside* among other shows before moving on to film, but how he realised that television wasn't really for him.

I realised when I was working on Corrie with Russell Davies that I actually didn't like telly. Because Russell just watched and loved everything and I was like, oh right? And that was the first time I realised, actually you're not mad about telly because that's what being mad about telly looks like. Having a shelf in your house with all of *Juliet Bravo* on it. That's what it looks like.

I am not mad about telly, but it certainly felt to me that all of those I met in television drama development were mad about telly – and that this was one of the key qualifications for work in the sector, being able to evidence this enthusiasm, and to proclaim it. (The television seemed to be the operative word as much as the *drama*. I had somehow expected the reverse.)

This perception of difference between the fields is discernible in some of my interviewees. Indeed, in many of the interviews – as with Cottrell Boyce above – the respondents resorted to saying when something was not film. As Gina Neff (2012, 71) says: 'Denunciations can be examined for insight into the values of people behind the critique. Denunciations are one way we see subjects defining their own values in the negative.' My interviewees were keen to make such distinctions. Take Dan MacRae, Head of Development at Studio Canal: 'I was talking to a TV producer the other day,

very experienced, who had no idea what a movie producer does. Despite the similarities, I asked a couple of questions that showed how little she knew, how wide of the mark.'

On the one hand, this is a straightforward claim of difference. He's asserting his knowledge of the field over a perceived outsider, claiming authority and marking out territory. But it's worth noting that he felt the need to distance the film industry from television. My question had been how much people outside the process knew about what a film producer does, I hadn't mentioned television at all. Amelia Granger spoke of directors 'graduating' from television to film.

Producer Andy Paterson also asserts the difference, in his mind, between television drama production and film both in his interview with me and in Peter Bloore's *The Screenplay Business*. In the latter, he argues that the development of British films and television is fundamentally different partly because there is in his mind 'no need' for British films (the cinemas would happily fill their screens with American movies) whereas British television demands content (Bloore 2013, 27). Whether this is true or not, Paterson is certainly at pains to point out these perceived differences and to place himself firmly in the 'film' camp. The point he is making here is that a UK film doesn't need to be made in order to supply a pipeline of content in the same way that broadcasters have to fill their schedules.

As I said at the top of this section, there are of course similarities between television and film production. Many of my interviewees, for example, have worked in television as well as film particularly earlier in their careers. When I interviewed him, David Parfitt was on the verge of shooting BBC 2's *The Wipers Times* for example, and Laurence Coriat had co-written *Everyday* which had just premiered on Channel 4. (Although it should be noted that the former of these was conceived initially as a feature film and only came to television when funding proved difficult, whilst the latter was conceived as a simultaneous film and television project.)

Despite this cross-over, it should also be noted that while many of my interviewees (the writers and producers) had experience in both media, only one of the seven



people I interviewed who are (or had been) development executives had any real experience of developing television.

There are also often practical differences between film and television development in addition to the obviously different format restrictions, not least the various funding models. The differences between film and television drama in how both development and subsequently production are funded is critical to an understanding of the different practices and culture. In particular, in my chapter on ‘The Purpose of the Screenplay’, we shall see that one of the most important functions of a film screenplay is often non-existent when it comes to television.

Without rehearsing that argument here, suffice it to say at this point that in television much of the screenwriting is done on projects where the production is guaranteed. Writers write speculatively, of course, and they ‘pitch’ pilots and the like. But it is rare to have to write a whole series, for example, speculatively. If the pilot is picked up, then all the subsequent screenwriting is undertaken on the basis that it will reach the television screen. Conversely the vast majority of screenplay development work in film is done on projects that have no guarantee of production. The industrial role of such a screenplay is thus vastly different in one industry sector compared to the other.

As the preceding has shown, there is also a strong *perception* of difference from those working in the film development sector. Taken together – the factual differences in practice and environment, along with the perception of difference – it is clear that film screenplay development is worthy of scrutiny quite apart from other forms of dramatic writing.

## **Conclusion**

We’ve seen briefly how the funding of feature films works in the UK industry. How films are funded on a project to project basis and how this operates differently from much of the funding of television drama, at least as regards the screenwriting aspects. That is, even though dramas on television are also project to project, not all the writing on these projects needs to be done to secure the financing (not to mention

subsequent re-commissions, for example.) We've also seen how screenplay development is, both legally and in practice, initially a separate field of activity from production, a fact born out not only by the special concentration on it as a sector (from the likes of the UKFC) but also by the sobering statistic that at most only 20% of projects in development in the UK make it into production. In other words, most screenplay development activity happens independently of production activity. While the latter may depend on the former, the former carries on regardless, *has to* carry on – otherwise there will be no films.

We've also seen how practitioners in this field perceive screenplay development to be a separate activity from television screenplay development, and how 'development' – while its ultimate purpose is to lead to a film – is spoken about by these practitioners as a separate realm of activity, with its own norms, conventions and culture. The very fact that my respondents understood my requests to talk about 'development' without any need for elaboration or clarification, suggests they are used to talking about it as something happening in its own sphere.

In other words, screenplay development can be viewed as a field of cultural production, the cultural 'product' of which is film screenplays. In the following I will unpack some of the 'embedded' practices of this field; look at how the dynamic power relations operate and fluctuate, where symbolic power is sought and where various forms of capital (economic, cultural, social) accrue. In particular, I will look at how the practitioners, agents or 'players' in the field both construct knowledge and talk about what they do.

## Part II – Culture

### Chapter Three: Origin Stories

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that screenplay development is a separate field of cultural production in itself. One of the key steps in analysing this field and culture is to see how knowledge is constructed and used by the social actors. Indeed, one of my research questions asks exactly this of my interviewees – how do they know what they know?

However, before I asked this apparently simply question I found myself asking my interviewees how they got into the film industry at all. The purpose of this question was to try to get them to give an account of what kinds of knowledge they brought to the field *before* they joined it. What emerged from this line of questioning, however, was not only some accounts of the knowledge that the respondents may have brought to the field (seen below and in the subsequent chapter on Knowledge) but also recurring types of narratives, analysis of which revealed much about the constitution and nature of the field.

This chapter, consequently, will look in depth at this type of narrative – the Origin Story. How do the practitioners talk about how they came to be in the film industry at all? Going deeper into the kind of trade stories Caldwell (2008) elucidates, I will argue that the Origin Story has heretofore been underexplored and that such stories can help scholars understand how the culture of the film industry is constituted, as well as how practitioners seek to present themselves. Moreover I will argue that in my portfolio of interviews, the responses could be grouped into three main ‘type’ of narrative. These narrative types suggest further the nature and culture of the film development field, and the roles within it, while also revealing practitioner attitudes to the industry itself. As Caldwell (2008, 332) says: ‘The production stories that practitioners tell are not just narratives about “what happened”, they also function as legitimization for careers and craft.’

## Origin Stories

As previously mentioned, the UKFC cited ‘development training’ as one of the key planks of its original mission statement (2000, 3). Subsequently, the council commissioned the Attentional (2007) report into the question of existing screenwriter/development training and how it interacts with the industry. What this report didn’t cover (it wasn’t in the remit) was how development practitioners see the relationship of their *own* education and background to their work. This is one of the aspects of the culture that formed a strand of my questioning in all the interviews. One of the cornerstones of a culture is the knowledge that is deemed necessary to be a part of it. Following from Clifford Geertz, Sherry Ortner (1999, 3) argues that culture must be seen as “webs of meaning” which are encoded in forms such as language, artefacts, etiquette, rituals and the like. Or knowledge in other words. What is it you need to know? How did you come by this knowledge? How does one become a player in this field?

These kind of questions not only help in ‘mapping’ some of the qualities and attributes of the field for the academic, they also have a very real bearing in the world outside of academia. In one of the most recent examples, Lenny Henry (2014) re-ignited a campaign to increase BAME participation in the film and television industries, responding to a report from the Cultural Diversity Network. The concern here is about access to the industry and the ethnic make-up of the executive classes in film and television. This relates to the origins, in other words, of those in decision-making positions: what is required to get into such positions and stay in them? There are many factors, obviously, that contribute to the class and ethnic mix of an industry sector. It is a simple question that provides many complicated answers and, also, a question that isn’t only limited to the film and television industries.

People’s educational background matters when considering how a culture is constituted. Any account of a community or culture needs to look at the pathways into that culture, hence my line of questioning. What I wasn’t expecting when I asked these questions, though, was how the responses so often took a similar form. Not only

were these Origin Stories similar to each other in structure, they also partially correlated to the respondents' position within the industry or field.

Caldwell (2008) goes into some detail about the trade stories and myths that film practitioners tell themselves and others. He points out that production studies at the mid-level – looking at how media industries actually work in terms of what people who work in them do – hasn't been replete until recently with examples of scholars looking to analyse the narratives at play within such sectors (2008, 37). In particular, he creates a typology of these stories based on genre, context and cultural function (2008, 38). Caldwell, analysing trade stories from various interview sources (both his own and 'industry' disclosures to the press, on the net and elsewhere), paints a compelling picture of how these stories are used to establish and cement status in the industry. Whether it's an electrician talking about tough days 'surviving' on the set – and thereby establishing his credentials as an experienced crew member – or a producer mythologizing the moment of creation of a project, Caldwell situates these narratives within the different sectors of the industry.

What the analysis doesn't uncover, however, is the routes into the industry for these people. His category of 'Genesis Myths' (2008, 47-49), for example, concentrates much more on how the respondent got to their position within the industry, rather than focussing on how they got into the industry at all. Thus although his analysis of trade stories points to a valuable source of information, and shows us how respondents use narrative to situate themselves in the field,<sup>15</sup> it is missing this key component. A greater understanding of how practitioners come to find themselves in the field at all, how they talk about it, and what knowledge they bring to it can lead to a greater understanding of the field itself.

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<sup>15</sup> That's not to say it is an analysis without difficulties though. There's little acknowledgement, for example, of any industry disclosures or interview data that doesn't fit into his schema. It seems very unlikely that every story any industry member has ever told can fit into one of his categories. Categorisation by its very nature tends to leave out evidence that doesn't easily fit. An example of this from Caldwell is his characterisation of 'war stories' as a genre predominantly associated with 'below-the-line' professions. In my experience, such stories are also a staple of producerial narratives around filmmaking. I have often heard producers talk about the process of going through pre-production (the preparation process immediately before principal photography) as moving onto a 'war footing', or of everyday producing being 'in the trenches' for example. Likewise, in my interview with him screenwriter William Nicholson refers to shooting the film as 'the battle.'

Caldwell himself makes no claims of exhaustiveness, merely stating that the various genres and contexts represent ‘recurring tendencies’ (2008, 38). Such work illustrates the revelatory power of narrative analysis. This whole task – the one that Caldwell undertook when he looked at these narrative forms and the work I am now continuing – is of a piece with Ortner’s following from Clifford Geertz, when she argues (1999, 3) that culture must be understood ‘through acts of interpretation analogous to the work of literary critics.’ I too intend to interpret these stories in such a way.

Consequently, while Caldwell’s analysis of trade stories is illuminating and shows the way forward in this area – the interpretation of trade narratives – I believe there is one genre in particular that should be looked at in far more detail. Indeed, as a genre of story it doesn’t appear at all in Caldwell’s schema yet it has revelatory potential. I want to characterise this genre, for want of a better expression, as ‘Origin Stories.’ The use of the word ‘genre’ suggests that the Origin Story is a pre-existing category, and to some extent I think it is – though not one that Caldwell uses. But in my experience in the field, it is a common enough question to be asked. ‘How did you get into the industry?’ As Miège (1989, 84) and Hesmondhalgh (2013, 83) point out, there seems to be more people who want to work in the cultural industries than actually do. Consequently, this question of how people ended up in their position, and the subsequent answer – the Origin Story – I argue can be conceived of as pre-existing genre of personal story.

My questions had been intended to establish the background – in particular educational background – of my respondents and while this bore fruit (to be looked at later) what came through strongly in subsequent analysis was the similarities in the narrative types of these origin accounts, particularly when cross-checked against the status and /or role of the respondent. It wasn’t as if I needed any kind of factually accurate account from these stories, either. Rather, it became apparent that these stories helped me situate both the respondents and the field in which they operated in the present. As Anthony Giddens (1991, 75) argues, ‘The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future. The individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (organised) future.’ By asking my respondents to tell me their Origin Stories, I was being given a window into this trajectory of self.

An additional advantage of the ‘origin’ narrative that became apparent as I interviewed, is that the respondents never used the narrative to reflect back on – or promote – their current work. One of the drawbacks with interviewing film and television professionals (as Caldwell himself and others have pointed out) is that they are often trying to promote their latest work in interviews. In journalistic interviews, for example, the point of the interview at all is often as part of a promotional tour to support a film, or in the DVD extras. The origin story has a far greater chance of avoiding such obfuscation.

Following on from Caldwell’s work, then – whilst being cognizant of the danger of ‘fitting in’ too snugly – I want to add to his list of genres the ‘Origin Story’. Furthermore, I intend to characterise these stories into three story types, that correlate strongly to the position of the respondent. Following this, I will discuss some of the few responses that cross-over between types and the reasons why.

### **The Control Narrative – Producing**

**‘We just went out and did it.’** Andy Paterson, independent producer.

**‘My route in came out of a lack of control over my career because what I’d realised as I got late teens early twenties, was how little control actors had over their careers.’** David Parfitt, independent producer

In the following I will argue for the existence of the first of the aforementioned narrative types, the ‘control’ narrative. Such a narrative is characterised by active words and a sense of self-determination. The respondents speak of their careers as ultimately depending on nothing so much as their desire to achieve it. Rather than simple destiny, it’s taking control of that destiny, of ‘just doing it.’

Take this from Andy Paterson, talking about the first time he made a film at university (while studying for a physics degree at Oxford):

We got together and we assumed we'd make a short, but one of the Americans looked around – no one wants to see shorts, our time is our time, why don't we make a film? No idea what we were doing but we went for it. It was a bunch of likeminded people with an opportunity which was the first run through of the process of how hard it was to make a film. Completely exhausting but we had good advice, help from Puttnum, Schlesinger who just told us things. Once you've done it, it's hard to stop.

One of the particularly noticeable tropes of this story is how rooted it is in a notion of self-starting: 'We went for it.' The story is couched completely in terms of active control – we 'made it' 'went for it' 'did it'. These are active decisions on the part of the respondent rather than being framed in a reactive way. He's not saying 'I got lucky', for example, or even that serendipity played a part. There's very little sense here of falling into the industry, of not really knowing what he wanted to do and finding his way. He is steering his own course here. The rest of the interview continues in a similar vein, each subsequent career step framed in terms of being either distractions (based on economic need) or stepping stones to this goal of producing feature films. There's no sense in which his fate is in any one's hands but his own, although he does acknowledge the help he's had along the way.

The use of the word 'we' rather than 'I' throughout the quotation and the rest of the interview is perhaps slightly misleading, or rather telling in its own way. When I pushed Paterson to define this 'we' later in the interview, it became clear that as often as not he was actually referring to himself in terms of his career. Yet any time he talked about a specific film, he almost always spoke of it in terms of a joint endeavour. Rather than highlighting any pomposity (the Royal 'we' as it were), this usage rather reveals his attitude to filmmaking. Each project is a collaboration, though one that he as a producer, sees himself as having a defining hand in; a collaboration that would not exist without his desire to see it happen.

There are other revealing aspects to this quotation, especially the attitude to film education and the desirability of working in the film industry, which I'll look at in more detail below. The point here to note is that, in keeping with the other producers



interviewed, producer Paterson's 'origin story' clearly shows two things. That he couches the story of his career beginnings in terms of control, being master of his own destiny, while also viewing the actual job that he does – making films – as being a collective endeavour.

David Parfitt, another independent producer, uses similar words and phrases to exemplify what he does.

I've lost count of the number of graduates from major universities who turn up and say can we just have 20 minutes of your time and they just come in and say I want to be in film and have absolutely no idea of where they want to be, what the jobs mean, and pretty much the only thing I ever say to them is that you've now got no excuse not to make something. You are at the best place you will ever be, you've just come out of university, you've got all these mates that are all trying to do versions of what you want to do – just get together and do it, there is no other way.

Note again the 'do it' and 'make something' expressions, especially taken in conjunction with Parfitt's explicit use of 'control' in the quotation at the top of this section. Again, there's no suggestion that Parfitt saw himself as anything other than the creator of his own fate. It's also impossible not to notice the exasperation in his own tone when he talks about those eager to enter the industry who don't have this attitude. Such narratives as employed by Paterson and Parfitt, it seems, construct entry into film production as a straightforward decision; a commitment to making films, to pursuing ambition, to 'just doing it.' (There's also the implicit assumption that such a career is desired by many people – 'all these mates trying to do versions of what you want to do' – that I'll return to.)

The two interviewees quoted above are the most consistent in this control narrative mode. There's very little sign, throughout their interviews when discussing their identities as workers in the film industry, of anything approaching notions of luck or happenstance or even, strangely, of dreams becoming fulfilled. This last, as we shall see, is more in keeping with a destiny narrative. However, before we come onto the differences between the control narrative and the other types it's important to make a

point about these two interviewees in particular. They are both *producers* and heads of their own companies (rather than being executives or writers.)<sup>16</sup>

Like Paterson, Parfitt also often frames his activities in terms of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’. At one point, I asked him who this ‘we’ referred to and it came down to the people he was working with (essentially employing) at the time (his assistant, a development executive) on a project, rather than a cluster of people who he’d worked with from the beginning. It felt almost like an habitual usage, when talking about films and filmmaking (‘we felt it wasn’t for us’) rather than necessarily being an accurate description of what happened.

While these two are the most forthright in employing a control type narrative, the tendency to employ similar formulations of control is also noticeable among the other producers I interviewed, albeit to a lesser degree. However, we can’t necessarily draw conclusions from this along the lines of ‘to be a producer, you need to have been in control of your career from the beginning’; or even that you need to be a certain kind of person. Even if we could trust my interviewees to be totally candid, objective and entirely disinterested in how they present themselves, even given this caveat, we could still not draw conclusions about how they entered the industry because I’m interviewing them many years later. They are no longer that younger person, with hopes and fears that may now have been forgotten or suppressed. I have not been interviewing their twenty-two-year-old selves.

So, while it’s not possible to read across with any accuracy from their origin narratives to how they actually were when they entered the industry, what we perhaps can do is turn this observation on its head. That is, we can say that the producers I spoke to were predisposed to constructing the stories of their careers in a certain way. Regardless of what this may or may not tell us about how they actually started their careers, it strongly suggests that those in producing roles are predisposed to asserting their authority over their career, to casting themselves as masters of their own destiny,

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<sup>16</sup> I should also note at this point that both Paterson and Parfitt are particularly successful producers. One would have to interview a range of producers who considered themselves failures, to see whether such a narrative type would also be employed. The point here, though, is that all my respondents are relatively successful, and so it is still possible to draw distinctions between producers, executives and screenwriters.

to being in control. As the previous quote from Giddens (1991, 75) suggests, their ‘selves’ are heading towards an organised future and they are using their pasts to situate such a trajectory.

This isn’t to say that the producers I interviewed are necessarily control freaks, or obsessed with micro-management or anything like that. In their day-to-day lives they may be no more controlling than anyone else. Nor does it mean that control is necessarily a central part of being a producer. However, that all the producers interviewed chose to a greater or lesser extent to talk about how they started their careers using the language of control and self-determination clearly suggests that they see it as important to be perceived as such. In other words whether or not you truly have to be a strongly self-determining individual to be a producer, the origin narratives of the producers I interviewed reveal that they believe it is important to at least seem as if you are. Producers are also predisposed to describing filmmaking in collaborative terms. The persistent use of the word ‘we’ illustrates that they also want filmmaking to be seen as a collaborative effort; an effort, nevertheless, that they to a large degree want to be seen to be controlling.

The framing of such narratives can also be viewed as an assertion of authority within the field itself. Even though the story may be about their younger selves, told to an academic researcher, the implication that this is how they are now (in control) in their jobs is very clear. They are not beholden to anyone else, is the message. In this sense, these narratives very much add to Caldwell’s look at industry narratives, which, he argues (2008, 38), are designed to achieve similar things: that is, to establish professional legitimacy, to illustrate craft mastery or to mark out turf boundaries. In other words, one of their functions is to position the respondent in their field.

### **The Destiny Narrative - Writing**

While on the face of it ‘destiny’ may seem similar to ‘control,’ the difference in how the narratives work is a real one. The Control narrative paints a picture of the protagonist deciding and taking charge of their destiny, while the Destiny narrative type is characterised more by the idea that the protagonist’s position is the product of

external forces, albeit that they were in some sense meant to be in the position they got to in the end. Phrases such as ‘I always wanted to be...’ or ‘I couldn’t do anything else’ are typical of this kind of response.

This type of narrative is particularly prevalent among the writers. Frank Cottrell Boyce traces back his writing career to a particular moment in childhood. He is quite specific and I relate it here along with a further explanation of how he started writing:

The first time I became aware of writing – it wasn’t screenwriting as such – it was because I had this ace teacher, a nun, in year six, who picked up a piece of work I’d written and read it out to the class. And it got laughs. And I remember thinking, when you see people making other people laugh, maybe somebody else made up those words.

My story is, I’d always wanted to be, I’d never had a plan b. what was great about Oxford for me was you could put plays on. If I’d been to drama school I’d have been in them. I wrote a play every term, so like nine plays.

The first excerpt reads like a scene from a movie or novel, unsurprising given Cottrell Boyce is a writer of both. He is tracing back his origins as a writer to his childhood, to being ten or eleven, an epiphany. Although there’s an external agent in this story – the nun, picking up and reading out his work – she acts very much in a revelatory capacity rather than an inspirational one. Her action has revealed to the protagonist what he should do with his life, what he’s *meant* to do. He has realised the way things are for him.

The subsequent quotation reinforces this idea, a notion that being a writer was who he was and what he did – even before he had got to university. He’d ‘always’ wanted to be a writer, with apparently no other ambition, no other option (‘no plan b.’) It was therefore natural, destined, that he became a writer. There’s no sense that he deserved to be a successful one, though; he never talks in terms of going out there and writing a hit play or making a successful (or any) film happen, in the way that is characteristic of the Control type. Writing, of course, is as much of a self-generated occupation as anything else if not more so. (It is rare indeed in the film industry for someone to be

commissioned to write something having never written anything before, not even a sample. The first step in writing is one that in almost all cases must be taken by the writer.) Yet using this Destiny type story points to a notion of the respondent as being *meant* to be writer, rather than being destined for any particular success or career path. It presents the idea that being a writer is an identity in itself, regardless of the subsequent success or otherwise of one's actual career as a writer. I am somebody who writes, I have always been someone who writes, I am destined to write – rather than I decided I wanted to write films, so I did.

William Nicholson, for example, speaks of seeing himself as a writer throughout his previous careers – writing a string of mostly unsuccessful (i.e. unpublished) novels while working in documentaries at the BBC. Writing was something he did, something he wanted to do – but it was the writing that he could control as it were, rather than the outcome of that writing. He too 'always' wanted to be a writer and it eventually came to pass, it was destined to be so.

Such destiny narratives, or constructions, while lacking the forceful 'I am in control' of the predominantly producerial representations nevertheless also function as legitimizers and claims to authority. This isn't the authority of 'I am in charge' so much as a subtle, almost moral, claim to a position in the field. If you are destined to be performing a role, if you are *meant* to write, this confers an authority of its own. There's no notion from the Origin narratives from the writers that they have been gifted their position in the film industry, that they don't deserve it; these Destiny narratives portray the protagonists as being in a position by right, as if things couldn't be any other way.

It lacks the forcefulness of the Control narrative in another key respect, namely that there's much less emphasis on success and more of a 'what will be will' message. There is no kind of claim to mastery over their own careers in the way that the Control narrative suggests, more that their career has happened. They are not passive observers in this narrative, but there's less sense that they are in complete control of it. While not being a claim to authority, a second reading of the Destiny narrative perhaps points to the different role of the writer within the industry (or at least, it

points to how they see their role.) They write (they are destined to do so), but it is up to others to determine whether what they write will be successful.

It is not that the respondents suggest they owe anyone for their careers as writers, but the way this Origin narrative operates suggests that those that use it acknowledge the role of external forces in determining whether or not it will be a successful career – certainly as film writers (rather than playwrights or novelists.) It suggests, in other words, that writers (users of the Destiny narrative) keenly feel themselves as part of a wider system; that whilst they, too, are self-determining (like the Control narrative) in their own identities as writers, they feel the need to place themselves somewhat at the mercy of others in terms of whether or not they will be successful.

The Origin narrative of destiny thus looks to claim authority on the one hand – this was meant to be, whether you like it or not – whilst on the other hand also illustrating the more diplomatic and collaborative qualities that the respondent (most often a writer) feels the need to exhibit in order to be successful.

### **Evolutionary narrative – Developing**

The third narrative type noticeable when my respondents talked of their origins in the industry can best be described as ‘evolutionary’. As a type, it is characterised by expressions such as ‘I fell into it’ or ‘I didn’t know what I wanted to do’ and then develops further with phrases such as ‘I ended up...’

Take this from Sophie Meyer, head of development at Ealing Studios:

I was looking for a job I didn’t quite know what I wanted to do, I heard through a friend of a friend of a friend – they knew someone who was looking for an assistant, it was this company British Screen that I didn’t know anything about. I went out and bought myself the BFI handbook so that I could learn about the film industry. I remember I came in and asked her some pointed questions that Emma was a bit surprised about at the time. At first it was very much a part time role, photocopying, audio typing making the tea and I was there for

three years so I gradually learnt more and got more involved. And when Emma went on maternity leave, it meant that everyone shifted around a little bit and got a bit more responsibility.

This is a narrative that contrasts markedly with the examples previously analysed. There is no sense of destiny here, no sense that she ‘always’ wanted to work in film, that she plotted a route into the industry and then did her best to make it. The narrative is couched very much in terms of treating it as an opportunity to get an entry level job – the emphasis on the ‘job’ rather than because it was in film. Likewise, although she is aware of her own worth (she asked ‘pointed questions’, which suggested that she impressed in her interview) this isn’t a ‘control’ narrative either. Admittedly, she ‘went out’ and bought the BFI handbook, but it wasn’t until her boss went on maternity leave that she moved forward in the industry. Progression here is almost by chance, rather than by design. Not only was promotion a matter of waiting for something to happen (rather than the ‘going for it’ that might characterise a Control narrative), her own progression as a practitioner is also couched in terms of bit by bit, step by step, ‘gradually’ picking things up. There’s a sense of making the most of a good opportunity, rather than being destined to do this or of creating the opportunity.

Or take this, from Dan MacRae, head of development at distributor Studio Canal:

I did eng lit and philosophy (at Glasgow.) I was working in an organisation called the Scottish Council for Education Technology and it housed the Scottish Film Council in the same building. They were looking for a programmer for regional cinemas, the Scottish art house stuff, and they’d spent nine months trying to fill this position and they’d just appointed the second person who dropped out for another job and the woman I worked with said you should talk to this guy Dan I work with, he knows everything about movies and they interviewed me and I got the gig.

Although this contrasts with Meyer’s view, in that MacRae clearly states his credentials as a film fan, it is nevertheless very different from either the Control or Destiny narratives. This is very much of a piece with the Evolutionary narrative, in that his entry into the film industry was something that happened and developed from

there. At no point, for example, does MacRae speak in the active voice about his own role in getting a film job. It was the Scottish Film Council who were looking to recruit, it was his colleague who suggested him, it was the SFC who interviewed him. Only at the very end does he state his role in the whole business, that is ‘I got the gig.’

This is quite clearly very distinct from the Control narrative. Those using that story type place themselves at the centre of the decision making, rather than ceding that role to others, as MacRae does here. Similarly, there’s no sense of destiny in MacRae’s account, that he would always become involved in the film industry even though he admits to being a film fan. If we believe this account, he never even applied for the job. Later in the interview, when talking about how his role at the SFC developed, MacRae again employs constructions that minimise the activeness of his participation in his career. He talks of a screenwriter’s training programme started at the organisation that ‘I ended up starting to run’, for example, in a formulation that suggests a degree of happenstance or of opportunity taken, rather than created.

The two above responses are typical of the Evolutionary type. The respondent’s career develops over time, gradually evolving from uncertain beginnings (‘I didn’t know what I wanted to do’) into something more successful and enduring; a career that develops very much in response to various circumstances, rather than existing (or being dreamt of) outside those circumstances.

It is no coincidence that these two respondents are also development executives, for in my interviews the Evolutionary type is chiefly employed by executives rather than producers or writers. It is most characteristic of that role. In one sense, this is hardly surprising. Even the job title – ‘development’ executive – suggests evolution. Development and evolution are closely related terms. A common theme among the development executive responses was this idea of finding oneself in a certain position and then building upon it, taking the steps as they presented themselves to move forward.

Unlike the other two types, it isn’t immediately obvious how the Evolutionary type narrative claims at authority or legitimacy. There’s none of the force of the self-created individual, or of the destined writer, but nevertheless what comes across is



still an idea of merit. While none of the executives claimed to have taken control of their careers in the same way as the producers, there is a distinct sense that they've got into the positions they occupy by weight of work. They've worked hard, in other words, they taken their chances and they've worked their way up. No one gifted them their position, they've put the hours in, it has been honestly earned.

This story type also emphasises the respondent's role as a facilitator, someone working in concert with other people's agendas rather than marching to the beat of their own drum. They recognise the constraints of circumstance, and want to work within those circumstances – it is emblematic of a collaborative mode, as opposed to a pioneering one. The Evolutionary narrative implies not the legitimacy of the leader or the seer, but rather as a helper, a collaborator in the filmmaking process. But a collaborator who earned their spurs by dint of effort, by learning and accumulating knowledge, by putting the hours in, working their way up. For the Evolutionary story type is also characterised by the humble beginning, by the acknowledgement of the first 'rung of the ladder' – by its very nature, it has to be, for it is a narrative of steps, one on top of the other, and therefore it is marked by the acknowledgement of that first step.

Such a narrative type suggests the executives view collaboration as a key part of their job, as well as experience, and the sense that they are there to help matters rather than to *create*, per se. In other words, the use of the Evolutionary narrative type suggests that while the respondent wishes to assert a quieter form of authority (based on experience, rather than mission or talent) they are also putting forward a collaborative version of how they see themselves working.

### **Mixed Narratives**

While the above analysis, with the correlation between producers and 'control', writers and 'destiny' and executives and 'evolution,' is representative of much of my interviewees and how they match up with their roles, there are nonetheless certain responses that fall outside this schema. Or, more accurately, the Origin stories of some interviewees employ more than one of the types hereby delineated.

Chris Clark, one-time development executive of long standing, initially fits into the Evolutionary type, like many of his colleagues, when he referred to ‘ending up’ in the film industry ‘accidentally.’ But as his origin account goes on, it begins to show evidence of more control:

What happened actually, when I left college I was more interested in music when I was younger and I always thought I’d be a drummer in a band and stuff like that but that sort of fell away a bit and obviously I had to earn money and I worked on a local paper and I quite enjoyed it. At that point I went to work for BBC Magazines which was extremely, very dull part of BBC magazines because they were doing all the TV and films previews and the listings columns and all that sort of nonsense. So I was doing all of that, and it was in that period that I started to go to screenwriting classes and film making courses – like local education evening courses and stuff like that in London. And that’s where it all began really. And there was another thing that happened, my parents moved to just outside London and they ended up living next door to an interesting American producer who’s now passed on and he’d produced things like *Yentl* and *Backdraft* and *The Hunt for Red October*, quite an entertaining character. And it was him who, you know I used to go over to his house and there were piles of scripts lying around and I used to dip into them and get into conversation with him. And years later he made a few key introductions for me, and that all led to getting script reading work funnily enough. And then I did an MA at the London College of Printing which I never quite finished because of the whole Working Title thing, but that’s the trajectory.

The story starts off in the evolutionary vein, with no sense of mission or vocation. He worked on a local paper, then moved on to magazines – ‘I had to earn money’ is not a phrase that suggests either destiny or control was a primary factor in these career choices. But then the narrative becomes more active – he goes to classes and courses, actively engages in filmmaking through contacts and ultimately starts an MA in the subject. The trajectory is clearly presented as something that he decided upon and then executed. This isn’t as strong as the Control type of Paterson or Parfitt (as shown

above), but nonetheless the impression is clearly one of a person taking control of their destiny and acting upon it.

There is also the faintest edge of the Destiny narrative familiar from the writers' interviews when Clark uses the phrase 'that's where it all began' - referring to one's career as 'it all' suggests this Destiny frame which, rather confusingly, slightly offsets the power of the Control narrative. What it illustrates above all, however, is that overall Clark's origin narrative uses a mixture of all three modes to a greater or lesser extent.

While on the one hand this presents a challenge to the idea that one can read across from the narrative type to the current role (if the narrative is so mixed, how can that match up with a single role?), it is worth noting that Clark's own biography in the film industry is also mixed. Later in the interview, when talking about his abilities as a development executive, he cites the fact that he initially wanted to be a screenwriter as one of the reasons he was good at the job. He felt he understood how difficult it is to write, and consequently had more empathy and understanding for the writers he worked with as a development executive. Now he is very much an independent film producer (of titles such as *The Guard* and *Calvary*) and consequently has filled professionally two of the three roles under analysis here, and had initial ambitions to succeed in the third. It is perhaps unsurprising that his origin narrative employs more than one story type, reflecting this multi-hyphenate career.

The chief point beyond this, though, is to note that while Clark's story types are mixed he is nevertheless still using them to position himself in the field. The dominant type is Control, reflective of his current role but he's keen to credentialise himself in the way that may be associated with his previous role too. Like the other executives, for example, he points out the hard yards he put in to the job, the courses he attended and the years of experience.

Senior executive at the BFI, Chris Collins,<sup>17</sup> shares some of these mixed story tropes, although his account shows a stronger strand of destiny than control. For example, while Clark characterises his entry into the film industry as ‘accidental’ Collins says he went to university but ‘studied science by mistake.’ He points out that his choice of university was down to it being in London, because that’s where the film industry was. This is a clear destiny formulation, a protagonist coming to London to be in film – backed up by a proclaimed film fandom – yet with no clear direction about how to do this.

I went the conventional route. I left university and I thought I might try and see, I knew no one in film, I knew nothing. I did an evening class in St Martins in the history of film, a film theory course that was fantastic, run by Ian Green who was a very charismatic teacher. And I had a menial job at the ICA which had two great benefits, one there was a lot of people doing stuff there connected in the arts people who were working on films, a connection with that but also there’s a system in London where all the people who work in cinemas get to go free to other cinemas so I saw a lot of movies. And they showed great movies in the ICA at that period, the mid-eighties, and through a mutual friend I ended up getting a job as an office assistant in a very small TV production company and then went up the ladder in that company, ended up producing short films and documentaries. And then with some of the directors we worked with, ended up making dramas with them and being heavily involved in a feature film with one of those directors. So I went that route.

Even though the destination point of this narrative is Collins becoming a producer (his role before he became an executive at the old BFI, before another stint in production and then joining the UKFC as it then turned into the BFI again), it’s very characteristic of the Evolutionary story type. He ‘ended up’ as an assistant at a TV company, he went up ‘the ladder’ and again, ‘ended up’ producing shorts films. This is not the Control mode of other producers, rather the step-by-step of the Evolutionary type. In addition to this his account, like that of other executives, emphasises the role

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<sup>17</sup> As I was finalising this thesis in November 2014, Chris Collins very unfortunately died. I’ve decided to retain references to my interview with him in the present tense however, as I feel it better reflects the vivacity and energy of the exchange.

of collaboration in his career. He made dramas ‘with’ directors and became ‘heavily involved in’ a feature film with one of them. This isn’t the language of the self-made producer in control, even though he was a producer on those projects. (The other producers interviewed use ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ when they talk about making films, but in a more active sense: ‘we made it’ or ‘we decided to shoot it,’ rather than this more ambivalent ‘involved in.’)

In fact, his account – after the initial Destiny frame, at least in terms of talking about his motivations and desire to enter the industry at all – is much more in keeping with his current role as an executive, a facilitator. What Clark and Collins have in common is that when talking about the notion of working in the film industry, they used Destiny modes (they were destined to work in the film industry, either from an early age – pre university in Collins case, post- in Clark’s case) but this crosses over with types more corresponding to the roles and positions in the field they ended up taking. That they are playing the game at all was destined, but their position is more about either control or evolution. (In other words, while the narrative modes of their origin stories take different forms, they both ultimately settle on one that reflects their current position.) Again, this is evidence of what Giddens (1991, 5) calls ‘The reflexive project of the self which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives.’

We can perhaps say that this mixing of story types reflects the fact that these two have changed positions significantly in the field during their careers. More certainly, we can aver that while the narrative types are mixed, these origin stories nevertheless still function like the others. That is, they claim legitimacy and mark out the respondents place in the field. There’s the recourse to past experience and education, putting the work in, that is characteristic of the Evolutionary type; and there is also the legitimisation of the Destiny framing – the film fandom, the moving to London – or the Control narrative, the steps taken to make it in the industry.

## **A ‘Special’ Industry**

It is possible to place all the origin stories I was told into one of these three narrative types, albeit with some combination of more than one at times, regardless of the differences in their actual routes in. These origin narratives were also similar to each other in one other salient aspect. In every case, bar two, the interviewees referred to a career in the film industry as being akin to an impossible dream, something totally outside what they may have thought possible for themselves. Phrases such as ‘I never imagined I’d be able to do it,’ from writer Laurence Coriat epitomise this viewpoint. The film industry was seen, according to these accounts, as ‘remote and exotic’, ‘inaccessible’ and something for other people. The interviewees are talking about how they thought of the industry *before* they entered it, of course, but the implication is that the industry is indeed special in some way. Nobody went on to outline how it was very different from how they expected, how it was not glamorous or exotic. If anything, the implication is that the industry is indeed special and that they are ‘lucky’ (a word used often) to do the job they do.

This is in keeping with other studies of creative industries. As Andrew Beck (2003, 3) points out, there’s a very long history of the artist as ‘special.’ Lisa Adkins (2013, 155), in her recent study of web-designer’s biographies, also found that the accounts from workers often bore an ‘heroic quality, a quality which has often been found to be associated with creative labour.’

The only two respondents who didn’t fit into this general way of talking about the industry as something they couldn’t see themselves working in were producers David Parfitt and Cat Villiers. The former of these, however, was a child actor (most successfully on television in the sit-coms *And Mother Makes Three* and its sequel *And Mother Makes Five*) and subsequently became an adult actor before moving into producing. In other words, he had known nothing else from an early age and so perhaps it is understandable that he doesn’t refer to the industry as something he couldn’t imagine being in – when he became a producer, he already *was* in it.

Villiers’ origin narrative is slightly different. She predominately talks in the Control type with early intimations of Destiny (she refers to a previous career of eight years in magazines before she entered the film industry as a ‘detour’.) Yet she unusually does not refer to the film industry as something beyond her radar, or a job for other people.

It is a narrative that does not fit with the prevailing idea of the protagonist as a plucky outsider looking in. This is perhaps partly explained by the biographical fact that her father was a filmmaker, her mother an actress and she spent her childhood ‘on film sets’. All my other interviewees made a point of saying that they did *not* have this kind of access to the film industry when they were younger.

Nevertheless, despite Villiers’ account lacking the usual characterisation of the film industry as a far-off destination, her responses still fit in with the wider implication of such origin narratives – that is, that the film industry is in some sense special. While this conclusion is implied by each of the origin narratives that refer to only dreaming about such a career, Villiers prefers to site this ‘specialness’ in a description of the ‘special talents’ needed to succeed in the industry. But special it is.

That each of my respondents should think of the industry as a desirable career is perhaps not surprising. In the first place, my interviewees represent a relatively successful tranche of the industry. No one I spoke to was effectively out of work, or shunned by the industry, or considering another career (at least as far as they told me.) Each of them had reached (and is still enjoying) a measure of achievement in their field, and thus it would perhaps be odder if they chose to characterise the industry as a more every day, or even unlikeable, one.

Such a view is also in keeping with wider notions about the creative industries as being desirable places to work. Beck (2003, 3) points out the common trope, following from Ruskin, that cultural work is seen as ‘special’; Jason Toynbee (2013, 85-93) makes the same point, that it is a common claim – albeit a contradictory one. Miège (1989, 89) points out the relative attractiveness of the cultural industries; Hesmondhalgh (2013, 83) likewise points to an oversupply of people wanting to work in them.

While there’s much detailed work that suggests the creative industries are not quite the fulfilling and exciting workplace that those working in them expected them to be (in the UK context, for example, see Hesmondhalgh & Baker (2011)), such expressions of dissatisfaction were mostly lacking from my interviews. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the relative career success of my interviewees coupled

with the fact that each interview was given on the record. Unlike the Hesmondhalgh and Baker's study, for example, or another piece of scholarship that uses interview data from UK Screenwriters by Bridget Conor (2014).

The salient point here, though, is to note that this notion of specialness – of work in film being something highly desirable or dreamy – ran through all of the origin narratives in particular. No one was saying that they had an easy life, and elsewhere in the interviews there are frequent expressions of how difficult and hard such careers are: yet in their origin narratives, this notion of specialness and desirability came through in almost all of them.

### **The missing link: motivation**

One of the first steps I took in investigating the culture of feature film development in the UK was to ask the practitioners about their knowledge base: where it came from and how they use it. In pursuing this line of questioning (which I shall look at in detail in the following section), I realised that the form and tenor of the origin narratives (as outlined above) proved a fertile field of investigation in themselves. It was only later in the analysis – once I'd completed the interview phase of my study – that a gap emerged in these accounts. Why did these people work in the film industry at all? Why did they want to develop and make films? It is the question that should come even before an analysis of any narrative type, whether they had a Destiny or Control frame, for example, it must surely have been pertinent to talk about why *this* particular career, why film, rather than anything else?

Not once did any of my interviewees talk about *why* they were interested in making films, why they had chosen the industry (regardless of whether they 'fell into' it, or made an active choice to pursue the career) and thus – from an overall point of view – my analysis of their origin stories is in some sense incomplete. The question simply never came up, and this is undoubtedly an area that is rich for further research. As I've mentioned in the introduction, all my interviews took the form of semi-structured, relatively informal in-depth conversations. I knew the ground I wanted to cover and by and large each interview covered most of this ground. What I did not ask



any of them, which seems almost inexplicable in retrospect, is why they wanted to make films at all.

My first thought when confronted with this omission was to rectify it. Most of my interviewees are accommodating, yet busy people – it may have been possible for me to re-interview them on this one specific point. To ask them, in other words, as an addition to their origin stories, why they chose film at all – what was it that attracted them to it? Despite the practical difficulties of re-engaging with the subjects, and of asking a single question out of context yet fitting it back into a response as if it were, this is a route that I could have taken. However, there's another way at looking at this problem

Ursula Plesner (2011) identified the problem when she discusses interviews where 'studying sideways' takes place. She was looking at the problem of sociologists interviewing journalists, where there was a lot of common knowledge and concerns. The main danger Plesner (2011, 480) identifies when studying sideways is that assumptions can be missed by the interviewer as 'obvious truths or common sense' and therefore not be sufficiently challenged or elucidated. Her own solution to this issue is to suggest that interviewers should be more confrontational in order to avoid 'overly smooth interactions.'

This response isn't open to me, unless I re-open the interviews. But another response suggests itself, given that as well as being a researcher I am also a member of and participant in the culture I am studying. Together with my interviewees, I had assumed that the question of why go into the film industry did not need to be asked. For though I undoubtedly failed to put the question directly myself, in what were otherwise wide ranging interviews, none of my interviewees brought it up either. There were no at length discussions about motivation, or even allusions, from either party. Assessing the transcripts with the gift of distance and time, it is startling how little such a notion enters the conversation. Yet this very fact is evidential in itself. If, as Ellis and Berger (2002, 851-853) argue, we take each interview as a 'collaborative, communicative event' that represents a 'sea swell of meaning making' then we can analyse the omission in just the same way as we might a statement.

Taken this way, the absence of any mention of motivation adds strength to the earlier point about the perceived ‘specialness’ of the film industry, or at least the field of development. If a desire to be part of a particular field is taken as a given by all concerned, if none of its members even bother to make a case for being a member or seek to question why anyone might want to, then this adds weight to the claim that they hold (at least publicly) membership to be a good and desirable thing. The weight of evidence within my portfolio suggests that this is a culture that takes for granted its own value and desirability as a workplace, at least as regards the way in which its members construct their origins within it.

## **Conclusion**

I began this chapter by asking my interviewees about their routes into the industry, which led to the delineating of ‘origin stories’ into three types. This narrative analysis of origin stories – their structure as much as their content – adds to the growing body of production studies data. Caldwell (2008) examined in depth the stories the industry members tell, about the industry and about themselves, revealing much about how the industry works. The origin stories analysed here add significantly to this work by suggesting a further – perhaps even more revelatory – ‘genre’ that can tell us much about how professionals see themselves and their jobs, in the UK film industry. While there’s no evidence to suggest an immediate read-across into other geographical contexts (it’s not clear whether practitioners in the US would respond in similar ways to the ones in the UK), nevertheless I argue that analysis of origin stories bears fruit. They are a powerful ‘genre’ of trade story that can tell us something about the culture under examination.

In this current account, the analysis has shown how those occupying differing roles in the development field choose to construct their entries into that field, and how they go about legitimizing their place and asserting their authority. Consequently, it is possible to make some observations about the nature of those roles and how they operate within the field. In particular, how the interviewed producers tended to put forward a narrative of self-generated control and leadership, albeit recognising the collaborative nature of their projects; how the writers formulated their responses using

a destiny type story that seeks authority through a notion of pre-determination, whilst also employing a mode of collaboration; and how the executives frame their responses in a way that suggests they get authority from ‘gaining their spurs’, from a gradual accumulation of knowledge, rather than from either leadership or destiny.

In addition to telling us something about these specific roles, the analysis of the origin stories – both of what was included and (by the researcher as a fellow member of the culture as well as the respondents) excluded – as a whole illustrates a wider-held belief about the specialness and exoticism of the industry. Or rather, how development practitioners talk about how they started (and what they don’t talk about) paints a picture of filmmaking and film development that rarely questions the high desirability of working in that sector. This is a culture whose members take for granted the value and desirability of what they do.

As a corollary, such stories can help us begin to build up a picture of the screenplay development field and who constitutes it. We shall see this played out more in the next chapter – on knowledge – but these accounts of origins allowed me as a researcher access to my respondent’s past education, and they often included other data such as geographical origins, class background and the like. These ‘facts’, while not definitive of the entire field, nevertheless allow description of the field to become ever thicker.

At a deeper level, these stories reveal a certain commonality or narrowness of pre-disposition and self-conception that further defines the field in a Bourdieu like way. Each of the accounts casts the narrator as a self-determining agent, in charge of their own destiny; it is a heroic conception (even from the Evolutionary accounts) that suggests that such self-conception is a trait of the field as a whole. It further suggests that such a disposition is important to success in the field and, consequently, that this field (of screenplay development) is dominated by self-legitimizing narratives of self-determination. This analysis goes further than Caldwell’s (2008) work, however, when we consider that the practitioners interviewed here are directly involved in both the creation of the content of films, and in the decision-making process of what gets made at all. Consequently, it could be argued that their views and predispositions have a crucial bearing on film content as a whole in the UK.

These stories add further weight to the conception of the field, and give us a greater understanding of the make-up of the field. With this greater understanding in mind, it is time to take a further step forward and answer the question that initially started us along the road towards the Origin stories. Namely, one of the corner stones of any culture: knowledge. Film development is a knowledge business, it's the research and development arm of the film industry. Yet how did these people acquire the knowledge that they use in their work and how do they talk about it?

## Chapter Four: Development Knowledge

### Introduction

#### **‘Nobody knows anything.’ William Goldman (1983, 39)**

William Goldman’s axiom is one of the most famous in the film industry. Written in 1983, that very same formulation cropped up in many of my interviews. Where the respondents didn’t use the exact words, they often expressed a similar sentiment. ‘It’s all subjective isn’t it?’ ‘Who the hell knows?’ ‘It’s still a crap shoot,’ are some examples from the practitioners helping me with my own research that illustrate this variation on a common theme. Its use was so pervasive as to be almost cliché, a sentiment that no one seemed inclined to argue with – not just Goldman’s axiom, in other words, but an industry one too.

On the face of it these oft repeated disavowals of knowledge are of a piece with wider industry disavowals. Caldwell (2008, Appendix 3) handily points out some of the more common ones in his analysis of Hollywood – including but not limited to the Goldman one, which he claims is designed to enhance an aura of chance (and disavow rationality in a research-based industry.) Likewise, Gitlin (1983, 21) observes that the further up the ladder he went in terms of television executives, the more they professed not to know. Such disavowals are a time worn industry tactic to conceal real motives, or to deceive, or mask or at least deny the interviewer any real access and to protect the position of the interviewee. They are used as cloaking devices, in other words.<sup>18</sup> Even industry insider turned author Angus Finney (who might be thought to be more sympathetic towards industry respondents, given that he is also an industry practitioner) characterises the tactic as a cloaking one. ‘Goldman’s dictum has been thrown up as a blanket by “the business” to help obscure how much film professionals really *do* know about developing and managing projects from a concept, to the written page, on to film and all the way to the box office and beyond’ (Finney 2010, 170).

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<sup>18</sup> This idea of disavowals cloaking real motives goes back well before Caldwell and Gitlin. Both Rosten (1941) and Powdermaker (1951) were criticised for not being able to ‘see through’ such devices, for example.

Yet despite the frequent use of Goldman's axiom no one I spoke to actually professed to know nothing about anything. Their responses are littered with examples of things that they know. Indeed, at times they often find themselves asserting authority, evoking knowledge, in their everyday jobs. There was no concerted effort to evade every claim of knowledge or to cloak whole areas of what they might know. Each of them spoke at one time or another of what they had learned during their careers, for example.

This is not to say my respondents were entirely open about what they did and didn't know. As said above, the phrase 'nobody knows anything' or a similar variant was repeated often. Yet my respondents frequently made significant knowledge claims, about numerous aspects of their work. That the 'nobody knows anything' axiom is prevalent does not necessarily mean that respondents are trying to cloak all of what they know, however. To think of it as a concerted cloaking exercise is perhaps to be confused about the different spheres of knowledge being referred to at any one time.

Finney (2010, 64) exemplifies this confusion by claiming, earlier in the same book as the previous reference, that while nobody knows anything 'outsiders know considerably less'. It isn't quite clear how it is possible to know considerable less than nothing. Similarly, Neff (2012, 158) sees the same sentiment as indicative of screenwriters' habitual frustration at executive stonewalling. Again, it's not entirely clear what this might mean.

Judging from both my respondents, and my own experience as a practitioner, people working in the film industry clearly do know things, and are often prepared to talk about what they know, at least to some extent. But this confusion still exists, primarily – I argue – because there are different spheres of knowledge at play in the field. As the subsequent analysis will show, it is not simply one sphere of knowledge that is employed when working in screenplay development.

This current study is focussed particularly on screenplay development, where – as my interviews attest – the Goldman disavowal is common. Yet the interviewees are also at times often both clear and forthcoming about what they *do* know. To better

understand how any culture operates, it is vital to have an understanding of what constitutes the knowledge necessary to be a part of it. In addition to this, it is vital to try to understand how the practitioners lay claim to knowledge. Screenplay development is a knowledge business. A great deal of authority, and therefore power, lies with anyone who can justifiably lay claim to know either how to create or identify a screenplay that will make a great film and, moreover, a popular one. Screenplays are products that have to be bought (by the financiers) before one is in a position to accurately measure whether they will succeed as films. There is no definitive quality test – no objective gauge – that will allow a financier to put up the money to make the film, and consequently there is an empty space for such ‘measurement’ that is filled by the knowledge claims of development practitioners (be they a screenwriter, producer or executive.) Consequently, we need to know how these practitioners lay claim to knowledge, for it is the very bedrock of what they do.

But there is more than one sphere of knowledge at play in the field and to understand better what it is these development practitioners claim to know, therefore, it is necessary to disentangle the different spheres of knowledge.

The first step I face, then, in trying to disentangle the various knowledge claims amid the interviews was to overcome this standard disavowal and to recognise it for what it was – a disavowal about a certain kind of knowledge, not *all* that they need to know in their jobs, just one aspect of it. Consequently, the best way to understand these knowledge claims and/or disavowals is to identify the sphere of knowledge that is being referred to at any one time.

In the following, I argue – based on my interview evidence – that knowledge in the development field is most helpfully broken down into three particular ‘spheres of knowledge’ that are often referred to in my interviews – either explicitly, or tacitly. They form a triad of knowledge that encompasses, judging by the interviews, much of what a development practitioner claims to know to do their job properly. The first two of these are fairly contained, easily identified and demarcated. Knowledge of the Audience and Knowledge of the Screenplay. The former involves the question that has exercised producers of mass media since its inception (will they like/buy my film,

album, television programme.) The latter is the kind of knowledge that many a ‘how-to’ screenwriting manual claims to be able to impart.

These first two categories are ones that that many of my respondents might themselves recognise. (In my experience as a practitioner I’ve often heard someone described as being ‘good on story’ or ‘good with scripts’ for example.) These two areas are *prima facie*, what a development practitioner should be able to claim knowledge of. I will go into each of these in detail in the following.

The third sphere of knowledge is by its very nature a little looser in its boundaries, deliberately so. Knowledge of the Industry in one sense covers all that a practitioner needs to know outside of the other two categories – including such things as networks, social behaviour, how to navigate one’s way through the obstacles and challenges of working in the industry, in other words, which is quite a separate knowledge sphere from either knowledge of what people want to see at the cinema, or knowledge of what might make a good or effective screenplay. I’ll go through this in the third section.

Let’s take each of these in turn.

## **Section 1 – Knowledge of The Audience**

I said above that there is a deal of confusion surrounding what William Goldman actually meant when he said ‘nobody knows anything,’ that perhaps it’s nothing more than a standard industry mystification tactic. But there’s another much clearer way to take this statement. Goldman means, I think, that nobody knows anything about whether or not a film will be successful at the box office; that the audience reaction to a film is ultimately unknowable and that no one can always accurately predict whether a film will succeed or fail.

What actually constitutes ‘success’ is of course a slippery concept in itself, and one that may differ from person to person and certainly may depend in their role on any film. In one sense, for example, the development process has ‘succeeded’ when a film



goes into production – regardless of how the eventual film is received by audiences and critics. Another type of success might indeed be ‘critical’ or festival reception. Certainly, this form of capital may be higher up any agenda for writers and directors than, say, the financiers. If a film doesn’t break even at its first theatrical run, but wins an Oscar, has it succeeded? The answer to this, for example, might well depend on who you are – the financier who lost money, or the individual who won the award. There are different ‘stakes’ at play in other words, depending on what the position of the agent is in the field – whether it be economic capital that a practitioner might seek (in terms of box office success), or symbolic or cultural capital (in the form of awards), or even social capital (the film may have been a success in terms of a practitioner widening their circle of collaborators for example.)

Even within the purview of one individual, whether or not a film succeeds may be hard to define. Producer Andy Paterson, for example, partially views his first major feature film, *Restoration*, as a failure. ‘It’s heart breaking to get ninety-five percent of the way.’ Because it only won craft Oscars, Paterson feels it didn’t achieve its potential, yet by many other lights it was a great success.

Despite these varying matrices of ‘success’, however, what perhaps can be said about the Goldman dictum – ‘nobody knows anything’ – is that nobody quite knows how any film will fare once it’s released out into the world, either in front of audiences or critics. One cannot accurately predict how it will be received.

Read in this light, the sentiment is very similar to the ones I quoted earlier from my own interviewees. When independent producer and former head of BBC Films David Thompson says ‘It’s a crapshoot,’ I took it to mean that he can’t ever be sure whether his next film will be a hit; when, Rachael Prior asks me ‘Who the hell knows?’ this is what I took her to mean, that she can’t categorically say whether her decisions on films will be popular and successful in the cinemas.

This is an old problem, one that is especially acute for those working in mass media industries. Gitlin (1983) highlights this very difficulty. Indeed, it is surely no coincidence that the first two chapters of *Inside Prime Time* are entitled, respectively, ‘The Problem of Knowing’ and ‘Predicting the Unpredictable’ and deal with this very

question. How can anyone ‘know’ the dispositions, tastes, preference or reactions of a mass audience for anything before they’ve had a chance to experience it? And if they can’t know it, how can executives, producers or writers seek to evoke this said audience? Gitlin isn’t the only scholar to address this problem of how producers of mass entertainment try to know their audiences (see the likes of Jason Toynbee (2006), Ien Ang (1991) and others.) As Elizabeth Traube (1996, xvii) points out, ‘The problem for the industries is that they must talk about something to someone, but that someone is literally unknowable.’ Gitlin (1983) is a particularly relevant work here, though, for he’s one of those scholars who actively sought to find out from the producers themselves how they go about knowing this ‘unknowable.’

Put simply, the problem is this. Symbolic goods (such as feature films) by their very nature are unique products. Each of them is different, *has* to be different to have a chance of selling at all. These differences can be small (it’s sometimes hard to tell the various instalments of franchise movies apart), but nevertheless, part of their selling point is that they are not exactly the same (unlike a Mars bar or a can of coke.) Consequently, the potential buyers of such a product are to a large extent unknown, for the *exact* product under consideration has never been put to market before.

This is the precise knowledge that so many of my interviewees seemed to claim was unknowable. Traube (1996, xviii) suggests such disavowals of knowledge about the audience may be born out of a desire not so much to cloak as to assert the respondent’s status as a producer of cultural products. That is, by denying that they know anything about the audience they are asserting their own aesthetic values and creative power over whatever it is they produce. They are the creators, they are not pandering to the perceived desires of others. And this view is certainly evidenced in some of my responses, in particularly writer Ayub Khan Din who explicitly states that he doesn’t care about the audience’s opinion. Such a strategy is also alluded to by Caldwell (2008, 47-50), where he cites it as another one of the producer’s ‘genesis myths’ – that by denying any knowledge of the audience, a producer (in the wider sense) can claim all the credit, in an aesthetic sense, the cultural capital.

However, rather than focussing on what producers, executives and writers claim *not* to know – concentrating on the attributes of their disavowal as it were – there is at

least as much to be learnt from analysing what they *do* claim to know and how they support such claims. And many of my respondents did assert knowledge of this supposed unknown, the audience. No one claimed to ‘know’ with certainty about the ultimate predilections of the intended audience, but as we shall see, many claimed to have some degree of knowledge about what they (the audience) might like or dislike. This expertise was claimed primarily in one of two ways – or rather, respondents buttressed their claims by citing either a market research based approach or a more personal, family and friends style approach. Let’s look at the first of these in more detail.

Before we do that, though, I should remind the reader of the point made in Chapter One regarding the definition of the ‘market.’ In the context currently being discussed, my respondents use the term ‘audience’ and ‘market’ fairly interchangeably. This is because in these sections of the interviews we were talking about the market for any completed film, in other words the potential audience (in demographic and size) for a proposed film or else the size and demographic of past audiences for films already released – rather than for the screenplay, the ‘audience’ or ‘market’ for which we’ll get to later.

### **Knowledge by the numbers**

It’s worth re-iterating the context in which my respondents work. UK film development predominantly takes place among small companies, with writers hired on a project by project basis, and producers seeking financing for development from one or more sources. Rarely, if ever, would a feature film production be funded from one single source. Only one of my interviewees works for a company that has direct and secure development funding (being under the umbrella of a US studio.) Each of the other executives or producers (all the writers I spoke to are freelance) are usually in a position of financing on a project by project basis, or occasionally (for development) of slate funding. Furthermore, the majority of them are involved in creating projects – rather than simply selecting them ready-made.

There are some surprising similarities with my own respondents and some of the other studies of entertainment executives, that I illustrate below, but I highlight the UK film context now to point out that while these similarities exist, the context from which they spring is markedly different.

‘We’re always researching, seeing how something has done in Afghanistan or Mexico.’ Chris Clark, one time executive and now producer, making the point that as far as he is concerned what past films have ‘done’ (that is, how much money they’ve taken at the box office around the world) is something that he feels he needs to know. Amelia Granger, a senior executive at Working Title, points out that she checks box office figures in key territories ‘every day’.

This attention to how other films are faring isn’t just confined to their headline figures. Sophie Meyer, head of development at Ealing Studios:

*Hunger Games* may not be my ultimate taste (although I did quite enjoy it) and *Twilight*, I try to go and see the films that have been big hits because you need to know what the audience is responding to and also what their cultural references are – if they’ve all seen that, then what does it mean about the pace of story-telling they’re feeling these days all those kind of things. My job is also reading the trades, I don’t always do it as much as I should, trying to stay a bit on top of what’s working, what’s not, what’s selling, what people are enjoying. You have to be filtering that through to the writers in a way that’s hopefully helpful to the process.

Meyer feels she needs to know not only how many people have gone to see commercially successful (or at least apparently popular) films, but also the content and style of them too. There is a very strong implicit claim to knowledge in this quotation, as the last sentence attests. Meyer says she filters through what she’s learnt to the writers she’s working with. While she doesn’t say exactly *why* the successful films are successful, or why people are enjoying them (again, though, it is unclear how she might be able to tell if the audience is actually enjoying something,) she nevertheless feels confident enough in her interpretation of box office results (and the

successful films themselves) to be able to pass this on to her development colleagues, especially the screenwriters.

Such sentiments were echoed throughout the executive practitioners I interviewed. Executive Ed Rubin puts this view succinctly when he says ‘You can’t second guess the market’ (the usual disavowal) ‘but you need to be aware of it.’

This is hardly surprisingly or revelatory. It makes sense that the makers of a product will be aware of how similar products have fared in the past. These practitioners – particularly the executives – take it as a very important part of their job to know what audiences have liked in the past. Even though on the one hand they may say they ‘know nothing’, they at least know what people liked last year, or what sold in a given foreign territory. As can be seen from the above quotations, the executives are fairly confident in their claims to know what the past market has done.

This again is unsurprising. The actual numbers that a film does (its box office returns and sales) aren’t that difficult to obtain – they are often public knowledge from websites such as Box Office Mojo and IMDB, or else easily obtainable via trade organs such as *Variety* or *Screen International*. Consequently, anyone can find out what films have done well – and the executives freely admit to doing this kind of research as part of their jobs. This is all quantifiable knowledge and work. But also, it is work that requires no special expertise, experience or qualification and none is claimed.

What *is* claimed as a sphere of special knowledge, however, is what to do with this data. Take this statement from Chris Clark. While he caveats his views by using a common formulation, ‘it’s purely my opinion against someone else’s’ when talking about how likely a project is to succeed at the box office he goes on to say ‘it is part of what I do. And I’ve been doing it for fifteen years, thinking about this kind of stuff.’ In other words, while he’s not claiming to know for sure how an audience will react to a certain film, he is gesturing towards saying that he knows more than most other people, due in no small part to the work he’s put in over the years.

Or consider these following quotations. The first is from an executive, Dan MacRae: '[knowledge of the market] comes from what's worked in the past. But we try to be sophisticated and intelligent about interpreting the past.' Paul Trijbits, producer and one-time public fund head. 'The market is very old-fashioned, so you have to interpret it. It says what was the last thing that was a hit. In which case they'd only ever make Bruce Willis, Sly Stallone, *Expendables* 2-10. Which you can't, they want to do other things too.... You have to be smart.'

Leaving aside the fact that *The Expendables* have yet to be expended, the key point is that in both these instances the respondents are qualifying their 'subjectivity'. MacRae tells us he and his company try to be 'sophisticated and intelligent.' Trijbits points out that he, too, is 'interpreting' the past and that he has to be 'smart.' These qualifiers can be seen as claims to authority, claims to expertise.

Gitlin (1983) identified something similar in the Hollywood television executive class in the 1980s. His interviewees admitted to him that 'picking winners' was a subjective business yet: 'Part of what happens in the command centres of the television industry is that network executives satisfy each other, and themselves, that their subjectivity is the right kind' (1983, 26). The above claims from my respondents can likewise be viewed as claims to 'superior subjectivity.' The key point is that while anyone (especially in the internet age) can find out what products – in our case films – have done well commercially, only those skilful or talented enough can accurately tell you *why* they've done so.

There are some marked differences between the context of Gitlin's interviewees and mine, however, that make the similarities in their professed attitudes to researching the audience worth noting. Gitlin outlines what is a corporate approach to, in the main, *selecting* entertainment shows for the (then) three country-wide US TV networks. It is a high-volume world, where hundreds of projects are in development at any one time, and where the executive's job is to whittle down and ultimately select the ones that go into production. The chief driver for such an activity is ratings (with the caveat that they want to satisfy the advertisers, which may mean drawing certain demographics rather than simply the largest audience), hence the language of 'picking a winner'.

Development practitioners in the UK, by contrast, are chiefly involved in *creating* properties rather than selecting them. Their job is to conceive of and nurture ideas from their inception through to screenplays capable of being made into films. Furthermore, most of the people I spoke to were not in a position to make a final decision – in terms of moving forward into production. None of them had the ability to ‘green light’ a production. Indeed, very few – if in truth anyone – holds such a position in the UK film industry. Unlike in Hollywood, almost all UK films are put together with a patchwork of finance and consequently any screenplay needs to be given the go ahead by more than one person.

Yet this marketing logic – understandably present in those selecting and marketing a product to a large audience – seems to be prevalent in much the same way in the UK development field. Rather than solely using such concerns as one of the assessment criteria for selecting projects to market, there is evidence to suggest they have become embedded in the creative process from the very beginning. This even in an independent and flexible sector like the British film industry, rather than in the studio behemoths of Los Angeles.

None of my interviewees were slaves to this marketing logic though. They all accepted that knowing how well films have done in the past, is no guarantee of how other – different – films will fare in the future. What the numbers-based approach can only tell you for sure is which films have done well in the past. What such research cannot necessarily tell you, however, is *why* those films have done well. It is in this space of uncertainty that some of my interviewees, as exemplified in the quotations above, sought to insert themselves. Thus they emphasise the need to ‘interpret’ the data, to be ‘smart’ and ‘sophisticated’ and to rely on years of experience or a ‘feel for the market.’ (This view that the relationship between numbers based research and how it should guide future production as one that primarily involves ‘interpretation’ is echoed throughout the interviews with a range of cultural producers in Richard Ohmann (1996) – as Ohmann (1996, 228-9) himself notes.

The vagueness of such terms is striking in comparison to the exactitude with which the interviewees talked about how they collected the data. While the latter is done in a

number of definable and reproducible ways (such as internet research, going to the cinema, reading the trade press), how these practitioners go about interpreting such data is never made clear. Yet, as the quotations above illustrate, skill and expertise in this area is nevertheless still claimed. It is not called knowledge, however. It is called instinct, feel or judgement.

In his study of practical knowledge David Schön (1983) interviewed and studied practitioners across various fields and disciplines. He observed that: ‘When people use terms such as “art” and “intuition,” they usually intend to terminate discussion rather than to open up inquiry.’ (1983, vii-viii). And it could be argued that the usage of such terms is in an example of this, that my respondents wanted to close down further discussion about how they make these judgements, or at least didn’t want to talk too deeply about how their instincts work. But as Gitlin (1983, 22) notes, the ‘instinctive’ judgements of an entertainment executive (in my case film, but the point holds) aren’t the same as instinctive judgements of professionals such as lawyers or doctors. When these types of professionals resort to explanations involving instinct and intuition, it may indeed be a masking or a shutting down of discussion but behind such statements there is a strata of much more quantifiable knowledge. What the entertainment executive knows is by no means as quantifiable (there are no qualifications to fall back on for example, no thresh hold to say that a practitioner must know *at least* x.) Thus it is by no means clear whether such statements and vagaries mask a deeper knowledge or no real knowledge at all.

Not only can the executive insert themselves and their view into this space – ahead of data, yet without any real definable knowledge sets – it also has its uses. It is into this area of uncertainty, (in the network television realm at least) that Gitlin argues that ‘network lore’ inserts itself. That is, dictums and axioms about what works and what does not work – sci-fi doesn’t play well, single women leads are out, variety genres are dead, and so on. The value of these dictums, according to Gitlin (1983, 23), is that they are slippery, they can change to suit the prevailing conditions and no one can hold you to them. Perhaps surprisingly, while Gitlin’s analysis applies to American television in the 1980s – in a world based around three huge broadcast corporations – I have found evidence of a very similar tendency among executives in the much more



flexible and smaller world of feature film production in the UK. Take this from Dan MacRae:

Everyone's taking the grey pound seriously because of *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*... Britain's most popular actors are elderly. We don't do enough of them. Everyone's chasing those projects now. You have to find a way not to be completely cynical about it. That was the nice thing about marigold hotel, its fresh.

There is the explicit evocation of a demographic – the ‘grey pound’ a reference to an older section of the audience – but also, crucially, a claim to know why *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* was successful, because the UK's most popular actors are elderly. He then points out that ‘everyone’ wants projects involving older actors. There is no real evidence to back up this assertion, beyond the fact that lots of people went to see a movie in which Britain's older actors appeared. It is a prime example of an executive ‘interpreting’ the data, and extrapolating forward. But such a rule or axiom is not cast in stone. If three subsequent films with a similar cast fail, executives may no longer be looking for the same kind of project. An understanding of this kind of changeability is implied in the above quotation by the use of the word ‘now’. Even in this statement of knowledge, MacRae's acknowledging that this isn't immutable knowledge, rather an assessment of current trends. That could change. At the time of the interview, it was obviously accepted by himself and others that films with popular older actors (e.g. Judy Dench, Maggie Smith, Tom Wilkinson) ‘work’ at the box office (MacRae wasn't the only executive to namecheck *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* for instance.)

In addition to this, it should be noted that all of those respondents who referenced the use of researching past box office performance also claimed to be aware of the limitations of such an approach. They all rejected the idea that they should blindly reproduce as closely as possible what has already been successful. We'll visit how they talk about screenplays later in this chapter, but one of the most highly prized attributes of a new screenplay was its ‘freshness’ and ‘originality.’ Incidentally, such a view – that screenreaders in the UK industry seek ‘freshness’ and ‘originality’ in screenplays, is supported by survey evidence from Macdonald (2003, 32 and 37). It's

one of the paradoxes of entertainment production that even the most profit-centred of corporations realise: consumers respond to products that are different from the previous products (as well as often being similar in some respects), though in what ways these new products should be different to be successful is the perennial question.

Before moving on to the second type of claim to knowledge of the audience, it is important to reiterate at this stage who my respondents actually are. They are screenplay development practitioners. Of all of the executives I spoke to, who clearly and cheerfully talked about knowing the market, responding to it, interpreting it – based on research of the numbers – not one of them was actually a marketing executive. Dan MacRae, quoted above, works for a distribution company – which might perhaps suggest why he was quite so explicit about the marketing side of things in the above quotation – but even he is still a development practitioner. He works, in other words, on the screenplay side of the business. Yet all the executives and some of the producers spoke in a similar way about the market – about researching past performances and trying to interpret and assess the market/audience in such a way as to accurately inform their future practice.

Even in this early stage of film creation, such concerns are at the forefront of many of the practitioners' minds. This raises questions for scholars of all film processes and suggests, perhaps, that a realignment of which part of the film process we study may be necessary in order to better understand it. The question is, perhaps have we've been looking in the wrong place? Or, rather, must we look to more than just the marketing and distribution companies to really get to the bottom of how films are marketed and distributed?

Put simply, if you want to understand how commercial concerns interact with aesthetic and creative ones – the oft-referred to battle between creativity and commerce – then perhaps the best place to look at it is in the development process. Is this where the battle is truly played out?

### **Knowing the Audience, the personal touch**

In his study of Hollywood film executives, Stephen Zafirau (2009, 191-200) points out that the fact that such cultural producers are also members (at least in some sense) of the audience they are attempting to sell to is often ignored. The audience for movies does not exclude, in other words, the people who make them. His study doesn't involve direct interviews with executives and producers, although he observed them in a number of semi-public seminars. He argues that these executives – those making the decisions about what gets on to cinema screens – operate in a 'liminal space' (2009, 191) between the intended audience and the production of the cultural product. They are neither wholly divorced from the audience, or entirely a part of it.

Some of my evidence supports this view. In particular, Zafirau's strongest example of this type of liminal interaction with the audience is when he cites an executive who failed to take the advice of his children and subsequently lost out on buying the tremendously successful *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie. Ever since, the executive has trusted and used the children in his family as a way of gaining knowledge of the audience (2009, 197-198). Similarly, one of my respondents, Amelia Granger, senior executive at Working Title, told me that 'Having kids is quite helpful (it's your focus group at home), and you've got to be careful to stop yourself saying "my kids think this.." but it's actually really good.' Note the explicit likening of the family to a 'focus group' and, consequently the increased knowledge that such access can gain – knowledge of a section of the audience.

Yet again, though, Zafirau is in the main talking about executives who are in the position of selecting products (they talk about what films to buy, like Gitlin's executives, trying to pick winners) whereas my respondents are creating these products from scratch. This strengthens the previous point above that what we are seeing is a certain kind of marketing logic appearing in the very heart of the creative process (the term 'focus group' for example, suggests the prevalence of this kind of marketing logic.)

However, there was another type of claim to knowledge of the audience that some of my respondents used that is quite different to the market-based approach and, also, distinct from Zafirau's examples. While he calls on scholars to look at cultural producers as occupying a space in between that traditionally thought of as 'producer'

and ‘the audience’, I argue that in many cases the cultural producers (of my portfolio) consider themselves to *be* the audience. In other words, they and their social circles are the primary audience for their products.<sup>19</sup>

Consider this from independent producer, David Parfitt: ‘[I’m thinking about the market in terms of] what I want to see and what I think my friends want to see.’ He qualifies this very clear statement by adding. ‘In terms of taste and what I believe an audience will go for, I follow my instincts.’ However, this second statement – falling back on the vague rather ill-defined ‘instincts’ – cannot obscure the power of the first: He judges an audience for a film by what he and his friends might want to see. He is putting himself and his social circle at the centre of any considerations about the audience and as a consequence, he can thus claim to ‘know’ this audience rather well. This is not the megalomaniacal pronouncement of someone who thinks his tastes stand for the whole world, rather an honest assessment of where he gets his audience knowledge from.

While this claim is not a megalomaniacal assertion, neither is it a humble one. Parfitt is not suggesting that he or anybody else could easily work out what his friends might want to see. There’s a level of expertise still implied. Later on in the interview, for example, Parfitt and I discuss the various merits or otherwise of certain books in terms of their film potential. He, like myself, ‘had lost count’ of the number of books non-film industry friends have pressed upon him saying it would make a great film. He pointed out that although this happened all the time, he’d never once found that he would want to (or be able to) make any of these suggested stories into a film. In other words, there’s still a claim to being able to interpret this audience. Nevertheless, the point still holds that he places himself firmly in the target audience for any film he tries to make. Indeed, one might say he almost defines the audience.

Like those who claim certain privileged knowledge of a young audience because of their knowledge of their children, this is a strong albeit limited claim. No one can readily disagree or disprove the assertion that you liked something; conversely, it is

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<sup>19</sup> As Caldwell points out, media scholars ‘seldom acknowledge the instrumental role *producers-as-audience* members play.’ Caldwell (2008 334-335).

harder to argue from it to a wider audience success. This claim to place the cultural producers (in a wider sense) at the heart of the audience for a film is one that chimes with some of my other respondents, particularly the writers. I've already cited Ayub Khan Din's desire for him and his collaborators to effectively ignore the audience. Frank Cottrell Boyce likewise wants to work only on stuff that interests him.

There is also a very real and obvious sense in which film and stage writers (in particular) are the audience for their own work, in a way that prose writers are not. I was first aware of this fact, in a non-academic capacity, years ago. I've known Ayub Khan Din for a number of years and when his play *East is East* was first staged (before it became a film), I was amazed to see him laughing at the show: hadn't he written this play, I thought, didn't he know all the jokes? But then it occurred to me that, of course, the play exists separately from its written text – it is not only its written form, but the interpretation from the director and designer, the embodiment by the actors and so forth and so on. In much the same way, a film writer will absolutely be part of the audience for their work – unlike the novelist rereading their book, or the painter glancing at his painting, the screenwriter hasn't seen their work until it is produced. (This is equally true of the development practitioner in general.) In Chapter Five I will look at how these practitioners view the screenplay as a document, but suffice it to say that in some sense at least, screenwriters want to watch this film that they've written (even if no one else does.) They are their own audience.

These writers aren't so arrogant as to suggest that, as audience members they are only interested in the kind of material that they write about. All of them I spoke to went out of their way to emphasise a number of films – different genres and styles – that they enjoyed that they never could have written themselves. These writers professed especially to enjoying twisty thrillers, although none of them were known for writing such films. What all the writers were keen to stress, however, was that they were part of the intended audience for their own work. They definitely believe that they and their friends are part of the audience and, consequently, they have some knowledge of that audience.

An even stronger claim comes from William Nicholson, who goes so far as to identify a knowledge of the audience based partly on his own interests and concerns. As if he

is in some sense an exemplar of a wider audience. ‘The nice thing is, that the things that I’m passionately interested in...I’m able to demonstrate that audiences like them too.’ His interests coincide with the audience in other words. Of course, he is partly able to claim this because of the past success of some of his previous films – on the numbers – but nevertheless, he is placing himself – like Parfitt – in the centre of the audience. What he wants to see, others will too.

On the face of it, this approach to knowledge of the audience – using yourself as an audience member and those around you – seems fairly uncomplicated and incontestable. The claims are generally small, after all – I know what I like and I know what my friends like. Or take this sentiment, typical in particular of the producers I interviewed, from David Thompson, independent producer and one-time head of BBC Films. ‘On the whole, it’s too depressing to do things you don’t like or aren’t interested in watching.’ It’s hard not to sympathise with this view. We wouldn’t expect artists more generally to work on projects they didn’t like or wouldn’t want to experience – indeed, some of us might even find the prospect rather patronising. However, if we take a broader view, we may argue that such an approach also drastically limits the canvas on which potential feature films are created.

I’ve already outlined in the previous two chapters a reading of the development field as a Bourdieu style field of cultural production, populated by players springing from similar *habitus*es and exhibiting similar attitudes and pre-dispositions. We shall see in the chapter on the creation of the screenplay how this begins to matter even more. For the moment, if we follow the logic of the above approach to the audience, then we’re left with a situation where not only do the creators of these cultural products come from a particular field or class, but their conception of the audience is also identical to this field or class. We would get to a position where filmmakers are making films for people like themselves, and thinking of this as a representative audience of the wider film going public.

The danger to the breadth of content is clear. Not only is a very small section of society making films; they are making them under the illusion that the audience for these films is just like their friends and family.

I am not suggesting that this situation is the case throughout the British film industry. Clearly films are produced that appeal to a variety of demographics. What I am claiming, however, is that a large proportion of my portfolio of interviews – especially the writers and producers – considers themselves and the people in their social circles as representative of a wider film audience. This clearly has implications for what ideas and screenplays get moved further forward through the development process. More importantly, it has implications for the content of screenplays. This is a point I shall return to later, in a wider discussion about the make-up of the industry sector, but it should be noted that even in this one specific area – conceptions and knowledge of the audience – the social constitution of the film industry is vitally important.

These two approaches to claiming a knowledge of the audience by my respondents (an appeal to past audience numbers and an appeal to their own family and friends) may not be the only way such knowledge is claimed in the UK film industry. However, in this study these were the two dominant modes I encountered. My analysis of the former begins to illustrate quite how marketing considerations have infiltrated the very inception and creation of film projects, while we can see that the latter points up a potential reason why breadth of content in the film industry may be an issue. Both such findings came about directly from an engagement with the development process and its practitioners.

The second sphere of knowledge I encountered and investigated in the course of my interviews is best described as ‘screenplay’ knowledge and I will look at in the next section.

## **Section 2 – Knowledge of Screenplays**

In the previous section, I looked at how development practitioners claim knowledge of the audience. Such claims to audience knowledge, as we saw, are often caveated with a fairly standard disavowal. There is in the industry an acknowledgement, in other words, that claiming knowledge of audience intentions is far from simple or objective and is often provisional at best.

No such caveats or disavowals were evident from my respondents when it came to claiming knowledge of screenplays. Each one of them claimed to know what a good screenplay was, for example, and time and again they made references to screenplays being ‘good’ or otherwise. They could all spot a good screenplay, this was universally claimed. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that their jobs revolve around the creation, modification and assessment of screenplays. The dichotomy between these two positions is perhaps best illustrated by William Nicholson who says ‘I know what’s good though not necessarily what will work.’ He knows what a good screenplay is, in other words, but he doesn’t know whether or not that screenplay will be the basis for a film that will succeed with audiences.<sup>20</sup>

The chief point of this section is ask the question, how do these people come to know what is or is not a good screenplay? Or rather, how do these people claim to have come by this knowledge? It is a vital part of their job – whether they are writers, producers or executives – to be able to pronounce with confidence on the quality of screenplays, and to project that confidence onwards – either to commissioners, current or future employers or other talent that they might want to work on a film. A producer could hardly send a screenplay out to actors or financiers, for example, and claim ‘I have no idea how good this is.’ Yet how can they stake a claim to this knowledge?

### **What is good screenplay?**

Before getting to this central question – how can these people claim to know what a good screenplay is, and where does this knowledge come from – it will perhaps be helpful at this stage to make some remarks about what constitutes ‘good’ in the context of screenplay development, at least as regards my respondents.

There’s a plethora of screenwriting manuals that purport to tell readers not only what good screenplays are, but how to write them too. These books are full of injunctions

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<sup>20</sup> Obviously such a view immediately throws up the question of how can something be ‘good’ if it doesn’t work? I’ll return to this question later in the thesis, when we look at the purpose of the screenplay.



about act structures, conflict, character arcs, dramatic irony and so on and so forth. Most of the more prominent ones (for example Field (1994), Linda Seger (1994), McKee (1997) and Christopher Vogler (1996)) come out of a Hollywood storytelling tradition, or rather extol the virtues of traditional Hollywood storytelling. These manuals often hark back to older story theories, in particular Aristotle, but they tend to use the Hollywood film as the story *par excellence* – the paragon to aim for. I shall look at in more detail the relationship between this ‘canon’ and the development practitioners below. The point I want to make here is that while in talking about good screenplays my respondents used some similar terminology, none of them went into the kind of detail or extent that such manuals go to.

In Macdonald (2003), the first real survey of what he termed screen readers in the UK film industry, the terms that cropped up most when respondents spoke of attractive elements in screenplays were ‘original voice’, ‘story’ and ‘industry reality’ (2003, 33). These are still fairly ill-defined terms, however, and such vagueness is replicated in my own interviews. Although I had a more limited portfolio in terms of size, I had the opportunity to question the respondents in more depth. Nevertheless, my interviews also evidenced this somewhat vague and undetailed approach to defining a good screenplay.

One of the key themes of my responses in terms of a quality screenplay, for example was the notion of character. Development executive Rachael Prior of Big Talk: ‘Characters and motivation and arc are what defines a good movie really.’ She didn’t elucidate further about what might make a good character or excellent motivation or compelling arc. William Nicholson also emphasises character and, in addition, plotting ‘What makes movies great is the life force in them, the energy in them, and that comes partly from plotting and partly from character.’ Again, however, he doesn’t explicate what these things might mean any further than this. So while most of the interviewees cited ‘character’ as one of the key elements, they didn’t go into what might make a ‘good’ one.

In this sense, my interviewees, although varying to some degree in what might be prized elements of a screenplay (as I say, character was consistently mentioned as a key element in assessing and developing screenplays), nevertheless is consistent with

Macdonald's insofar as there is a significant lack of real explanation as to the exact nature of these various attributes.

There may be a number of reasons for this lack of detail. On the one hand, as previously noted, such omissions or elisions are consistent with problems that academics have had interviewing practitioners in a number of disciplines (e.g. Schön (1983)), whereby respondents fall back on generalisations and terms such as 'instinct' because they either find it hard to unpick complex thought processes that have become 'natural'; or else, again as previously noted in the earlier section, they wish to hide their expertise as a way of protecting their status, a mystification technique serving to mask the fact that someone else might be able to do their job just as well. Caldwell noted that producer disavowals are sometimes employed to either tame industrial complications and 'thus cover over economic and ideological dimensions of media' or else to 'legitimate long-standing, tightly held industrial mythologies' (2008, 318). Such vagaries, in terms of the elements of what makes good screenplays, may indeed be partly down to such an attempt to reinforce legitimizing myths of 'talent' and instinct.

Another reason for this omission is perhaps my failure as a researcher to truly mine this seam as a line of questioning. It wasn't until after I had collated the bulk of the interview data, that I realised this was one of the various omissions in terms of areas covered that I might fruitfully have been able to ask more about. This points to a problem I highlighted in the methodology section of this thesis – namely, my insider status – which is perhaps yet another reason why there's not as much detail on what these practitioners think makes a good screenplay. My interview transcripts are littered with the expression, 'well you know all this' 'I don't need to tell you' and its variants. All of my interviewees knew my background – those I didn't know already, I nonetheless gained access to via contacts who did know me – and may very well have deliberately forbore from 'lecturing' me about what makes up a good screenplay. They may have seen it as patronising, or perhaps simply picked up on visual clues during the interviews; if I nodded and smiled knowingly, for example, it's liable that the conversation itself may have naturally elided over this area, rather than the respondent deliberately steering clear of the subject.

## A Personal Analysis

As I pointed out earlier in this thesis, such elisions as above may be the inevitable consequence of my own familiarity to both the field and my interviewees, however hard I tried to avoid them. That being said, there's a chance here to turn this disadvantage on its head. Or at least, as I argued in the methodology chapter, this is a chance to use myself as a resource in this context. In the following I will do just that and analyse an aspect of my own experience together with one of the documents I generated as a development consultant.

As a development consultant, I have been called upon often to deliver a 'verdict' for want of a better word on screenplays that have been submitted for potential funding. I've done this job of script reader for a few different organisations that have slightly different priorities or agendas, and therefore while I as a reader can happily move between work for a public funder, say, and a big commercial company, part of being able to work for both is to be aware what those priorities are.

Script reading is one of the ways into development work in the UK industry, certainly that's how it was for me. Generally freelance, not only is it a way to earn money in itself it is also often used as a prelude to interviews. For at least two of the subsequent jobs I took in the development sector (and one I did not get), as part of the interview process I had to read a script and write either development notes or a script report (in parlance borrowed from the US, such reports are sometimes called 'coverage'.)

While this is only one of the many documents generated in the development process, and while it can in no way represent the entirety of what developers might think of as a 'good' screenplay, I think an analysis of this assessment document can provide some insight into the kind of elements that are thought of as constituting a good screenplay. Not only is it one of the units of 'assessment' widely used across the industry<sup>21</sup> (that is, its purpose is specifically to judge the quality of a screenplay), it is also one of the earliest documents a new entrant to the industry might come across.

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<sup>21</sup> See Bloore (2013) Appendix B for example

Certainly, when I first joined the film industry, I quite quickly gravitated towards script reading and became used to working with such documents. This happened well before I came across (let alone wrote) development notes that might be given to a screenwriter, or before I'd even met a screenwriter. I was familiar with working on script reports before I had even worked on a screenplay that had made it to production.

### **Screenplay Coverage**

The first thing to say is that the screenplay coverage is written as an assessment, normally of a piece of work someone has deemed 'complete enough' to submit. The report, therefore, is an assessment of a completed work rather than as a commentary on a work in progress. There is much less requirement to come up with strategies for improving the material. It still behoves the script reader to assess a project's potential (rather than simply saying whether or not the draft is ready for production), but not to offer much in the way of direction for further development. When writing 'notes' in a more developmental or creative mode, there is much more emphasis on identifying where the material might be flawed and how to make adjustments. In this mode there is also less emphasis on judging the material, and more on trying to help the writer achieve what the reader thinks they are trying to achieve (rather than coming to a view about whether or not it is worthwhile trying to achieve this goal.)

Exact requirements vary slightly between companies and bodies, but in my experience a report normally consists of a title page (reproduced below) plus a one to two page synopsis of the screenplay and a page or two of comments, culminating in a verdict as to whether or not the production company (or funder) should pursue the project further. In figure 1 I have reproduced the front page of one of these reports I wrote for a commercial production company (I have blacked out the name of the screenwriter and the screenplay for confidentiality purposes.) While there is some minor differences between templates, by and large this front page is representative. And, as we shall see, the front page is particularly revealing.

Fig1.

TITLE	
WRITER	
FORMAT	Screenplay
LENGTH	115p
GENRE	Sword and Sandal, Biblical action
LOCATION	Italy, Palestine/Israel
PERIOD	33 AD
BUDGET	Mid-High
SUB TO	
SUB BY	
SUB DATE	
READER	Ben Lyle

**Logline:** A highly skilled Roman soldier is sent to Judea to avenge the murder of a general by a gang of bloodsucking Norsemen and their beautiful female leader. They're intent on drinking the blood of Christ to make themselves immortal

	EXCELLENT	GOOD	FAIR	POOR
Premise			*	
Plot			*	
Characters			*	
Dialogue			*	
Structure		*		
Visual			*	

**Brief:** Despite a laudable ambition in this take on Romans in Judea – the writer's a fan of GLADIATOR, and Jesus by the looks of it, - overall this feels a million miles away from making a successful film. It's derivative, occasionally laughable, and hide-bound by underwritten action and unconvincing characterisation. The idea of a gang

of bloodsuckers, hunting for immortality by drinking Jesus' blood, is also not a strong concept commercially and overall this has car crash written all over it. The writing itself is just about okay (though not recommendable) but when you combine that with the outré concept, and moribund rendering, this is an easy pass on both script and writer.

**Commercial Potential:** Very limited, especially given the high production budget needed. Sub-par sword and sandal, without the wow factor

**Recent Comparisons:** Gladiator, Alexander,

**Script Recommendation:** Pass

**Writer Recommendation:** Pass

There are a number of things to note. In the first place, this front page is filled in to the production company's template. While it is only meant as a guide, for one particular company, it nevertheless suggests how the decision makers at that company like to break up the elements of a screenplay. Even before we get to the grid that illustrates these various elements, however, there are other strictures which the template imposes on the screenplay assessor. Title, Writer, Format (i.e. screenplay, book, newspaper article, play), and even Length are fairly uncontroversial insofar as this is not particularly loaded information. Although the latter of these does illustrate that length is an important factor – too short, and the material won't be long enough to officially count as a feature film, too long and it may be deemed uncommercial.

The subsequent headings tell us more. Location, Period and Budget help the reader (of the report) to place the screenplay. It illustrates that the assessor has to be thinking in these terms when presented with the screenplay but also that the production company is thinking in these terms, particularly the relationship between – for example – the budget and the subsequent elements. Next comes Logline, which for myself as a writer of these reports, is both one of the hardest and most important elements of the report. It is intended as a summation, ideally of one sentence only, of the whole screenplay. My understanding as a practitioner is that as a writer of the

report, you make an effort to ‘sell’ the screenplay in the Logline – or, at least, you pitch it as best you can. For all that it is only one sentence, however, it is crucial in the assessment of the screenplay. If – as in the report reproduced above shows – the Logline is insipid and unstriking, then the chances of the screenplay being taken seriously may drastically reduce, depending on the company. For the Logline (the short description of the film) illustrates to a large degree how a film will be marketed in its purest form. If the Logline of the report is immediately engaging, then the screenplay has a greater chance of being taken further. Or rather, from my perspective as the assessor, I always felt that the better the Logline, the more likely someone else will be to read the screenplay. If I read a screenplay (or book for that matter) that I felt strongly was good and should be taken further, then I would take extra care on writing the Logline in an engaging a manner as possible. If I thought the screenplay was poor, then I wouldn’t take nearly as much care over this aspect of the report.

After the Logline, the front page of the report gives us an attributes grid: Premise (which might also be characterised as ‘idea’ or ‘concept’ for the film), Plot (what happens), Character and Dialogue, Structure (a more technical consideration than plot, which relates to pace and the release of information) and Visual (this can refer both to visual elements of the premise – i.e. if the setting is particularly conducive to what the reader might think of as good photography – as well as to a quality of the writing. That is, if the writer has a particularly engaging visual style.)

Whether or not these attributes do indeed constitute what makes a good screenplay, there’s no doubt that seeing them written down as the factors by which to assess a screenplay certainly plays on your mind when reading them. From quite an early stage in my career as a script reader (one of the early entry points into screenplay development in the UK for many people), I’ve been used to filling in similar templates. This point is crucial, when I consider where I got my screenplay knowledge from. Like most of my interviewees, I did not study film at university (my undergraduate degree was in Philosophy), nor had I attended any short courses, or even read any of the ‘how-to’ manuals when I first started working in the industry. Yet, from an early point in my career, such templates as the one above must have been steering my thoughts about screenplays in a certain direction. If you’re told the

criteria by which to judge something, that very criteria must materially influence how you judge.

Subsequently, I went on short courses in the development field. Two of these were specifically aimed at training script readers. (These were run by The Script Factory, which followed the precepts of its founder Lucy Scher. Scher (2011) even designed her own template for writing script reports in an attempt to address what she saw as a lack of industry standards.<sup>22</sup>) I also went on a couple of courses designed to help in developing specific kinds of projects (rather than in assessing screenplays.) These courses undoubtedly contributed to my understanding of screenplay assessment and development. Nevertheless, my first and possibly most profound contact with these issues came through the writing of script reports, conforming to templates like the above.

After the grid of attributes, comes the ‘Brief’ section. This is a paragraph summing up the ‘Comments’ section of the report, which is normally about a page of commentary on the screenplay. In such a case as in Fig. 1, where the outcome is a ‘Pass’ (i.e. to reject the submission), this would normally consist of (in my reports anyway) a paragraph pointing out the positive aspects followed by two to four paragraphs outlining the perceived flaws.

When assessing a work in this mode, as a reader I have nearly always made up my mind as to whether or not to recommend the piece before I’ve finished reading it. More importantly in this context, I have normally made up my mind before I have articulated in my mind *why*. That is, the assessment that I write up about my views is a post-decision rationalisation rather than a recording of my thought processes leading up to that decision. It’s almost as if I can say ‘I don’t like that,’ and only afterwards – when pressed – do I have to come up with some reasons why. In the above example,

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<sup>22</sup> Subsequently published in Scher (2011). This book is unusual, for while in many ways it is a ‘how-to’ manual like some of those already cited, its aim is to show the reader how to analyse and evaluate screenplays rather than how to write them. Scher gives a full definition of what she thinks a good screenplay consists of. As a how to manual, furthermore, it attempts to show how to write a very specific kind of script report – namely one intended for the screenwriter, rather than for someone thinking of purchasing the screenplay. That is, reports slanted more in the mode of development notes, rather than strictly speaking an assessment. See Scher (2011, 31) for her distinction.



I've criticised its originality and the concept and its marketability. But I could equally have passed on it for other 'reasons'.

What I have in my mind as soon as I open a screenplay – when assessing it for the company above – is a few very simple things, which are partly represented in the report. It has to accord roughly to my understanding of the company's 'brand' (public funders also have brands) – some entities have stronger brands than others, but this is something one can glean from conversations with colleagues, previous output, stated partners and other industry factors. Given the commercial outlook of the company which commissioned the above script report, there also has to be parts in the screenplay that are castable. That is, roles that allow the producers attractive options in going out to actors; and that actors (of a certain stature) will conversely be attracted to those roles. It has to have an identifiable audience in my eyes, hence the extra heading in the report above entitled 'commercial potential, along with the 'recent comparisons.'

It is only after these factors that other considerations come into the equation – such as the ones in the grid above. Yet again, we can see how commercial considerations – marketing logic – pervade the development process from its very beginning. (For I write similar reports – with similar considerations – when assessing whether or not to option books for adaptations, even before they've been written into screenplays.) Only after these thresholds are met do other considerations come into it, the other 'qualities' of the screenplay as it were, from character, to dialogue and plotting.

I should also add that however complicated the story being told is, whether it's a multi-layered, multi-character screenplay or a fairy-tale remake, as a report writer I always sought (and was enjoined) to keep the synopsis down to a page if possible, two at most. As a report writer, you have to 'boil down' the story to this one page, then boil it down again to a logline. There isn't time – nor evidence – within the scope of this current study, to go more deeply into the role of the script report in the film industry. However, I believe this could be an avenue for further fruitful study. In particular, it might be enlightening to go into the relationship between coverage and screenplays that make it into production.

There may or may not be a connection, but it is interesting to think that ideas that are pithy and easily pitchable are often better suited to receiving positive coverage.

Famously, in the industry, Stephen Spielberg articulated this desire for conceptual reduction in 1985: ‘If a person can tell me the idea in 25 words or less, it’s going to make a good movie’ (quoted in Lewis & Smoodin [2007, 68]). Such a view was encapsulated by the UKFC’s Development Fund in 2003 when they started a scheme called 25 Words or Less – specifically to encourage screenwriters to think of their projects in succinct and pitchable terms (Tim Dams 2003). The script report is the embodiment of such a view, for the more succinct and pitchable the idea, the more favourably it will fit into that type of formalised assessment form.

As I said at the top of this section, the script report is only one industry manifestation of how to judge a screenplay, how to assess whether or not it is good. However, as I hoped this analysis has shown, in my case at least (both as a professional script reader and subsequently a development executive) the nature and structure of the templates behind these reports had a significant impact on my understanding of what makes a screenplay good. Given that the use of such templates is widespread across the industry (I myself have used similar ones working for numerous independent production companies, distributors, public funders and broadcasters) it is possible to say that such templates do illustrate to some extent how practitioners go about assessment.

### **Story is King**

I started this sub section posing the question what makes a good screenplay and, as mentioned, there are plenty of detailed answers to this in the reams of work on screenplay writing and dramaturgy. My own research has found more generalised, vaguer responses, in keeping with much of the other work academics have done in questioning development practitioners. Even when I analysed my own experience and practices, I still come up with some slightly hazy notions: I want to see ‘engaging’ characters with ‘compelling arcs’, ‘sparky’ or ‘economical’ dialogue and ‘strong narrative spines’ or ‘dynamic relationships’ or ‘thematic coherence’. I haven’t just plucked these phrases out of thin air. They all appear at one time or another in

assessments I've written about screenplays – either as praise for their inclusion, or criticism at the lack thereof. In some sense, they must be elements that I think necessary if a screenplay is to be deemed good.

One particular property of a good screenplay – indeed, its defining characteristic as far as my respondents were concerned – is something that is so pervasive in most analyses of screenplay writing and development, and UK cinema in general, that I hesitate to cite it here in case I appear stupid. However, everyone I spoke to – and most of what I've read, both academically and otherwise – takes it as read that good screenplay writing is about good story telling. That film *is* story. This assumption is so embedded in the culture that the word story is often transposed for the word script ('story editor' and 'script editor' are often used interchangeably for example.)

But is this necessarily so? Does the cinema and filmmaking have to be about story-telling? Most scholars are careful enough to preface their work on the industry by using a phrase such as 'narrative filmmaking' or 'screen narratives', quite rightly. Maybe my point is a much more limited one, in that my respondents (of screenplay developers) only work on narrative and dramatic films, and consequently (and obviously) for them, filmmaking is synonymous with story-telling. Certainly, before embarking on this process of research that was my assumption. It's an assumption all of them share.

Again, however, maybe such an industry-wide assumption impacts on the breadth and nature of filmmaking in this country. If everyone making the films assumes that films are about telling stories, what space does this leave for other more experimental and entirely different methods and agendas? Are we to leave these to the art world and installation artists, for example? Are only 'strong' stories destined to make it through the development process? Does filmmaking attempting to secure a wide audience, have to be a narrative art form only? Maybe the answer to this question is simply yes. What I'm pointing out is that the screenplay development sector of the industry and, probably, the industry as a whole has assumed the answer to this question is indeed yes.

Perhaps this is a question for a film or social historian to answer – in the development of cinema as a mass medium, when and how did storytelling become its most important motor? One of the most popular forms of entertainment before the emergence of the cinema was the music hall, which isn't really a story-telling medium in the same way at all, for example. This question is one that needs to be left here for the moment. All that I can claim in this thesis is that, based on my interviews of screenwriters, development executives and producers – and my time in the industry – this is indeed the case for the UK. Despite the hopes of thinkers like Maras (2010, 174), and Kathryn Millard (2006), the rise of digital filmmaking has seemingly done little to shift the 'gospel of story,' at least in a UK context.

'Story' is a word that crops up again and again in all my interviews. Take producer David Parfitt on reading novels for adaptations: 'it's not for us about the quality of the writing, it's about the quality of the storytelling.' This is one of over twenty times in an hour and a half that he mentions either the story or storytelling. For executive Rachael Prior, development is time spent: 'building a story,' or 'working on the story.' Even more bluntly, when talking about her career path she says: 'I knew I wanted to work with story.' William Nicholson repeatedly uses the word 'story' to describe what he does as a screenwriter, so much so that it appears on almost every page of the interview transcript. Olivia Hetreed as a screenwriter says it is: 'my responsibility is to tell the story in the best way possible.' What demarcates a good producer from a great one, in Cat Villiers' eyes, is 'Taste and instincts and understanding how story works.' Chris Collins, one time producer and at the time of my interview a senior executive at the BFI, even referred to script editors as 'Story Editors,' a common industry conflation.

From a creative point of view, the 'story' as a value comes through as by far the most important aspect of the screenplay – its chief creative purpose in fact. Analysing the interviews again – as a whole and with the benefit of distance – I can note my own acceptance of this as a value. This is one of those instances where as an interviewer I was quite clearly a part of the culture I am studying rather than being an outsider. In my role as a development executive, I am often called upon to talk about what the story is, what it should be, whether it is being told as effectively as possible, if it is a worthy enough story, a cinematic story, a powerful story, a marketable one. This is a

value I've never really questioned, and maybe I was correct not to, but nevertheless when looking at screenplay development with a detached eye in leaps out as the single most important value in terms of those creating the screenplays.

Maybe I shouldn't be surprised. Maybe film writing *is* simply storytelling, to the exclusion of anything else, maybe this observation is trite. Nonetheless, I am struck by the prevalence of this story value in the interviews. Robert McKee (1997) wrote a hugely popular how-to manual called simply *Story* and one can perhaps understand a mainstream system – McKee's is mostly a Hollywood analysis – being specifically orientated around narrative. But many of my interviewees are also involved at one level or another in art house cinema. They wouldn't characterise themselves as being part of the same tradition as Hollywood superhero movies, or even the Syd Field/McKee dependence on three-act structure. Nevertheless, 'story' is the value that comes through most strongly when talking about the screenplay. Only one of my interviewees seemed in any way ambivalent about 'story' as such. Laurence Coriat, noted for her work as a writer for directors such as Michael Winterbottom, talked about what interests her in a project: 'it's very rare that I get excited by just a story: all stories are the same, it's how you tell them really.' Although later on she does refer to a 'story' being worked out for the screenplay.

As I say, I didn't really notice this at the time – the total centrality of the concept – but it's there in black and white in my transcripts and when I think back to my own experience too. From a creative perspective, the screenplay's chief attribute – more important than the dialogue, the milieu, the genre, the tone or any other single element – is, as far as those charged with creating it are concerned, the story. It is the container of that story, its first incarnation. A screenplay as a document also contains instructions as to how to realise that story in a filmic way, how to tell the story in effect, but it's the story that's the thing.

### **Where does screenplay knowledge come from, and how is it claimed?**

#### **Formal Education**

There are some professions where formal qualifications are a pre-requisite. Doctors, lawyers, architects and the like are unable to practice if they don't have degrees, certificates and the various accoutrements of a formal – usually university-based – education. The film industry operates no such barrier, or threshold. At least, that's the impression you would get talking to my respondents.

Yet if ever there were an area of the development field that you think might, to an extent at least, be covered by a formal education one might expect it to encompass the area of screenplay knowledge, or theory. As I've already intimated, there's a significant amount of literature on the subject of what makes a good screenplay. In the UK, further, there's been a blossoming of both film and media studies more generally, and screenwriting courses in particular in the last twenty years. An ever-greater number of people are thus getting qualifications that at least point to the sector. At the time of writing there are ten university screenwriting courses accredited by Creative Skillset (and many more unaccredited), and a further forty-six accredited courses in 'film production' (Creative Skillset 2014). This is quite apart from modules and areas of undergraduate courses that cover screenwriting as part of a wider course of study.

The relationship between the industry and the educational establishment is an uneasy one, however. There was a push from the newly formed UK Film Council to increase 'accreditation' in film screenwriting courses, hence the involvement of (then) Skillset in the courses mentioned above, which relied heavily on input from industry practitioners and which, it is argued by the likes of Macdonald (2013, 68) and Conor (2010, 173-4) had the effect of offering students the perception of a better chance of gaining employment. Such a training push from the UKFC, was designed to meet a supposed industry need for better trained writers. But as the UKFC/Attentional report into this very matter found out in 2007, there was still a high degree of mistrust from the development practitioners about the value of university courses, certainly as regards screenwriting (2007, 52-53). While none of my respondents spoke disparagingly about courses as such, there was a clear (though not universal) tendency to downplay the role of their formal educations in their current jobs, especially as regards what I would call knowledge of screenplays and screenwriting.

Yet in trying to find out how these practitioners construct knowledge, I had to find out what knowledge they did or did not claim to bring to the field from beforehand. All but four of my portfolio of seventeen had at least undergraduate degrees from UK universities. One of those four went to film school instead. None of these undergraduate degrees were taken in screenwriting, film or even media. There were a couple of physicists, while the rest read subjects in a range of what might be considered more traditional humanities subjects (History, Philosophy, English, Languages.) Two highlighted that they'd done a film 'module' as part of their degree. Of course, the age range here is considerably older than those attending university in the last five to ten years and it might perhaps be instructive to see, in another ten years, whether the educational profile in the industry has changed to reflect the fact that there are many more courses attempting to cater for the industry than previously. This lack of a supposed educational background in screenwriting is supported by Susan Rogers' much bigger (in statistical terms) survey of UK screenwriters in 2007, where she found that five out of the sixty-three surveyed had done something related (drama or creative writing.) Fewer than ten percent (2007, 30).

On the face of it, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that my respondents don't attribute their own knowledge of the field to their education – and therefore mistrust the potential claims of others to have been 'taught' screenwriting or the precepts of screenplay development. If they didn't acquire their knowledge of the discipline in that way, then how can anyone else?

Such a blanket disavowal of the utility of formal education in terms of screenplay knowledge, however, doesn't tell the whole story either in terms of the *actual* background of my respondents or in how some of them talk about it. In purely statistical terms, I interviewed five screenwriters. Three of them had degrees in English (all, as it happens, from Oxford.) Of the other two, one went to drama school. If, following on from the previous section, you take a position – as all my respondents do – that filmmaking and screenwriting is about story-telling, then having a degree in English literature *must* be of some educational value to screenwriting. It would be hard to argue that an English lit degree is of no value when it comes to storytelling, for instance. Yet none of these writers ascribed their knowledge of how to write screenplays to their university education.

Ayub Khan Din, who went to drama school, likewise attributes his knowledge of screenplays and writing to the practice of being a writer, rather than anything learnt at drama school. This is perhaps a slightly different case, insofar as his course was predominantly practice-based. Nevertheless, it is still a course of formal education.

Perhaps the most interesting example of this almost endemic disavowal of formal education comes from the fifth writer I spoke to, Laurence Coriat. She recounted an early academic experience at university (in France) where she dropped out, and told me on more than one occasion that ‘I’m a self-made woman,’ and an ‘autodidact.’ This was understandable, given her apparently fairly unusual route into the industry (as I say, she was one of the few not to have a university degree.) However, later in the interview she goes on to say that took a year-long course in Media, Photography and Video at the London College of Printing. It was her tutor, she says, who suggested she might make a good writer. This story came as a prelude, however, to Coriat again emphasising her lack of formal education, in that she said she tried to get into the National Film School ‘like five times.’

This is a little peculiar, even from a writer. That is, there’s an ongoing debate around the teaching of creative writing in general that regularly revisits the question of whether it can be taught or not. I don’t need to go into this debate here, except perhaps to make the following point: That a writer can claim that their formal education was not in any way formative and can further claim to be *completely self-taught*, while moments later refer to a course in the very subject at which they claim to be self-taught, I argue points to a more sector-wide attitude to formal education.

For it is not only the writers that wish to distance their current work in screenplay development from their previous academic experiences. Even those respondents who claimed some formal education in the field – Chris Collins (MA in film theory) and Chris Clark (an uncompleted MA in the same) – made it clear in the interviews that such qualifications weren’t really important in their jobs, beyond the fact that both courses encouraged an ‘immersion’ in cinema and films. More common still, though, was the complete denial of any relevance. Take this from executive Amelia Granger. ‘I’m kind of self-educated, like a lot of people who work in film, in a very non-



academic way.’ As an undergraduate, Granger studied French and German at Oxford University.

The fact that someone can claim to be self-educated in a ‘non-academic’ way and come from such a background, is revealing. She’s not denying that she went to Oxford (she told me this moments before), rather it shows that her attitude to what she knows about film – and development in particular – is that it is wholly practice based knowledge. Further that such knowledge is by its very nature ‘non-academic.’ So although she is not claiming to be an author or creator in the same sense as the writers (she is not claiming *artistry*, in other words) she nevertheless places this whole sphere of knowledge firmly in the realm of practice-based, industry experience.

This view is replicated throughout my interviews. It points to a self-imposed, or self-conceived barrier between the ‘academic’ and the craft or art of screenwriting.

### **Art versus Craft in Screenwriting**

Before continuing with this analysis, I shall note the distinction some of my respondents drew between what might best be described as art and craft, especially in this context of education. I’ve mentioned already the widespread debate about whether ‘art’ can be taught, and I don’t need to go into that further here. A concept that was evoked far more often in my interviews, in terms of screenwriting, was ‘craft’. This can be seen not only in my own interviews but elsewhere; McKee (1999, 15-17) refers to the ‘loss of craft’ in screenwriting, Scher (2011, 10-11) uses the term repeatedly, screenwriting manuals often have it as a subheading. Tom Stempel (1988, 15) traces the use of the term in connection with writing for film even as far back as pre-WWI.

This points to the debates around teaching creative subjects, not least screenwriting, and the putative division between theory and practice when it comes to teaching media subjects, see Desmond Bell (2004) and Nils Lindahl Elliot (2000) for examples of this debate. My respondents were eager to stress the practical nature of screenwriting as a staging post to their art, which fits into this notion of craft.

Screenwriter Olivia Hetreed said this: ‘I was only able to write a script because I felt it wasn’t really writing. The film was the point, not the writing.’ Hetreed, an English lit graduate, had made the point that the degree turned her off ‘writing’ as something she wanted to do. Such a formulation gives us an insight into the perceived practical basis of screenwriting, which she feels in some way is not even writing at all. It thus becomes clearer, perhaps, to understand why development practitioners separate their current work from their formal academic backgrounds so completely.

This emphasis on craft in the screenwriting realm doesn’t of course preclude the possibility of learning in a wider sense. Elliot (2000, 31) makes the point that ‘craft’ reasoning nevertheless still embodies orders (and theories in other words), and that students (in screenwriting courses) unselfconsciously adopted certain craft forms of production thereby ‘reproducing the subjectivity associated with the dominant regulative orientation.’ In other words, although my respondents may use the term ‘craft’ to denote something non-academic, and to an extent theory-free, actually such a notion still does embody theories, often only more embedded and unchallenged ones.

Bridget Conor (2014, 70) wants to go further, when talking about ‘craft’ in screenwriting and education. ‘This dichotomy (between creativity and craft) is a necessary structuring device within a neo-liberal educational environment.’ In other words, it suits the educational establishment to define screenwriting as ‘craft’, so they can then claim to be able to teach it. She sites this in an attempt to distinguish screenwriting from ‘more creative writing by tying it down as a craft-based profession’ (2014, 70).

While the dichotomy between creativity and craft may well be one that is highlighted and utilised by educational establishments, it isn’t a duality that is reflected in my interviewees. They see craft as something you can learn (though not necessarily something that can be taught), but knowing your craft is part of being able to be creative. One is not opposed, or apart from the other. It is a false dichotomy. So when Hetreed, above, states that she didn’t see screenwriting as writing, she doesn’t mean she looks on it as being any less creative – she doesn’t think that her work is any less artistic. I think this stress on the craft-based elements of screenwriting (by the

screenwriters) is more illustrative of the fact that they perceive the ‘art’ as ultimately the film, not the document they have written to get to the film; all the screenwriters are thinking of, is the film.

Such a construction is supported by Cottrell Boyce, who claims that the best adapted screenplay Oscar often embodies greater creativity than the original screenplay category. I’ll go into this point further in the creation of the screenplay chapter. He makes this point primarily to rail against the strictures imposed by commissioners, the need to fit into some kind of template. He mentioned specifically the reliance on the three-act structure, as well as other conventions. Such restrictions, he felt, are dispensed with if there is source material – there’s already some validation. However, we can also use this argument as evidence that Cottrell Boyce views the *film* as the artwork, the new creation, and that the source material isn’t especially relevant when talking about how creative or otherwise the screenwriter has been.

This point is not opposed to Conor’s, merely pointing out that the perceived dichotomy is indeed a false one. Creativity and craft go together for my screenwriters. What gets in the way is theory, what is irrelevant is the academic. (At least in their minds. As Elliot (2000) points out, any notion of ‘craft’ contains embedded, deeper notions of theory, only elucidated in different terms.) There is no paradox in knowing one’s craft and being creative. Indeed, reading over my complete portfolio of interviews as a whole the opinion would be that you can’t be the latter without having the former.

Such a usage – an appeal to craft – explicitly evokes a notion of knowledge. My interviewees (both the writers and the rest) continually spoke of how they learnt what they know, as we’ll see below. In other words, there is very much a space in the views expressed by my respondents for learning – indeed, it is much prized as an asset, the ability to learn – but not of the formal, academic or university based variety. The development sector isn’t, judging from my respondents, wholly dismissive of formal qualifications rather than supposing them largely irrelevant.

This brings us back to the spine of this section. How else, if it isn’t through formal education, do my respondents lay claim to screenplay and development knowledge?

### **Script manuals/Short Courses/Training**

In the film *Adaptation*, the writer Charlie Kaufman has his protagonist (also the writer Charlie Kaufman) engage in a push-me pull-me struggle of attraction and repulsion with the screenwriting guru Robert McKee. Kaufman (the character) is at first dismissive and sceptical about McKee's very prescriptive rules for screenwriting but as his own adaptation project becomes increasingly problematic, he begins to engage with some of McKee's precepts.

A similar ambivalence was notable in my own interviewees when it came to the value of short training courses (in development) or the kind of screenwriting manuals I've already mentioned, the most prominent of which is McKee's book, *Story*. There was at once both a reticence to acknowledge the real use of such things, while at the same time an acknowledgement that the interviewee had either read the book at issue, or gone on a training course.

Let's look at in more detail at one of these claims. Take this exchange between myself and executive Dan MacRae:

Lyle: did you have any training?

MacRae: No, not really. I ran a scheme [at the Scottish Film Council], because we brought people like William Goldman, Jimmy McGovern, Atom Egoyan...we brought a lot of people from sit coms Father Ted etc. For years I sat in every lecture they gave and the lectures were not script theory, they were 'this is how we did this' and 'this is how we made this' and at one point I went on North by Northwest and that was a script editors training scheme. Since then I've done a couple of other courses because they are around, I think they are all flawed but I think they have useful things about them. My own sense of script theory has simply come about from being an avid consumer of movies for years.

Although he sat in lectures ‘for years’, and has attended multiple courses in and around the area, and even considers there to be some ‘useful’ things about each of these courses, ultimately he feels able to say that he knows what he knows about script theory because of the many films he’s watched over the years. This response is emblematic of many of the views I heard expressed on the subject. Despite all the evidence to the contrary – quite clearly admitted here – MacRae can’t bring himself to break free from the strictures of industry self-representation in this area: that knowledge is learned primarily through doing, practice, rather than learning, academia. The one difference here, compared to the way interviewees talked about their formal (school and university) educations, is at least there’s an admission that some form of learning or training had taken place.

Why is this so?

I think this points to two factors. One, as noted in the previous section, there’s a buttressing of the idea of film development as a practice, something to be learned on the job, rather than something theoretical; it is a craft. Not necessarily a craft that can be taught, though (unlike the perceived propaganda from the kind of educational institutions Conor (2014) points out) rather a craft that has to be learned – primarily through experience. The screenwriters in particular, but my interviewees in general, often used the word ‘talent’ to describe what they and their colleagues do. Talent, in other words, that is innate for all that they learnt their craft. Talent allied to craft, is the prevailing doctrine.

The use of the phrase ‘toolbox’ to describe what they might find useful, in terms of script manuals, for example, is emblematic of this view – which came particularly from execs. Writers, meanwhile, championed materials from ‘people who’d done it, observing what they had done’ rather than theorists, or analysts. Again, this cements this idea that it is a practice, to be learned practicing, and almost entirely non-academic and non-theoretical. A phrase that was used more than once to describe a number of screenwriting manuals, for example, was that there were simply case studies of great movies rather than any kind of guide for how to re-create them.

The writers, in particular, preferred to cite materials written or produced by fellow practitioners as being most helpful to their own practice, rather than the ‘how-to’ manuals of observers or outsiders. In the case of Hetreed, this was the work of Alexander Mackendrick; for Laurence Coriat it’s the podcasts of fellow screenwriters; for Ayub Khan-Din it’s the memoirs of people ‘who’ve actually done it.’ There weren’t always wholly hostile to the more didactic sources, such as Syd Field (1979), (although William Nicholson says he ‘learnt nothing’ from McKee’s *Story*), so much as dismissive of their utility when it came to actually writing anything.

This point was made most forcefully by Frank Cottrell Boyce. While saying on the one hand, he’s happy that development practitioners (in terms of editors and executives and even producers) have the language and tools to discuss screenplays, learned from manuals and courses, he finds it deeply depressing when such things are taught to students with ambitions to write themselves.

Lyle: Do you think that kind of development language, three act structure, plot points etc., is unhelpful?

Cottrell Boyce: no actually, it’s because I can remember before that language came in and people would give you notes like ‘I don’t know, it’s lost some of its magic’. I think it’s quite good that people have a diagnostic tool, I really think it’s great. What I hate is that diagnostic tool being used as a creative tool so you go and see film students now and they’re being taught that stuff. I always say, these are diagnostic things you can’t diagnose someone to life. You can only create people by loving someone, you know.

Note again the use of the word ‘tool’, a metaphor that emphasises a practical and craft based conception of the work of writing. There is a clear distancing here, however, between the work of ‘diagnosis’ (presumably something carried out by someone other than him, an executive or producer) and ‘creating’. We can perhaps say this is that same mixture of ‘talent’ (mysterious talent) and craft.

I noted before that this was the first of two factors that explained why my respondents sought to downplay the effect of education and training in the careers: i.e. this

conception of screenwriting and development as being practice based, and learned on the job and from experience.

The second factor that I argue is behind this downplaying of training goes back to ideas around promotion of the self, ideas that we first saw at play in the previous section of this thesis on Origin Stories. The interviewee learned what they know, through their own actions; it wasn't who they knew, it wasn't what they read in a book or the product of some course they took; it was what they learnt for themselves.

Such self-representation, as we found in the previous chapter perhaps goes to reveal something further about the screenplay development field: That practitioners in such fields as these need to aggressively assert their self-determining self-hood. While my portfolio of interviews doesn't wholly support this view – each of them deliberately and carefully points out, continually, the collaborative nature of what they do, how any success is shared, how any project is a joint endeavour – nevertheless this denial of any source of knowledge other than that which they've learnt for themselves 'doing it' suggests that self-promotion is an important part of how they feel they have to represent themselves, even when it comes to claiming knowledge of the screenplay.

We can thus see that yet again, my respondents have resorted to a disavowal of knowledge sources outside the field of development itself. The picture as concerned short, vocational courses and manuals such as McKee (1997) is admittedly more complicated than the blanket disavowal of formal education. The closer such courses and books come to the industry or field, the higher status they seem to gain. The screenwriters, for example, almost exclusively appealed to the work of other screenwriters – podcasts, essays, memoirs, books – as being of use to them, rather than anything written by non-screenwriters, or anything 'theoretical'.

While this disavowal is going on, however, it should be noted once more – as I say above – that there is nevertheless a dialogue going on with the kind of precepts such screenwriting manuals and courses seek to propagate. Regardless of how strenuously the writers, for example, deny the utility of phrases such as 'character arc' 'first act turning point' 'mid-point' and so on, and often even claim not to know what they mean, it is nevertheless clearly part of their job to have to deal with such concepts.

Furthermore, they have to deal with people who use such language, although again many of the executives and producers claim not to use such words if they can avoid it. It remains the case, however, that these notions have a currency in the field – even if their value is debated, they are nonetheless used in some sense. The very fact that such language (and books) was brought up, either to dismiss, rail against, cautiously support, or otherwise comment upon illustrates this point. The very ubiquity of such language in my interviews – whether to dismiss their usefulness or otherwise – points to its place in the field, however contested.

Screenplay manuals and short courses were not disavowed to the same extent as formal education – it was clear that there was at least a dialogue going on between my respondents and this body of work – but nevertheless, their influence was consistently downplayed in favour of first-hand experience.

### **Experience as a source of screenplay and development knowledge**

My interviews are overflowing with references to how the respondents learnt either how to write or how to develop screenplays by working on them, by experiencing the job for themselves. This is the primary stated source of screenplay knowledge of every single one of my respondents.

In terms of the screenwriters, the claims are not unusual. They learned to write primarily from writing, and from making mistakes. As Frank Cottrell Boyce said – backed up by William Nicholson – you learn to ride a bike by falling off and getting back on again. Cottrell Boyce's first experience of writing drama came via writing plays (coincidentally at Oxford, although this didn't form part of his 'formal' education.) Ayub Khan-Din claims that he learnt how to write through being an actor. Hetreed's claim is a little more unusual, in that previous to her screenwriting career she was a film editor – an experience that 'taught her to write'. Nevertheless, all these claims – these experiences – can be said to come from experience of the field of drama in particular, which leads on to film drama.



Those non-writers I interviewed also base almost all of their screenplay expertise on experience. As we've seen in some of the foregoing quotations, most of this is indicated by phrases such as 'immersing myself in cinema', 'watching lots of films' as well as – in many cases – the claim to having read a huge amounts of screenplays. Executives were also keen to credit past bosses in helping them learn about screenplays. Rachel Prior's explication of this process is typical:

In my early days, sitting in script meetings with Natasha or Deborah, both brilliant at what they do and to learn from, and they would give these global kind of bird's eye view kind of notes, and all mine would be this line isn't very good that sort of thing. And I think that's the journey of experience as a development person.

She goes on to say that, despite her English Literature degree – and consequently her wide reading – she didn't really understand how screenplays worked at all when she started working in film. She was aware that she didn't really understand (also despite her film module at university – which she says seems 'very unrelated to what I do') and the experience of working under people who did – and learning from them – is what gives her the expertise now. In keeping with the vocabulary and narrative voice of the origin stories of the previous chapter, Prior's description of her skills is in the Evolutionary mode – she's a development executive, 'a script editor at heart' – and credits others for teaching her. Nevertheless, this is still knowledge that has been gleaned almost exclusively from the field itself.

Again, to reinforce the points already made, this overwhelming emphasis on personal experience in the field – as opposed to learning in a structured environment or from outside sources – is of a piece with the 'self-made' narrative prevalent throughout the interviews.

### **An Exception**

It all my interviews across practitioners in the field, be they screenwriters, development executives or producers, I can find only one positive reference to a

theoretical source that springs wholly outside the development field. While formal education is disavowed, and screenwriter manuals and other sources downplayed – although such sources gain status the closer to the field its authors are – the role of anything approaching academic theory is almost entirely absent.

Sophie Meyer of Ealing Studios talked me through the development process behind the company's *St Trinians* reboot. Meyer had arrived at the company midway through what had been deemed an unsuccessful phase of development on the *St Trinians* screenplay. She decided, with her boss the producer Barnaby Thompson, to restart the process from the beginning.

I watched all the old movies and even read an academic analysis of the films that I found somewhere on line. I thought a lot about the different elements and what was and wasn't working in the script that we had and realised in a way that I don't think the writer was to blame, it had gone through quite a difficult development process and had lacked an experienced development person within it to help guide and filter the notes of Barnaby that were helpful to the direction of the script and those that perhaps heading towards something slightly different.

Here we can see two of the common appeals already highlighted – firstly the need to watch the movies and secondly the appeal to an 'experienced' development person (herself.) The important line here, though, is that in trying to understand and work on a remake of an old series of films Meyer 'even read an academic analysis.' The use of the word 'even' is telling, illustrating how out of the ordinary this is – indeed, as I say, it was the only time any of my respondents claimed outside theoretical research. It wasn't until I'd analysed these interviews in the round that it became apparent how little such a recourse was used.

This isn't of course to suggest that the development field is devoid of research. Development was claimed, on more than one occasion, to be the 'R and D' of the film industry. Yet it is research primarily into content (for example, background research on the setting for a film, or on historical context or related sources) rather than theory. Given that my respondents claim to glean a large amount of their screenplay

knowledge from ‘watching and immersing themselves’ in films, it might on the face of it seem reasonable for them to turn to the writings of other professionals who also do this for a living (film academics.) Yet Meyer’s is the only mention of such a usage, across hundreds of pages of transcripts.

### **Screenplay and Audience**

Screenplay knowledge was claimed by all my respondents. Very little, indeed almost none, of this was claimed to come from any formal education. As we’ve seen, the picture when it comes to screenplay manuals and vocational short courses is a little more complicated. Nevertheless, the vast majority of screenplay knowledge is claimed by my interviewees to come directly from experience of work in the field. While this may not be inherently surprising, what it does mean is that screenplay knowledge is largely claimed to come directly from the field itself and not from anywhere else. There is no external knowledge sources coming to bear on the notions of screenplays, at least none that is acknowledged.

If this is indeed the case, it has serious implications for the chances of innovation and originality. How, if knowledge is based solely on the culture itself, can anything change? Is the development field really such a closed system, immune to influence (in terms of its prevailing norms) and consequently, slow (or indeed unable) to subsume and accommodate other visions? It is the field itself which determines what makes a ‘good’ screenplay; such knowledge is learnt from direct participation in the field; and the further away criticism, theoretical observation or alternative theories are from this field, the more quickly they are to be dismissed. It is a self-perpetuating view of script theory, of what is ‘good’, disguised by the more practical-sounding notion of craft.

In the preceding section, we saw how knowledge of the audience is claimed in the development sector. Of the two main sources of this knowledge, the claimants’ social circle and the box office, only one of these can truly be said to be external from *habitus* in which the practitioners work. The only source of information and knowledge feeding into the field from outside – in terms of these key areas of audience and screenplay knowledge – comes from box office numbers. Yet even here,

as we've seen, the information contained in the numbers apparently needs to be 'interpreted' and 'understood' with the use of long experience in the field. In other words, in the two crucial areas of development – what constitutes a good screenplay, and what the audience might want and respond to – the field itself is the predominant source of knowledge, despite the fact both areas need not necessarily be so detached from the field. Much of the audience, for example, is quite separate from the field. While notions of what might constitute a good screenplay – and therefore a contributory factor in a good film – may also exist outside of the field. Yet such sources are discounted in the claims I came across.

While these two spheres – screenplay and audience – may be said to at least partially exist outside the field, the final sphere I want to look at in terms of how this knowledge is talked about, is that of the field itself. That is, what kind of knowledge is claimed about the film industry, about how the development field operates itself – rather than what they know of audiences or screenplays. The rules of the game, in other words.

### **Section 3 – Knowledge of the 'Industry'**

On the face of it, 'Industry knowledge' is a sphere that self-evidently springs from the field itself. Certainly, no one I spoke to claimed to have learnt about the industry and how to operate within the field from any other source. Indeed, they rarely spoke about this kind of knowledge at all. Whereas the two previous areas – the audience, and the screenplay – are spheres which my respondents actively have to think about, and indeed proclaim some kind of knowledge of or understanding, the industry itself (and how things operate) is a knowledge base that apparently does not need to be asserted in order to be useful. The question, therefore, about how such knowledge is claimed does not really arise because my interviewees didn't really claim it. Such knowledge was assumed.

Yet it is often this latent knowledge and these unacknowledged skills that contribute significantly to the working life of anyone operating in the field of feature film development. To take one example, networking has long been acknowledged as being

an important component in the film industry. As Sullivan (2009, 50) points out, we can go at least as far back as Leo Rosten's study of Hollywood in the 1950s to find the insight that cultural production is 'firmly situated in social and economic networks.' And knowledge of networks is still prevalent and necessary in today's film industry, as more recent studies by, for example, Blair and Rainnie (2000), Blair (2001), Blair, Grey & Randal (2001) and Blair (2009), have shown, in the UK context at the very least. Networking is of crucial importance in the industry.

Such findings are supported by my own work into the development field. The desirability of working with 'people you know' came up time and again, for example. The degree of trust required meant that a huge premium was placed on working in tight knit groups. Such a desire was never framed in networking terms – no one suggested that they networked well in order to get their jobs – but the power of these networks was continually, and often unconsciously, emphasised.

This is nothing new, however, as those previous studies have shown. There were two elements of 'industry knowledge' however that I want to look into here, that while connected in some sense to wider notions of networks or circles, are more specifically important here when looking at development as a field of cultural activity. In particular, I want to investigate how certain skills – despite the repeated disavowal of formal education as a source of industry knowledge – could be argued to spring from such formal environments, thereby challenging industry notions of self-learned knowledge.

The two specific areas I want to look at in no way constitute the entirety (together with script and audience) of the knowledge sets employed by development practitioners, but an investigation into them can help illustrate the working of the development sector and how familiarity with its practices can be learned and built up. I've called these two areas 'Taste and Sensibility' and 'Behaviour' and I'll hope to show their importance and how an investigation of them can further support the notion of development as a Bourdieu field.

### **Taste and Sensibility**

‘Taste’ is a concept that comes up often in the development field. As one would expect, it tends to be used when referring to preferences in screenplays and films. My interviewees might describe a colleague as having ‘good’ taste, which is a kind of short hand, presumably, for having similar taste to them. Alternatively, a handful of my respondents (the executives especially) used the concept to highlight the fact that they can ignore their own taste at work. That is, they claim to have been able to put their particular tastes aside – to recognise that the kind of films they might like are not the kind of films that the company they work for want to make (or in the case of Chris Collins at the BFI – given the breadth of his remit – it would have been impossible for him to claim that all the films they might feel obliged to support came under the ambit of his own personal ‘taste’.) Taste is also often used as a high complement to executives within the industry – look no further than respected producer Jeremy Thomas’ reaction to the recent hiring of David Kosse as the new head of Film Four for example (Geoffrey Macnab, 2014).

In one sense, this usage is straightforward enough; using the notion of taste can help people differentiate between each other’s aesthetic preferences and dispositions when it comes to screen content. Whether they like horror films or romantic comedies, whether they prefer colourful and fast paced epics to stripped down realism. The adding of the word ‘good’ confers some form of agreement with that from the user of the word, to the target of their admiration.

Yet taste is not a concept that exists on its own, like some kind of platonic form. As Bourdieu (1984, 466) points out, following from Kant, ‘Taste is an acquired disposition to “differentiate” and “appreciate” a way, in other words, of marking differences in things that need not necessarily relate to any distinct knowledge of the things themselves, only ways to differentiate them. As Bourdieu (1984, 6) famously also says, taste is also a means of classifying the classifier; what someone is disposed to like and appreciate, tells us something about that person.

It is in this context, in particular, that I’d like to look at this question of taste in the development field. We’ve dealt with the specifics of screenplay knowledge, and how those in the field go about claiming what’s ‘good’, but now I want to look at the role

of wider dispositions and taste, when not tethered to a specific screenplay. When I asked Rachel Prior, head of film development at Big Talk, about whether or not the company was trying to establish a brand of sorts for their film projects this is what she said:

We talk a lot within the company about what makes a Big Talk project, and what makes it distinct. And that's not just in material, that's also about how we go about making things. Absolutely. We'll say 'it doesn't feel very Big Talk'. But we also talk about people in that respect as well. When you're taking on new staff, it's a sensibility, a feel and a taste, a personality thing as well. And I think that probably all successful production companies have that, and know themselves well in that respect.

We went on to discuss the difficulties of defining 'identity' for a company, and she made especial remark about how Working Title do this. But what's striking about the above quotation is how explicit she is regarding these notions of taste and sensibility. In particular, I was surprised when she talked about taste and sensibility in connection with taking on new staff (in my question, I never mentioned or spoke about personalities or staffing so much as material – screenplay content, in other words.) Prior thinks that such an outlook on personnel is also prevalent in all successful companies, that this notion of 'branding' can extend beyond the confines of the screen content to behavioural norms and personality types of the staff.

On the one hand, this might be expected. People like to work with people they like and, often, people like them. Yet this isn't always owned up to quite so baldly as this here – indeed, it isn't proclaimed either in the way that Prior does. She talks of a shared taste, shared sensibility and personality, as an almost necessary strong point in building the company. It's a view I've heard expressed in the film industry before<sup>23</sup>, though this was one of the only times it cropped up in my interviews.

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<sup>23</sup> An anonymous producer once told me a story of being taken to a public financier/broadcaster on a field trip while at film school. The students were introduced to the development/executive team, and one of the team outlined their decision making process on deciding which projects to support. When one of the students asked 'What happens when you disagree?', the team responded by saying 'It's fine, we all pretty much have the same taste.' Now, whether or not this was actually true (insofar as the development team may well have wanted to present a united front to outsiders, for example), the fact that they felt comfortable proclaiming that they 'all had the same taste' is indicative. This is a publicly

Is there anything wrong with this? After all, recruiters looking to hire someone into most working environments that involve teamwork would look to bring in someone that could ‘fit in’ in some sense. A university lecturer even remarked to me that when they are interviewing people to join the staff, one of the questions that comes up is ‘are they one of us’ in a general sense. Will they fit in, will they rub along well. If we assume there’s no discriminatory element to this in terms of race gender and the like (and there’s no reason to assume there is), is this just a natural way to build teams? Does it matter?

So while on the one hand we may say that this is simply good practice in terms of building a team of people to work well together, on the other hand what we’re talking about here is the creation of cultural products for a mass audience. Potentially the content and inflexion of which is decided by a people of similar dispositions and tastes. Big Talk is a private company and has no obligation to create an environment that in any way represents society – or even its potential audience – unlike, say, possibly a publicly funded body. However, such an attitude to recruitment must surely have a knock on effect in terms of breadth of content and innovation. If everyone in the content development environment has significantly aligned tastes and dispositions, then only projects that accord with the prevailing tastes will be developed.

Of course, Big Talk is only one company. Furthermore, it’s a company led (in film terms) primarily by one producer in Nira Park and consequently you might expect the ‘tastes’ of the company to be in line with her own. She will ultimately be the lead producer of the project, and as such will have to like it. Again, from a breadth of content perspective it would be unreasonable to expect one company – or one person – to display a huge variety in their tastes. Thus this concentration on taste and ‘the right kind of people’ isn’t necessary a problem if the industry as a whole can encompass a breadth of tastes and dispositions. But it is unclear whether this is, in fact, the position. Certainly, black and ethnic minorities are very underrepresented in this sector of the film industry, with only 5.3% in film production as of 2012 (Creative Skillset 2012a, 31).

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funded body, with a wide remit, and yet those practitioners working in the development team felt able to assert the similarities in their taste in films as a good thing.



The question here, furthermore, is how does one come to have similar tastes and dispositions to those doling out the jobs? If we follow Kant and posit that taste is an acquired disposition, how is it so acquired in this context? In one sense, this is an impossible question to answer for the various societal and other factors that go into creating the aesthetic dispositions of an individual are manifold and not easy to identify. However the point is not so much *what* those tastes are, as the fact that it is deemed necessary to have similar ones to those employing you. Development departments – if they are set up like Big Talk – are consequently designed to replicate the established tastes within the department. They are set up, in other words, to avoid conflict and anything that challenges the nature of the content being produced.

As said, while this is not wholly unsurprising in itself what is perhaps unusual is that such a position is proclaimed specifically as a strength. A lack of diversity (of taste), in other words, is identified as something to aspire to in the development of material.

While the above example concerns working (and hiring) for a specific company, this notion of sharing tastes and sensibilities also has wider connotations when practitioners are considering working with each other in looser configurations – executives wooing writers, for example. In my interview with Dan MacRae, I asked him whether age was an issue in relationships between executives and writers – whether such a mismatch might engender a difficult working relationship (when a writer might be in a position where they have to take advice from someone significantly younger or older.) While he acknowledged that there might be a problem with someone such as David Hare feeling somewhat patronised by a new entrant into the industry, in general he didn't think it was a problem:

I come back to this notion of negotiation and personal skills. Age doesn't necessarily have to be a barrier. I always remember at Working Title writers would come in and sit down and start chatting and they'd suddenly see my poster of *Don't Look Now* that Nic Roeg had signed and they'd go 'oh, you like that. That means you have this kind of mind-set as opposed to just a *Mr Bean* mind-set.' And they would embrace you a bit more, at a certain level

there's a whole process of making people realise that you have a certain kind of language and reference points that help and age can be part of that.

I will look at the notion of what the personal skills are in the next section. What's interesting here in this quotation is this idea of shared language and reference points, how the signed poster of what might be deemed a 'good' or 'cool' film works as a marker of a certain mind-set. MacRae clearly views the poster – endorsed by the director in the form of a signed copy – as such a marker, and observed the effect of it on the writers and directors he was meeting in his capacity as a development executive. He clearly thinks that being thought of as liking such a film helped him in his job, that his own personal taste in movies accords with the kind of writers and directors he wants to work with.

It should be noted that MacRae wasn't tasked with developing projects like *Don't Look Now* – he was working for the company that made *Mr Bean* (hence the reference) and although he wasn't necessarily tasked with developing films exactly in that vein either, nevertheless the bent of the company is to make commercial films. In other words, the poster he had on his wall was designed (or at least functioned) as a marker of his own *personal* taste, something he deems important. Taste is thus operating as a unifying force in this field, something which brings together potential colleagues (either in a company setting or on temporary projects together.) As Bourdieu (1984, 243) points out, 'taste is a matchmaker.'

Again, this isn't necessary a terrible thing – as we shall see (and have noted already) the importance of agreement, of workers 'being on the same page' during the development stage is deemed as being of paramount importance. However, if we extrapolate to the wider field, we are left to deal with a picture of a field built up of players coalescing around similar tastes and sensibilities. Where, furthermore, any new entrant to the field may feel that in order to get on and to succeed, they'll have to exhibit similar tastes themselves – look at the quote above about getting a job at Big Talk, for example.

Where this becomes particularly problematic is when we once again ask this question, how is taste formed? Can it be that the field forms and constructs what constitutes the

acceptable or ‘good’ taste, and thus it continually reproduces itself through hiring and inculcating practitioners who fit into this mould? Is this indeed the situation that Bourdieu (1984, 243) himself alludes to when he says that this ‘matchmaking’ and coming together of those with similar pre-dispositions and *habitus*es (of similar classes) is what’s going on, and that it occurs through the ‘socially innocent language of likes and dislikes’? If this is the case – which the above interviews seem to suggest – then it does pose a question as to how the film industry can hope to represent or replicate the various tastes and dispositions of its audience. For unlike the high literary field that Bourdieu describes, where the poet’s most important target audience is their fellow poets, film is by its very nature a mass medium.

## **Behaviour**

Mixed up with this idea of tastes and sensibilities, of being the right sort of people, is of course ideas of behaviour. How one conducts oneself is also an expression of one’s tastes and dispositions and it is also an important element of succeeding in the development field. I talked to Amelia Granger about the difficulty in judging ‘development skills’, unlike some of the more craft-based on-set professions such as camera and lighting (where if you can’t do something, it will quickly become apparent.) She agreed that you ‘can’t come top in development’ and that it’s hard to define what makes a good development executive. She went on to say:

Unfortunately it also comes down to personality, are people nice, do you want to be in a room with somebody for a whole day and have something to talk about. It’s very unscientific.

Are people ‘nice’ is one of the key questions here, whatever ‘nice’ may mean. Furthermore, Granger puts a lot of value on having subjects of conversation in common (with the writer in this case.) Granger here is talking about a development executive working with a screenwriter – in other words, not the same scenario as when Prior talked about Big Talk as a company, for this would be a temporary work arrangement. Nevertheless, the importance of getting on with the other person is emphasised, as is the need to be in some sense *simpatico* – of being able to maintain a

conversation all day, which echoes MacRae's observation about having a similar 'mind-set' to writers coming to see him.

Again, this may not be wholly surprising – it would be more surprising if Granger or anyone else had asserted that they'd rather work with people who aren't 'nice' – but it does yet again bring questions of *habitus* to the fore. If succeeding in this world, depends on the navigation and negotiation of certain standards of behaviour that may come more naturally to one section of the potential work force rather than another, does this have a corresponding limiting effect of the kind of content that the field produces?

## **Diplomacy**

I want to look at one particular facet of 'good' behaviour that was cited often by my respondents as being of immense importance in the development process and, by extension, a personal strength when operating in the field. The executives talked of themselves as needing to be good diplomats. Chris Clark cites diplomacy as a key part of his success as a development executive (and a producer), for example. When dealing with writers, in other words, they feel they need to be sensitive, empathetic and tactful. The executives I spoke to emphasised this point strongly – that talking to writers about their work required a respectful attitude, demanded a listening approach and required that any points they did make were made in as diplomatic a way as possible. Development as a process was not portrayed in a confrontational way at all from this section of my interviews.

This tells us something about the development role, certainly as regards the relationship between the developer and the screenwriter. In the developer's eyes, the writer is someone to be handled or managed sympathetically and with respect and diplomacy. They see it as part of their role to keep a smooth relationship going, to be cooperative and for everyone to get along. At least, this is how they chose to represent their job in my interviews. Having been an executive myself, I wasn't surprised to hear this. This is how I would approach dealing with a writer myself if I were in their position.

What was more unusual was that the screenwriters themselves were also keen to emphasise the role of diplomacy and interpersonal skills in their jobs. As Olivia Hetreed said, ‘You don’t want to be seen to be bolshie or difficult.’ This is worth dwelling on for a moment. Part of the writer’s job is to manage the relationship between themselves and the executive and/or producer, to manage ‘up’ in other words. Writers can ill-afford to be seen as difficult to deal with, to be contradictory or argumentative. For ultimately, in almost all cases they are freelancers employed by producers (or production companies) and thus the producers (or their representative, the executive) are in some sense in control of their future employment.

We’ve already seen in two of the interviews excerpted above how getting on with people is a highly prized asset of executives, so the writers are perhaps correct to think that getting on with the executives and producers is an important part of their career. And how, conversely, it can become problematic if these relationships aren’t as smooth as hoped for. Take this from writer Ayub Khan Din, one of the very few in my interviewees who didn’t have a university education.

Khan Din: I’m not very good at trying to explain what I want in those kind of meetings. It usually comes out that they’re trying to change things... the right kind of language to use, I’m not very good at that. I find it hard when people start making the wrong choices.

Lyle: is there a class profile of people in the film industry, producers execs etc.?

Khan Din: it’s all very middle class. They’re all called Ben. Or Emma. Miranda.

During the interview above, Khan Din didn’t go into any more detail about exactly what being good in such meetings might entail but his evidence is clear enough that he sometimes struggled in that environment. Prompted by my question, he also identified the film development environment as ‘very middle class’ – contrasting it with his own working class upbringing. At a different point in the interview, he talks

about being political and diplomatic as being a characteristic of some screenwriters – and that such qualities may help your films get made, but that they won't make the films any better. The formulation of his response suggested that he didn't see himself as particularly possessing either asset.

### **Benefits of a University Education**

Obviously, in one sense learning the norms of behaviour within a field of endeavour is gleaned from that very field. I wanted to pinpoint diplomacy as one of the key elements of development behaviour, however, as although learning how to talk to a screenwriter about their work, say, is something that may be said to come about from observing how others do it and subsequently learning on the job, there are deeper skills at play here. As I observed in the section on formal education, my respondents rarely – if ever – cited skills or knowledge acquired at university as having any significant relevance to their careers as development practitioners. And so, to make this point, I shall resort to my own experience.

Half-way through the second year of my doctoral candidacy, I worked in my university department as an associate tutor, overseeing seminar groups in support of a lecture series. During my 'office hours', I occasionally had to help some of the undergraduate students with their work. While doing this work, I thought back to my own experiences as a student – more recently, having my writing supervised during my taught MA but also many years early to my life as a philosophy undergraduate. In particular, I wanted to emulate and replicate those positive sessions of one-to-one feedback (and good seminars and tutorials) that I've had over the years – in those years when I was the student, discussing my work and now discussing the work of my students in turn. Consequently, I would ask questions of my students, trying to draw out of them what they knew and what they might think about a particular subject – what they were trying to say, or argue for in other words. I would endeavour to talk respectfully about the work, with a degree of detachment – as a student myself, for example, I learnt to take criticism of my essays constructively and certainly not personally. It was part of the learning experience that I tried to pass on.

I realised, when I began to teach, that I had already been behaving and using similar skills in my job as a script editor. The resemblances between the two activities were striking. As a developer, I was encouraged to speak to writers respectfully about their work, to venture constructive criticism, ideally to run a development meeting (and write a set of development notes) primarily via the use of questions: to tease out what the writer has been trying to do with their work, to discuss – dispassionately and constructively – possible directions, alternatives, all the while trying to elucidate the process for the writer.

This characterisation will not be accurate for all scenarios of development, but nevertheless in my experience this is a common way to approach a development meeting between executive (or producer) and screenwriter. Furthermore, as we've seen above (in the quotations), it is one that is endorsed by my interviewees on more than one occasion. In the literature Bloore (2013, 177) suggests that ideal development meetings should also work something like this, and he quotes Simon Beaufoy in further emphasising such attributes (2013, 192).

In other words, much of the interaction in the development process is remarkably similar to how an academic might run a university tutorial. When I excerpted the quotation above from Ayub Khan Din, I mentioned that he was one of the few interviewees not to have a university education. He was also one of the only people to admit to having difficulties negotiating the kind of development meetings we discussed. This isn't to say that the others didn't also have difficulties in such scenarios, but if they did they didn't confess to them so explicitly. Furthermore, I can't definitively say that Khan Din had these problems *because* he didn't go to university necessarily. Nevertheless, it is a salient fact in this context.

This developmental skill, one of diplomacy, tact and the ability to discuss one's work in a certain way, is so highly prized yet, I would argue, has in many cases been learnt before there is even exposure to the field itself. Despite all the disavowals of formal education I've encountered, this is one distinct area where a formal – university – education clearly has a tremendous amount of use. That it is not readily acknowledged as such is perhaps unsurprising, for it is subsumed under the heading of 'good behaviour' rather than a specific knowledge set. As Bourdieu (1984, 468) says:

The practical knowledge of the social world that is presupposed by ‘reasonable’ behaviour within it implements classificatory schemes, historical schemes of perception and appreciation which are the product of the objective division into classes (age groups, genders, social classes) and which function below the level of consciousness and discourse.

The kind of behaviour deemed acceptable and reasonable in a development meeting is the product of a *habitus* deeper than the field of feature film development itself, as well as functioning below a level of consciousness. Agents operative in the field assume such norms of behaviour without greatly questioning them, yet such norms spring from a quite distinct *habitus* and social class.

This goes back to the point made in the earlier chapter about Context. That, rather than being a collaborative world in the Becker sense, this is a Bourdieu field of cultural production, the rules of which are determined not by the classes and *habitus*es of those consuming the products but the predispositions, tastes and *habitus*es of those making them. I will develop this point – and the dichotomy between Howard Becker’s art world and Bourdieu’s field – more fully in the chapter on the creation of the screenplay

### **Taste and Behaviour**

These two elements of industry knowledge – the importance of diplomatic behaviour and the advantages of having a confluence of taste with those you’re working with – point to a highly constructed and homogenised work force. Taste, personality, sensibility are much prized when in alignment. This is a field, a sector of the industry, that is comparatively homogenised in terms of these key aesthetic attributes. This, despite the fact that the audience may have a much wider and more diffuse sensibility and tastes.

Furthermore, as evidenced in the discussion of diplomacy, some of the valued skills in a development practitioner – which do not necessarily bear any relation to the quality



of the work (i.e. the screenplay) per se – nevertheless have a bearing on success in the field. Moreover, despite the repeated disavowals of the use or relevance of a formal education, such skills may very well have been acquired in that very environment. These skills have become so naturalised – and assumed to be natural in others – that it is not even acknowledged as such. This is indicative of the field as a whole, that despite the continued insistence on craft and field-based knowledge that a significant degree of the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the field are brought to it from outside, even if the respondents don't recognise this as such.

### **A Concluding note on Knowledge in Development**

An analysis of how knowledge of the audience is gained and claimed by development practitioners in the UK shows that, despite this knowledge on the face of it being about events and people quite separate from the development field, that most of this knowledge is actually drawn from the field itself. Consequently, we can say that the social constitution of the field is vitally important in considering the products of that field.

The two approaches outlined – by the numbers and by personal contacts – were the dominant modes of claiming audience knowledge. Both have their own difficulties – the former reveals a deep pervasion of marketing values into the content creation process, while the latter points to serious potential shortcomings as to the breadth of content in screenplay (and therefore film) production in the UK.

Knowledge of screenplays themselves evidenced a similar heavy reliance on the development field itself for legitimization. Formal education was almost universally repudiated as a source of knowledge, while other sources of theory (books, podcasts, short courses) were only given a limited degree of credence; the level of importance accorded such sources was in direct proportion to the 'nearness to the field' from which such knowledge came. This again emphasises the strong reliance the field places on itself in terms of valuing screenplay content. Such a view of knowledge presents a picture of the field as relatively closed to new visions, alternative ideas and innovation. It is a field designed to replicate the values which it has established.

Finally, we saw how much of the unacknowledged knowledge was brought to the field from outside, from pre-existing *habitus*. The importance of sharing tastes and disposition with fellow practitioners, the value of certain modes of behaviour, the similarities of practice with a university education – all came through, despite the respondent's failure to acknowledge them. In other words, pre-held views, tastes and pre-dispositions are vital knowledge-sets to take into the field, which yet again argue against a vision of the field as diverse, accommodating and open to change and innovation. Yet again, it seems to be a field set up to replicate itself, right down to the *habitudes* of its members.

## Part III – Practice

### Chapter Five: The purpose of the Screenplay

#### Introduction

Firstly, the aim of this chapter is to look into how development practitioners themselves address the screenplay. I intend to analyse how they talk about the screenplay, in other words. In particular, I wanted to find out what they – the writers, producers and executives – think the screenplay is *for*. What's its purpose, in the eyes of the people whose job it is to create it? Understanding what a thing is intended to do in practice will help us understand the very nature of that thing, at least in some sense. Looking at the screenplay from a functional perspective may even help our understanding of it philosophically, as Ted Nannicelli (2013, 14) tries to do.

The difference with my account here, however, is that rather than trying to establish a functional definition philosophically, I am looking at what the creators think they are doing in practice. Or rather, what claims do they make as to the purposes of the document?

#### The purpose of the screenplay

The first thing to reiterate is that this analysis is of the UK film industry, which – as described earlier in this thesis – has its own industrial context in terms of commissioning and financing, one distinct in certain respects from the USA or Europe and from television.

In the course of my interviews I found a good deal of agreement about some of the purposes of the screenplay document. I asked each of my interviewees a similar question – ‘what do you think the screenplay is for?’ – and their answers tended to

coalesce around three distinct themes, or subheadings. For each of them admitted that as a document it always had multiple purposes.

The first two of these subheadings will be fairly uncontroversial to screenplay and production studies scholars, and perhaps not surprising. Nevertheless, it's worth going into a little detail with each of these areas to analyse exactly how my respondents expressed themselves when they talked about 1) the screenplay as a 'blueprint' and 2) the screenplay as a financial prospectus or business plan.

I then will turn to the third subheading which emerged from my interviews, a powerful purpose behind the screenplay that is rarely discussed in the literature, namely the screenplay as a Love Letter. It's not ignored by scholars, as such, for in some sense it is an obvious aspect to any successful screenplay. Nevertheless, as I'll argue below, in many ways it is actually the most important single purpose of the screenplay – if the screenplay fails to seduce its reader, then all its qualities and purposes (its brilliance as creative blueprint, its efficacy as a business plan) would be for nothing.

But first let's look at how the practitioners approached the question of purpose in terms of the first of these categories.

## **1. The Screenplay as Blueprint**

There is a long history of the screenplay being described as a 'blueprint.' Claudia Sternberg (1997) details some of this history and says: 'The blueprint is the classic metaphor used to characterise the function and significance of the screenplay in the production process' (1997, 50). Its use is repetitive in screenwriting manuals, for example, and even a search on line will reveal its repeated use often without any argument or further explanation. Examples include the BBC Writer's Room (BBC 2014a), Alexander Steele (2006, 63), The Writers Store (2014) and Kelly Crabb (2005, 89) just to name a few. Even in more academic work, the metaphor often goes unexamined in the likes of Batty & Waldeback (2008) and Mark O'Thomas (2011).

Both Maras (2009) and Price (2010) go into the metaphor with more academic rigour, though, following on from Staiger's analysis of the earlier studio system in the States (1979, 6-25; 1985b, 173) as well as Sternberg (1997)'s work. After accounting for the historical antecedents of the metaphor, both Maras and Price attempt to problematize the notion. Maras (2009, 117-118) argues that such a metaphor is used particularly by screenwriters as a means for asserting some form of authorship – the architect (the writer of the blueprint) being more important than the contractor (the builder of the house/director of the film.) And that's certainly borne out by some of the responses I encountered. Take this as an example from playwright and screenwriter Ayub Khan Din:

[the screenplay is to] lay down what the story's going to be; to lay down the ideas, to put down what the story's going to be on film; it's the blueprint of what the film's going to be, what it's going to be about, what the themes are of the piece, what essentially we want the audience to go out feeling. To lay down not just foundations, it should be what the overall film is going to be.

This is a pretty clear explanation of what he thinks he's doing when he writes a screenplay. The extent to which the screenplay lays down what the film is 'going to be,' might perhaps be argued about, but this is what he thinks he's doing. Again, the explicit use of the word blueprint epitomises this viewpoint of the screenplay as a plan, as does his reference to themes and story. For him, the screenplay contains all these elements. The use of the term 'lay down' – repeatedly in fact – emphasises this planning metaphor, right down to the emotional effect that should be achieved. He's arguing that even how the finished film leaves the audience is contained in the screenplay.

Later in the interview Khan Din also emphasises the importance of the characters in his writing, something else that he says is created and set out to a large extent in the screenplay. In other words, despite the fact that a director will come in (Khan Din does not direct himself) and dictate the pace of the scenes, both in the shooting and in conjunction with the editor; despite the fact that the actors will interpret their characters in their performance (and be dressed by the costume designer); and despite

the fact that a composer will score the piece: in his head – despite all these different elements – Khan Din believes he is planning all this, and recording the plan in the screenplay.

Frank Cottrell Boyce also stresses that all ‘the major category decisions’ are made in the writing and development of the screenplay. ‘All the big artistic category decisions are made in that first draft that set the compass.’ A slightly different metaphor, perhaps, but nevertheless of a piece with this notion of planning – the screenplay as an artistic planning document, in other words. Cottrell Boyce is even prepared to put extra stress on the *first* draft of the screenplay, the iteration that sets the direction artistically for the whole thing.

These kind of claims back up Maras’ point above – the emphasis on the blueprint metaphor as means of claiming authorship – although such usages were by no means the sole preserve of the screenwriters I spoke to. Its usage was stripped across all my respondents fairly liberally, suggesting industry-wide usage. Given this, we may take a view that the metaphor is more than just a means of claiming authorship and status, or at least is used slightly differently by different people within the field.

Price (2010, 44-47), for example, argues that the continued use of the word blueprint in the industry actually leads to a belief that the screenplay is not a work of literature; that it promotes the idea that the screenplay is an industrial, mechanistic product – factory produced, in other words. Certainly, the producers and executives I spoke to weren’t shy of using it as a way of describing the screenplay. Producer Paul Trijbits went even further: when talking about the desirability of working with pre-existing material – adapting novels in other words – he described even the novel as a blueprint. The novel as blueprint for the screenplay; the screenplay as blueprint for the film.

Price argues that the emphasis on the screenplay as a planning document denudes it of its literary status and that the usage of the blueprint metaphor downplays the creativity of the screenwriter. He points out, for example, that Jean Renoir hated the term as it ‘represses’ the various creatively dynamic processes involved in making a film (2010, 46). Yet the screenwriters I spoke to did not seem to shy away from the practical, planning aspects to their writing. They had a very practical outlook on the document

as a piece of writing, though this did not appear to diminish claims of creativity. In other words, that the document was acknowledged to be partially a planning document; that it had myriad practical applications; and that it formed part of a larger process did not diminish the creativity of the screenwriters in their own minds.

Cottrell Boyce likes nothing better, for example, that solving a ‘practical’ problem (e.g. a location is unobtainable, or the budget has to be cut) at screenplay stage. Implicit in his understanding of the screenplay is that a lighting department will have to set up lights (if the scene is set outside at night, or EXT. NIGHT as it would be rendered in a screenplay), the location department will have to find that beach, the art department will have to mock up an art deco office, the costume department will have to clothe five-hundred flappers.

The screenwriters were also very well aware of the function of the screenplay as a set of directions for other workers, rather than simply as a stand-alone piece of work in its own right, complete. As William Nicholson points out, one of the things that makes it easier to write a screenplay rather than a novel is that you don’t have to supply all the detail. ‘You don’t describe every detail of the streets of Paris, you say Paris, 1832 red light district. And you may say a few details but the designers going to find all that.’ There is a space left here, in other words, which other people will fill – it is a set of instructions, that has to be made concrete.

Nevertheless, as the screenwriters were keen to point out, these many decisions – in their view, as expressed to me – are decisions made in *the screenplay*. While the shot list, for example, is often a separate document it is nevertheless created out of the directions contained in the screenplay. And even though they are about what happens on the shoot – under the purview of the director – and even though such decisions may be materially influenced by outside factors (feeding back into the screenplay) nonetheless, it is in the screenplay that accommodates such factors.

## **Story Blueprint**

Earlier in this thesis – in the section on values – I intimated that ‘story’ appeared to be the single most important screenplay value for the practitioners interviewed. This theme continues into a discussion about the screenplay, for my interviewees quite clearly took one of the purposes of the screenplay to be the container of that story, the medium by which the story is best communicated prior to production. Take the quote from Ayub Khan Din above: the very first thing he says when asked what the screenplay is for is to ‘lay down the story’ and to ‘put down what the story’s going to be about’. Not only is the screenplay a blueprint, plan or set of instructions to those workers who are going to physically make the film, it is also a blueprint of what the story of the film is.

Screenwriter William Nicholson is quite explicit about this:

We write our scripts to be read in the development process by studio heads and executives and so on – these people don’t want to go frame by frame. They want the sweep of the story, the way it’s going to be on the screen.

Nicholson’s acutely aware that while the screenplay document contains all sorts of instructions (to designers, directors, actors) it is also designed to be read by certain classes of people who read in a certain way. (We’ll come back to this point in a moment.) The point to note here is that he is trying to give the reader ‘the sweep of the story’ – the screenplay is a storytelling document, in other words. We’ve already looked at the culture and values of the people who might be reading the document, but what is clear here is that as a screenwriter he intends the screenplay to be this container or communicator of the story. A point echoed by my other respondents, as Olivia Hetreed exemplifies when she states that her ‘responsibility is to tell the story in the best possible way.’

As I observed in the section on knowledge of the screenplay, the development field as a whole – judging by my interviews and my experience – talks openly and repeatedly about story, in reference to the initial idea for a film, in reference to the screenplay and ultimately in reference to the iterations of the film. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that while the screenplay is seen as a blueprint for the film – with all the



planning implications that entails – it is also, specifically, seen as the chief container for the *story*, that most highly regarded of development values.

As far as my interviewees are concerned the screenplay is a plan for any proposed film; it contains instructions for staging, setting, dialogue and – most importantly – it is the document that carries the ‘story’, however that may be defined. For practitioners, therefore, one of the chief purposes of the screenplay is as this plan, blueprint, or bible for the creative and practical aspects of the film’s production – in particular the story.

### **A note on the Screenplay as Literature**

At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned debates about the screenplay. One of the debates in particular circles around the notion of whether or not the screenplay could be conceived of as literature and if so, in what sense. See Winston (1973), Maras (2009), Price (2010), Macdonald (2013), Nannicelli (2013) for examples of this debate. One of the things that came through strongly in my interviews, including those of the screenwriters, was that this isn’t a question that exercised any of them particularly. Or rather, whether or not the screenplay constituted literature was not a point that came up.

I should say that just because the question of whether the screenplay is or is not literature didn’t particularly exercise the minds of those people who create screenplays doesn’t invalidate it as a question of academic enquiry. It’s perfectly right that the above scholars seek to pose the question. However, I don’t want to significantly intervene in the debate here myself, either, except to point out that not only did my interviewees not look on the screenplay as literature themselves, they didn’t even seem to care one way or the other.

The screenwriters were much more interested in the notion of authorship – their own – as to some extent were the producers, along with notions of rights (and consequently power) over the material they had a hand in creating. It wasn’t as if these screenwriters didn’t have literary pretensions, however. Of the five

screenwriters I interviewed, two were published novelists (they both talked about the novel as what they write when they want to write ‘their own’ stories), one is a successful playwright and one is currently writing a novel (of a story she found hard to get off the ground as a film.) And the other, Olivia Hetreed, says she could only become a screenwriter because she felt ‘it wasn’t really writing.’

In other words, on this question of whether or not the screenplay is literature, the practice of those that write them suggests they don’t view it as such – and that such a categorisation is indeed irrelevant to their practice, as they appear to be much more comfortable describing themselves as *filmmakers* rather than writers of literature (at least in regards to their practice as screenwriters.) It should be added that this view wasn’t necessarily symptomatic of humility, or the oppressed humbling of the screenwriter as a ‘writer’: they were proud to be filmmakers and of their role in creating films. I’ll return to this notion in the third section of this chapter.

For the moment, let’s look at the second heading or theme by which one might describe the purpose of the screenplay, as claimed by my respondents.

## **2. The Screenplay as Financial Prospectus**

The sums of money usually involved in filmmaking – certainly at the level at which my interviewees work – mean that it inevitably also involves the raising of cash from external sources. In the British film industry, such sources are usually a combination of private and public (in the form of either a state body/lottery funding, or a broadcaster.) As we’ve seen in the Context chapter of this thesis, it is very unusual for a UK producer to finance a film from one single source. A patchwork of finance has to be stitched together.

It is also rare for a producer to be able to fund a film without some form of commercial finance. In other words, in most cases at least one of the financiers of a film in this country expects (or at least hopes) to recoup some, all or hopefully more of the money they invest in the film. Even the publicly-financed bodies such as the BFI or the BBC generally expect to recoup their investments if at all possible. See

Finney (2010) Chapter 6 for a full explanation of how independent – i.e. UK – film finance and investment is pieced together. While Finney is at pains to point out that no two projects are ever put together the same way (2010, 61), the point here is nevertheless sound – that is, it is incredibly rare to find a production where *none* of the parties in the financing process care about making a return on their investment. Consequently we can say in almost all instances there is a commercial/business dimension to making films in the UK, certainly above a certain monetary threshold.

Making a film, for many of the people involved and certainly for many of those providing the money, is a business proposition as much as an artistic one. This is no new revelation – the tension between ‘creativity and commerce’ is a chord played so often as to be almost cliché. It is almost impossible to completely avoid commercial considerations in film production in the UK, because of the sums of money involved. Screenplay development does not happen in a vacuum. It has an industrial context, a commercial context.

One of the purposes of the screenplay, consequently, is to act as part of a financial prospectus for potential investors. We’ve already seen how the screenplay acts as a planning document for the physical production of the film. In this sense, it is the document furthermore from which the budget of the film is derived, at least in its first instance. The schedule is generally derived from the screenplay, for example. So as a document it dictates how much money it will take to physically shoot the film, given certain parameters.

Of course, the same screenplay could command different budgets – the document itself doesn’t specify the figures which should be spent on each aspect. Ultimately, the film will be made for the amount of money that *can* be raised and so while the producer may have an ideal budget in mind (based on the agreed script) if the finance falls short, then the screenplay is consequently altered. Other factors that affect the budget include talent (you could make the same film with unknown actors or stars, for example; the same goes for the director and crew members), location restrictions and questions of proposed scale. Even changes to these three elements, however, are also ultimately fed back into the screenplay in the latter stages of development.

The point still holds, however, that the screenplay is the document that tells the physical producers of the film what they need to achieve. The production team will consequently decide the standard to which they want to make the film (i.e. how long they will take to shoot each scene – for scheduling purposes the screenplay is normally broken down into one eights of a page; how much they will spend on set-dressing; the quality of the camera equipment and so forth.) These decisions will help to set the budget – yet they are decisions based on the screenplay, for that is the document that tells them what they must achieve. Thus although it is not the *definitive* document in the budgeting process in and of itself (many other external factors come into the equation), it nevertheless forms a crucial role in that financial process.

Apart from these practical concerns, as has already been intimated above, the screenplay goes a long way to indicating the type of film that's intended, in particular the story and the characters. Although in one sense this is the creative aspect of the screenplay, it nonetheless has many business implications. Take the issue of casting. For most UK films, certainly ones working at the budget level of my respondents, financing the film usually involves casting at least one (or probably more) actors that the financiers 'approve.' In other words, a star 'name' of some description that will supposedly help the film reach an audience. As I pointed out previously, one of the key elements I looked for as a screenplay reader for a commercial production company was how 'castable' the lead roles were – not only whether they were good roles, but whether they might attract 'star' actors and further, how many different options there were for such a role (i.e. how many potential actors they could approach for the role.)

Perhaps surprisingly, this point about casting actors and the various options open to a producer also applies to films that operate in the more 'arthouse' end of the market. Even with a lower budget auteur style film, financiers (say the BFI or Film Four) may still expect certain name actors to appear in the film. The 'value' of such actors (or directors) may be constituted more around a notion of artistic prestige than commercial potential, but the process remains very similar.

Most of these judgements – about the casting options for the lead roles – are made on the basis of the screenplay. To be clear, however, although casting may be seen to be on the face of it a creative decision, it is also a business one. Casting is a vital part of the business proposition and the first indications as to cast are contained in the screenplay. Take this as an example from Dan MacRae, particularly useful here because although he is a development practitioner, currently he works for Studio Canal a distributor (i.e. frequently a partial financier of the films in which they are involved)

There are decisions about what age is the protagonist, that'll affect how easy it'll be to cast them. We were developing something that had a grandfather figure in it, UK set, and ultimately you were talking about Michael Caine. If it was set in America, there are a lot more of those kind of actors to choose from. Those sort of decisions kick in all the time. There are projects you are working on and you're chasing Michael Fassbinder or Tom Hardy so the character loses certain of their everyman qualities and becomes a little bit more cynical, a little more jaded, more tough and that sometimes doesn't actually work to the benefit of the script in some ways. But you have to think about transforming it completely because you're pursuing that actor.

This quotation encapsulates precisely the intersection of 'business' and creativity, as seen through the prism of casting. At the end, we can see how MacRae recognises that changes made to the screenplay aren't always creatively successful – nevertheless, he avers the necessity in order to secure the cast. A business necessity, in other words, as set out in the screenplay. See how at the top he feels the very nature of a project is in some sense compromised from a business perspective, because of the age of the protagonist and the perceived dearth of actors 'big enough' to play the role.

It's clear that he views the screenplay as containing this 'business' information. The likelihood of getting the cast necessary to make the film, in other words. Of course, this betrays a certain rather rigid, realistic view of filmmaking. The underlying assumption is that only those actors similar in age (and gender) can play the characters as set out in the screenplay. Nevertheless, it is arguably a prevalent view in

the UK industry – certainly, there aren't that many striking examples of British films in recent years where the casting hasn't been strictly along realism lines.

There are very few examples of this in mainstream film in general. In America, the Todd Haynes directed Bob Dylan biopic *I'm Not There* cast multiple actors in the 'Dylan' role, including at one point a woman in Cate Blanchet. Terry Gilliam pulled off this multiple casting trick in *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, though that was a decision forced upon the production by the death of Heath Ledger, and partially accounted for by magical elements in the adjusted screenplay. In the UK, instances are even rarer. Sally Potter cast Tilda Swinton as a man in her adaptation of *Orlando* back in 1992 (and also had Quentin Crisp playing Queen Elizabeth I), while even further back Alan Parker used an all-children cast in *Bugsy Malone*. (Although this latter was always intended to be the case from the screenplay stage, and can't really be sighted as an example of imaginative *casting* as such, given that the screenplay was written to star children in the first place.)

Such casting choices are thus very rare in British film. Especially when contrasted with how the theatre approaches non-realistic casting – the all-male cast of Cheek By Jowl's *As You Like It* in the 1990s, for example, or Phyllida Lloyd's upcoming Shakespeare history plays with all-female casts are just two instances. Aging actors Nigel Havers and Martin Jarvis recently starred in a West End production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* – playing characters written as much younger. It is rarely the case in film.

Thus one of the vital business elements of a film project (the likely range of potential stars suitable) is information contained in the screenplay. There are other properties too. We've already discussed the idea that the screenplay is the container of the story (in a creative sense), but this also has commercial implications, particularly when it comes to genre. The screenplay tells the reader what 'kind' of film it is the intention to make, or in other words what segment of the market is being targeted by the film. The screenwriter might not be thinking in such business-based terms, but the producer has to be aware of the market for the film – and the screenplay is a key part in showing others what that market might be. (A very basic example: if your screenplay is a story of two lovers falling in love, amid mild complications and comedy, then it

would fall within certain genre conventions. Using such a screenplay to sell a ‘horror’ project would be unusual.) There’s a whole other work to be written about the screenplay in relation to genre, its conventions, the expectations of readers and its subversion. The simple point here is that it is the screenplay that illustrates to a potential financier which genre the intended film project is trying to operate within.

### **The Package**

This isn’t to say that the screenplay is the *only* element in any business proposition regarding a film. I’ve already mentioned the central importance of casting. Actors are a key component of a film project’s ‘proposition’ to financiers – they are often central, or at least very important, to the business case for a film. Other personnel come into this equation, in particular the director and the producer. Their track records form part of the equation (i.e. their perceived ability to get the film made to a certain standard) as does their potential. Such elements will also be judged differently depending on the agenda of the financier (so, for example, a commercial distributor wants a certain kind of film – laying particular stress, say, on the fame of the actors and the reliability of the director to shoot the material well enough; while the likes of the BFI or Film Four may wish to support certain directors based on their cultural value and potential.)

In short, financiers, regardless of their agendas (be they looking for high box office returns or cultural cachet) will ultimately judge a project on this overall ‘package.’ This is the various elements that make up the business proposition, which normally would include director, cast, producer, possibly original source material (if for example the film is based on a very famous novel or true story) and the screenplay. Further documents might include a budget, a finance plan (i.e. how the producer plans to raise the money, from various sources) and often sales estimates. These last are provided by the sales company, whose job it is to sell the film to distributors around the world. They make sales projections based upon the other elements of the package. (As mentioned above, Finney (2010) has an accurate and full account of this process.)

Here is an example of a producer talking about certain elements of a package, and how he has to input these kinds of considerations into the screenplay development process. Paul Trijbits, then of Ruby Films:

I often have to say (if we're talking about a project or an actor) if you are going about this in the independent way, if you are relying on pre-sales and sales estimates, the Taiwanese distributor who doesn't speak a word of English but who needs films will look up what the director has done, possibly what the writer has done and possibly what the last film did box office wise and what a particular actor did and if it doesn't appeal to him he's just going to say No.

Note the repetition of the use of sales estimates, which are usually drawn up by sales companies. Such figures are arrived at, as the above quotation illustrates, using a combination of the perceived 'value' of the cast and director, combined with an analysis of the screenplay (from a quality and genre perspective.) Thus while financing is often impossible without certain important elements (like a cast that matches the budget level), the screenplay is an absolutely key component of this package from a business perspective. And it's the package that gets the finance. Its importance points to a third crucial function of the screenplay, perhaps one less talked about but nevertheless vital in building a package and consequently funding the film.

Before moving on to the final section of this chapter, the screenplay as Love Letter, I should point out that none of my interviewees seemed particularly happy that the screenplays they created were subject to such strictures. As the Dan MacRae interview excerpt illustrates, there was a disappointment that changes had to be made that might not be in the best interests of making the best film. This is particular the case when it comes to casting issues. There is a degree of resignation to the issue of casting, an acceptance that 'that's the way the world is' rather than any one embracing the idea as something positive and productive for the film industry.

Such a view is perhaps best expressed by producer Andy Paterson.



There's a script out there at the moment that two very big stars want to do, and I get why they want to do it – very wordy piece, lots of acting – and it's terrible. But it will get made because they want to do it.

Nevertheless, the restrictions of casting – securing actors that sales agents, distributors and broadcasters feel that they can 'sell' – are seen as a fact of life by producers, executives and screenwriters. This 'fact' brings me on to the third, and possibly most important, purpose of the screenplay at least in the UK industry.

### **3. The Screenplay as Love Letter**

There's a lot of love in the film industry. Or rather, there are a lot of people looking for it. It's a word that crops up repeatedly in my interviews, when people talk about underlying story material or screenplays or even finished films. They 'loved' the novel that they later adapted, they 'loved' an earlier draft of the screenplay or treatment. It also crops up constantly when the industry faces outwards, in promotional material about films, for example, actors 'love' the script, the director or the character. It's not for nothing that actors are sometimes called luvvies.

Putting theatrical effusiveness aside for one moment, however, doesn't also take away this notion of 'love' in the film industry. In the foregoing I've looked at the concepts – as used by practitioners – of the screenplay as a blueprint for practically making the film, as a story document, as a business proposition and as a creative guide for the bringing into being of a movie. Yet one purpose of the screenplay in some sense stands above all this, because for any project to become a film it needs to be financed. And to be financed the project needs to appeal sufficiently to a financier – either on the basis of the screenplay or more likely the package; to make a package, the screenplay needs to appeal to those people who are agreeing to be part of that package.

While I was interviewing Frank Cottrell Boyce, I asked him what the screenplay was for and in the course of the ensuing conversation he talked about a specific project

that had been brought to him by a producer that he was currently working on: ‘the script is for Danny, and if he likes it....’ His target reader, in other words, is Danny Boyle the director – and the purpose of the script is to seduce. Cottrell Boyce goes on to be even more explicit about this:

It’s going to be the script that gets you read by a star. And prior to that, it’s the script that will bring a director on, even if the director’s developing it, it’s still the script. There are narrative and artistic category decisions but there are also category decisions along the lines of ‘who’s in it, who’s directing it, who’s lighting it’ and actually the script is crucial in those things, because those people need to be seduced. It’s a love letter.

I’ve noted elsewhere that he thinks the screenplay is the space where the big decisions are made (which he reiterates here.) Cottrell Boyce is a screenwriter and novelist. Although he’s part of the team creating the film, he has no ultimate responsibility (or tasks directly involved) in raising finance. It is the producer’s role to worry about whether the money will be available to make the film. Cottrell Boyce’s role is to write the screenplay. And yet he defines the screenplay as a ‘love letter.’

It’s helpful here to recap the context of the UK film industry. UK producers raise the finance for a film from a number of sources. They send the screenplay to broadcasters, distributors, equity financiers and the like. They piece the finance together from these different sources. But, as already mentioned, projects normally gain finance when they are ‘packaged’ or at least when some of the major elements (director, cast) are in place. The screenplay is one of the most important, but not the only, element of such a package. Depending on the perceived ‘value’ of the various elements, a producer is more or less likely to get the film made. In the first quotation above, for instance, Cottrell Boyce clearly thinks that if Danny Boyle wants to direct the screenplay – if he wishes to become part of the ‘package’ – then the film has a very high chance of being made. Hence Cottrell Boyce’s desire to please him with the screenplay.

Cottrell Boyce in the longer quotation is referring to the other elements of the package – whether they are behind-the-camera creative practitioners such as cinematographers

or actors. He's explicitly stating that these people need to be seduced if the film is going to be made, and it is the screenplay that achieves this seduction (at least in the first instance.) It is not only the screenwriters who look at the screenplay from this perspective. Take Amelia Granger, VP at Working Title:

It's a very imprecise science, and a good script can be a really good script but if it doesn't speak to any directors or actors or gain any traction in terms of the elements in needs in order to become a film – then it will stay there being a good script. Likewise a script that may not on the surface be a brilliant piece of work but it's a great idea and you can get a great director on board then it can lead to a good film.

Clearly, she views a screenplay that can't attract or seduce crucial talent (in terms of directors or actors) as a failed screenplay in some sense, regardless of its other qualities. Everyone in the development process is acutely aware of this need to appeal to collaborators further down the line: normally a director first, then possibly cast and then possibly financiers. And in most cases the vehicle for this seduction is recognised to be the screenplay, as the quotes from MacRae, Cottrell Boyce and Paterson indicate.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth dwelling on this point for a moment. Most prospective films in the UK have to attract actors and directors of a perceived 'value' (whether that's calculated in cultural or economic terms) in order to raise the finance. The implications of this on the content are rarely thought through, however. In other words, in this development and pre-production phase the actors have a deal of power. Not only over the content of potential films (as expressed in the screenplay) but right down to whether the films get made at all. We're already seen, from Andy Paterson, how a 'terrible' screenplay

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<sup>24</sup> While few of my respondents pointed it out in the interviews, it's nevertheless possible to speculate that certain attachments – e.g. actors – may on occasion be drawn to projects for reasons other than the screenplay. Money may be a factor – although this generally isn't that much of a factor in the UK industry, given that the stars a production might want to attract (for a UK film) normally have robust enough careers (they are already in demand, in other words) to not give this too much thought. Sometimes, an actor professes a desire to work with a particular director regardless of the material. Richard E. Grant summarises this notion in his diary, Grant (1996, 263-4), where he points out that he – along with his colleagues – are appearing in *The Age of Innocence* 'for Marty' – for the experience of working with Martin Scorsese in other words. Although, as Cottrell Boyce pointed out to me, such 'name' directors are few and far between.

will receive finance because two ‘star’ actors want to do it; and we’ve seen how screenplays are altered to suit the personas and tastes of star actors (from Dan MacRae); consequently, we can deduce that certain actors – in this phase of a film’s production – have a high degree of say over what gets made (still based on the screenplay, of course.)

Most projects in the UK film industry need to attract actors of a certain value, be that cultural or commercial (perceived ‘box office’ value, or critical prestige, as deemed by financiers.) Consequently, actors can wield considerable power in the screenplay development process. This power is predominantly a power of selection, for they can choose to attach themselves to a project or not and therefore significantly alter a project’s chances of getting produced. Once the shoot starts, of course, and certainly once the film is shot, this power almost totally evaporates. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to discount actor power. Furthermore, this power is only ever evidenced in the development process – and as such, adds further grist to the case for studying the development process more thoroughly, either as a whole or with respect to the specific films.

The screenplay as a tool of seduction is evidenced even in the smallest of details. As mentioned above, cast can be absolutely crucial and thinking about actors can have an effect on the screenplay, even before they’ve read it. While trying to cast one of his films producer Andy Paterson happened to read an interview in the newspaper. A renowned acting star intimated that they always looked at the end of the screenplay to see if their character was still taking part in the story. So what did Paterson do when it came to approaching that actor? Made ‘damn sure’ that their proposed character had the last line in the screenplay. Perhaps not the kind of major change to the screenplay as referred to by Dan MacRae (above), but nevertheless a very real alteration designed purely to seduce the actor into thinking better of the project.

A film project that requires a significant level of budget can only happen in the UK if the various collaborators want to make it happen. A producer normally needs a screenplay, to which they can attach a director, to which they then attach key cast, which in turn attracts the financing necessary to actually make the film. This journey starts with the screenplay – it seduces the director (as Cottrell Boyce points out in

relation to Danny Boyle); it seduces the actors (as Paterson tried to do in the above case) and it can therefore subsequently seduce the financiers (as Amelia Granger points out.)

In some sense, perhaps, we can then say that the screenplay is designed as a work of literature only in the same way that the love letter is: a piece of writing, experienced as being read by a person on their own (read-throughs are rarely someone's *first* experience of a screenplay), the primary function of which is to get the reader to fall in love with the idea of making the film project which it (in some sense) represents.

That it also has other functions is of course important. The readers of the screenplay – the wooed – will judge the screenplay based on various criteria, some of which is no doubt known to the producers (e.g. the various values that may be held to be important in the field at any one time – such as story, character, conflict and the like.) It may very well be that some readers will view the screenplay as a practical and artistic blueprint, or a story document, or as a guide to future marketing potential. As we've discussed, the screenplay also has these functions. The reader inevitably brings their own agendas to bear on the screenplay, based on where they are coming from. Yet, as I argue in this whole thesis, many of the values are common to the *habitus*, that most of the funding decisions – for example – are, if not made by members of the field, then at least are significantly informed by the norms and 'values' of the field itself.

The screenplay is a vehicle of persuasion, a written document designed to woo and seduce. I should say here that this analysis pertains particularly to the UK and may not be quite so relevant in other geographical contexts. Caldwell (2008, 81) points out, for example, that in Hollywood the 'pitch' has overtaken both screenplays and treatment documents as the medium of choice for communicating ideas. However, this isn't the case in the UK. I'm not in a position to comment at any length on why the US may be different (save perhaps as a marker of increased volume.) In the UK context, while 'pitching' is an important element in communicating ideas, the most such a skill could get you – in the absence of written documents – would be a development deal and even at that, probably not a very substantial one. Similarly, screenwriting in the television sector (in the UK) can often differ from the film

industry in this regard. Once a television screenplay is commissioned – possibly as an episode in a longer series – it doesn't necessarily have to go through these various appeals to different attachments, be they commissioners, directors, actors and so forth. It wouldn't strictly speaking be accurate, therefore, to say the primary purpose of a television screenplay is to act as a vehicle of seduction in the same way as I'm arguing that a film screenplay does. Which is yet another reason to look at the two fields as separate.

### **Filmmaking First**

No one that I interviewed appeared interested in writing or developing screenplays for any reason other than to make the films.

There was an acknowledgement – or at least a claim – that my respondents thought they did fulfilling work: the kind of 'good' work that Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) and Conor (2014) go into, when they talk about the possibility of the creative industries offering fulfilling jobs. In other words, everybody I spoke with to a greater or lesser extent claimed to enjoy their work, and claimed to be fulfilled by it. Much of what they experienced 'every day' was satisfying and challenging. These claims were made despite the fact that much of their work will ultimately 'fail'. William Nicholson said he was happy with his conversion rate of one in three, that every third screenplay he worked on made it to the screen. Turn this around, of course, and we can say that two thirds of the projects on which he's worked never get produced at all. And as a writer, he has a high conversion rate – he is 'successful'.

Indeed, the biggest dissatisfaction expressed by all my interviewees was not the conditions of their work so much as the difficulty in converting their work (of development) into works on film. It was claimed across the board that the focus at all times – the focal point of screenplay development – was filmmaking.

The screenwriters made it especially clear that they would only even start on a project if they thought it had a reasonable chance of getting made. William Nicholson only accepts work from 'reputable' producers, because he does not want to write

screenplays that don't become films. He satisfies any need he might have to write 'personal' stories by writing novels. Olivia Hetreed casts the same careful eye over potential collaborators, for the same reason. Laurence Coriat puts it even more simply: 'the film's the thing.' I make especial mention of the screenwriters in this context, because this level of writer gets paid for their work, *whether the film gets made or not* (unlike the producer.) Yet still their focus is entirely on the completed film, not solely on the document that precedes it.

As Chris Clark, former senior executive at Working Title and now a successful independent producer says when he talks about the lessons he learned as a junior development executive. For all his work on honing the perfect screenplay, agonising over every scene and line with the writer, going through the wearying rewrite process – for all this hard work, creating turning points, believable characters, powerful scenes, the 'perfect' screenplay, if no one of any perceived commercial value wants to direct it, or act in it, then no one will want to finance it and there will be no film. In other words: 'It didn't matter how good the screenplay was, it was about getting the film made.'

The screenplay document – this letter of seduction, vehicle of persuasion – is thus seen partly as a means to that end. And if the screenplay fails at this, if it fails to woo the necessary attachments or finance, then it fails in its primary function. They will be no film, and any consideration of the screenplay's other merits will be largely redundant.

## **Conclusion**

As we've seen, those that create screenplays see it as a multi-purpose document. In keeping with previous literature on the subject, they often used the metaphor of the blueprint to describe some of these purposes. As recent scholars have pointed out, and as my research has further illustrated, such a usage doesn't necessarily mean the same thing when used by different people. Nevertheless, as far as the practitioners were concerned, the blueprint metaphor was not contentious. In other words, while in theory the notion of a blueprint is complicated and complex (and likewise the

relationship between a screenplay and a finished film), in practice it was used fairly liberally throughout the field in my interviews, without much contention or debate. This isn't to say that the work of Maras (2009), Sternberg (1997), Price (2010) et al, on problematizing the notion of the blueprint isn't valuable. It certainly is, both from an historical perspective and in illustrating how such language usage can have far reaching consequences for the separation of conception and execution. The point of this study, however, is to examine how the purpose of the screenplay was talked about during my series of interviews.

While the evidence of my interviewees doesn't directly add to the scholastic debate around the ontology of the screenplay (in the sense that none of the practitioners entered directly into this debate), the evidence at least tells us how ingrained the metaphor of the blueprint has become. It is perhaps for others to say whether or not describing a screenplay as a blueprint is 'correct' or 'helpful' – I observe only that none of the screenwriters, executives or producers I spoke to shied away from such usage.

Subsequently we've seen the importance of the screenplay as a business document, part of a financial prospectus for a film project, as seen by the practitioners. Though this was recognised as a reality, 'a fact of life' by the practitioners, it wasn't always welcomed. In particular, the necessity to create characters that gave casting options was cited as a problem or at least an issue. As we saw when analysing the knowledge claims around the audience, marketing (i.e. questions of who to cast) again inserts itself as a concern into the screenplay development process. Of course, the fact that screenplay creators are aware that the document needs to raise money will not radically surprise screenplay or production studies scholars.

Finally, however, what emerged from my interviews as the chief (or at least most important) function of the screenplay was its role as a Love Letter, a vehicle of persuasion. For a UK film to raise finance, it needs to attach a director and actors of certain perceived commercial value, and then subsequently financiers: and the screenplay needs to seduce these readers. If the screenplay fails to seduce, it fails.



In one sense this finding may be stating the obvious, but up until now the importance of a screenplay's 'attractiveness' or 'appeal' is merely assumed, or hinted at, in the literature – both in the manual style books but also in the academic literature. Bloore (2013, 9), for example, defines the process of screenplay development as repeatedly rewriting the screenplay until it reaches 'a stage when it is *attractive* to a suitable director, actors and relevant film production funders.' (Emphasis added.) It is this 'making attractive' that I'm arguing is the key function of the screenplay in the UK film industry – certainly it is seen as such by those who create the document.

This has implications for screenwriting studies. For above and beyond those various elements already discussed (what makes a 'good screenplay') there is this further, overarching function that needs to be fulfilled.

This final function, without which all the others are irrelevant, needs to be factored more fully into screenwriting studies and analysis. Not only might it help give better accounts of why some films get made over others, it can also give future scholars insight into how power operates in the film industry at any one time. If, for example, one were in a position to accurately chart the development of a specific project through its various iterations – stages we'll see in the next chapter – then one might be able to concurrently trace how power is operating in the field. Changes made to the screenplay at whose behest? Or conversely, changes made to satisfy who – whether asked for, or in anticipation? At the very least, such a recognition of the screenplay's function problematizes and makes more complex notions of why the films that get made, get made.

If we look at the screenplay in this light, as a love letter designed partly to seduce the reader, then this changes our perspective on it as a document in other ways too. Inbuilt into the document's very design is this notion of appealing to those people necessary to get the film made. While in one sense this is obvious, I believe the implications of such an observation are much more profound than have before been realised. The screenplay has to appeal firstly to those in the 'development field', and therefore those writing the screenplay have to appreciate and be aware of what the norms and values of that field are – even when they are designing the document.

While the screenplay is a document that springs from the development field, it is also a document that has to satisfy certain members of that field. Producers have to be satisfied that the screenplay ‘works’ before the rest of the industry sees it; likewise executives (working for funders) have to be satisfied before they recommend it further up the line. Built into the very creation and purpose of screenplays in the UK – given the collaborative nature – is this need to satisfy other members of the development field, to conform to the values and norms of that field, to be a ‘good’ screenplay. In other words, screenplay development in the UK is a world talking to itself.

Despite the fact the planned films may often be intended to satisfy and appeal to (ideally) millions of people, a screenplay only needs limited appeal. It needs to appeal to the members of the field that created it, based on the norms and conventions of that limited field. As Frank Cottrell Boyce says: ‘Nobody self-censors as much as screenwriters. Even self-censor sounds too conscious, you’ve absorbed so much about what a film is.’ Even as he’s writing, he’s processing what the field will and will not accept; he’s thinking about what will ‘work’.

Seemingly, in most cases the only powerful judges of a screenplay that stand outside the field of screenplay development – the only social agents in the industry with the ability to alter content and take part in decisions as to what films get made – are high demand actors and directors. Yet even in these two types of practitioner often operate in the field too, and cannot be said to be wholly divorced from it.

Such a limited field, a small audience, bounded by field-created conventions, has serious implications for innovation and dynamism in screenplay content. There’s a very real danger that such a state of affairs drastically reduces both originality but also breadth of content. If the field is made up of a narrow band of society (in terms of class, *habitus*, ethnicity, emotional constitution), and the content created has to satisfy that narrow band, then despite the supposed mass appeal of the medium, the actual content is limited and narrowed by the very conditions of its creation.

So, we have gained some understanding about what the screenplay document is meant to achieve, according to those who go about creating it. The next step is to look at how these practitioners go about that very task.

## Chapter Six – The Creation of the Screenplay

### Introduction

This chapter looks at the process of screenplay development, from initial conception through to the screenplay going out into the wider field. It argues for an emphasis on collaborative *process*, rather than sole inspiration. It then provides an analysis of a production company account of idea generation. Subsequently, the chapter looks at the drafting process that illustrates a particular reliance on the sharing of pre-dispositions and tastes among practitioners for good development; and how the values of the field, and shared *habitus*, are embedded in the practices of the field. I then go on to draw parallels between the development process and Howard Becker's notion of an art world, before re-situating the overall process of screenplay development as a Bourdieu like field of contest and struggle. A field, furthermore, that is culturally limited and limiting, and that through its very practices is liable to reproduce the values of the field without necessarily any regard for those beyond it (despite the fact that the ultimate product of the field, a film, is intended to reach way beyond the field.)

### Process

Much of the recent work on screenwriting and the screenplay, while immensely valuable in helping us understand the screenplay as a document, has a tendency to assume a distinction between the writing of screenplays and screenplay development. The very term 'Screenwriting Research Network' suggests, however tacitly, that the creation of the screenplay is equivalent to the writing of the screenplay. The effect of

this, whether intended or otherwise, is to downplay the role of the *process* of development, the process of screenplay creation with all its many players.<sup>25</sup>

While I don't want to argue against the proposition that screenwriters *write* screenplays, I want to take this chapter to focus on the multi-player process of screenplay creation. Macdonald (2013, 32) attempts to do something similar, challenging what he calls 'The ideology of screenwriting [that] operates at the individual level; indeed, the mainstream industrial view is that screenwriters provide content from their individual genius, which the industry then shapes and hones into something as close to perfect as possible in a linear process.' One of the ways in which my study differs from Macdonald's, however, is that at present I'm talking about the formulation and creation of the screenplay, and not what he calls the screenwork or film. My evidence suggests that even the screenplay is created from a multiplayer environment.

Following from my interviews, I will argue that screenplays are created by the screenplay development process, they spring from the field of screenplay development (the ones that get made into films anyway), and as such if we want to better understand them then we need to understand the process *qua* process, rather than assuming that screenplays are fed into (by screenwriters) and then changed by the said process. In this sense, I am harking back to my methodological chapter and trying to engage some of the techniques and approaches of production studies – from the likes of Caldwell (2008 et al) and Banks (2014) – to examine the practitioners and industrial processes. In other words, to look at screenplay development as an industrial process, rather than considering it as a literary one (or a writing process.)

Let us get to the process of screenplay development. I have ordered this consideration in a linear model that occurred to my interviewees. Or rather, one that corresponded with their accounts of how the screenplays they worked on came about. That is,

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<sup>25</sup> I will once more repeat that this current study is focussed on screenplay development in the UK film industry, whereas many of the other studies cited here are intended to take in screenwriting not only for film but for television and in some cases other media, and certainly not only in the UK context. My remarks here should be taken in the context of the UK film industry, although where appropriate I'll indicate when I think the implications of the argument stretch beyond this confined field.

conception and execution (of the drafting of the screenplay), followed by the sending out of the screenplay into the wider field.

## **1. Conception**

Much of the literature surrounding screenwriting and the film industry suggests that the screenwriter initially conceives the idea for the screenplay that they subsequently write. Depending on the sophistication of such accounts, this view generally goes on to assume that the producer takes on or ‘selects’ that screenplay, then works with a director to bring it to the screen. Sternberg (1997, 48) paints exactly this picture when talking in the US context, for example. Or take this from Batty and Waldeback (2008, 2): ‘In many cases the screenplay can take more than a year to develop before it is ready for production; the writer effectively conceives and gives birth to a screenplay which is then passed on and ‘raised’ by a producer and director.’ This exemplifies a notion of the screenwriter conceiving their work, then bringing it to the industry (producers, executives, directors.) Subsequently, this ‘work’ is reshaped by these other players in the process – either improving it, diluting it, re-interpreting the writer’s original intentions or (in the case of what is termed ‘development hell’) ruining it.

Yet in the UK, according to the Attentional (2007) report for the UKFC the ‘vast majority’ of film projects come from in-house (i.e. in production house) development and not from screenwriters or directors at all (2007, 4 and 35). Susan Rogers’ report for the UKFC also found that screenwriters were three times more likely to be approached with an idea for a film project than the other way around (Rogers 2007, 22). Amelia Granger in my interview with her estimated that Working Title – the UK’s biggest production company and highest spender on development – operate ‘about 75% in house, to 25% external.’ And the findings of that Attentional report are to some extent borne out by the experience of my respondents. The screenwriters rarely bring their own initial ideas to their screenwriting work. The writers I spoke to are all well-established now, and consequently practically never use their own initial

ideas. Ayub Khan Din, for instance, has ‘never done a spec script. [I]Would never have the motivation to do it.’

This is a picture, then, quite at odds with the aforementioned conception of screenwriting as an individual pursuit with the lone writer fighting to get their ideas onto the screen.

That’s not to say that none of the writers I spoke to haven’t had original ideas for screenplays that they have subsequently presented to producers. Laurence Coriat’s first film *Wonderland* was developed in such a way. Khan Din adapted his own stage play as his first screenplay. And certainly for screenwriters earlier in their careers, there is a place for what is known as the spec (for speculative) screenplay. It would also, paradoxically, be unusual for someone to be hired to write a screenplay with no experience at all in either the genre (screenplays) or a related field (TV, Plays.)

However, given the evidence of these reports and my own respondents we may say that the majority of projects are not of the type that have been conceived and dreamt up by a lone writer. Given that most of them aren’t dreamt up by a lone writer staring at a blank page, where do these ideas come from?

### **A Production Company Executive**

I am going to take an extended excerpt from one of my interviews in particular over the next couple of pages of this thesis, for two reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, the interview illustrates some of the varied means by which projects come about (from a production company’s perspective.) Secondly, it is an interview with a development executive.

The reason I want to concentrate for a moment here on the role of the executive is because as a position it is repeatedly over-looked in accounts of creativity and yet, as the following suggests, such an oversight may not always be merited. In a subsequent chapter on authorship I will investigate the implications of this further. At this point,

though, I want to highlight one of the possible implications of taking this kind of development work seriously.

In 2013 *The Journal of British Cinema and Television* devoted an issue to the work of women in film and television production, following on from the formation of the Women's Film History Network. One of the key aims of the debates around women's work in the film industry, according to Vicky Ball and Melanie Bell (2013, 550-553), is to illuminate the 'invisible labour' of women's work and to bring this work into view. While my current study is not historically based, a consideration of the following interview should throw up further avenues of investigation in terms of revealing women's film industry work.

Women often fill development positions in the UK industry. It's hard to get an exact figure – the Attentional (2007) report did not address the issue of gender in the development field – but we can extrapolate some figures from the latest Creative Skillset census. Women make up 47% of the film production workforce while, in the wider sector (audio-visual), women make up 46% of those working in 'creative development' (2012a, 14-16). Screenplay development is encompassed by this second figure, although film producers are not counted in this number; conversely, creative development also encompasses storyboard artists and copywriters working in industries other than film (2012a, 74). Nevertheless, this suggests that more women operate in film development than in the wider sector as a percentage – though still not at a level of equality.

Ball and Bell (2013, 551) explicitly use a concept of 'invisible labour' – borrowing the term from filmmaker Sally Potter<sup>26</sup> – to point out how much of woman's work in film has gone undocumented and unacknowledged. Little of the subsequent journal or work from the Woman's Film History Network has yet sufficiently addressed screenplay development. Yet the work of development is a prime example of this kind of invisible labour. As Dan MacRae pointed out to me: 'You're never going to know all the great [notes], hundreds of great movies that have probably had great notes.' In other words, once a film has succeeded it is rare for the people behind it – director or

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<sup>26</sup> Sally Potter in an interview conducted with Kristy Widdicombe in 2003, quoted in Mayer (2009, 140).

screenwriter say – to want to acknowledge the possible mistakes they may have made. As writer Frank Cottrell Boyce says: ‘We mythologise creativity because we don’t want people to know how wrong we were before we got it right. No one wants to go, I’m really glad you like it – would you believe in the first draft it was a cow I was wandering as lonely as?’

We shall see in the following quite how much creative work is undertaken in development by more than those usually credited with being ‘creative’ on a feature film, work often undertaken by women. While I am not considering the issue of gender in this thesis, much of what I found in my interviews suggests that further study on the role of women in development can add to these debates about women in film in general. Melanie Williams (2013), for example, shines a light on the role of the continuity girl or script supervisor and its importance. Williams’ points out that David Lean collaborator Maggie Unsworth helped initiate projects for Lean, recommended writers and helped with script development (2013, 611), one of the few pieces of work thus far in the network to address film development.

As we shall see, initiating projects, recommending writers and helping with development is the kind of work women do in the film industry every day and on a significant scale. While on the one hand we may bemoan the lack of women screenwriters and directors, this development work (and its importance) also needs to be acknowledged. But let us look at some of this work in more detail.

### **A Production Company Account**

Rachel Prior is the head of development for independent producer Big Talk Productions, and was formerly a development executive at Working Title 2.

Lyle: How do projects come about for you and what’s your role in that?

Prior: We have a few core relationships with film talent – writers and directors – who originate stuff and who we’re constantly talking to and helping to evolve their ideas. But the slate is quite varied, it’s everything from books and



adaptations to... perhaps it's good to talk about the next two films we're making. So, *Cuban Fury* we're making which is the film we're in post on came from Nick Frost, who had an idea and emailed Nira [producer, Nira Park] about it and we built the film from there, hired a writer. So that's a common thing with the core talent at the heart of the company.

Lyle: did he write it?

Prior: he didn't write it, no. he had the concept but he worked very closely with the development, and was across it creatively (and was an exec producer on it.)

And the [next] film we're making actually came in as a spec but that is so rare. I'm still kind of shocked that we even have a comedy spec on our slate at Big Talk, I like to think we're thought of as leading in terms of British comedy and film, and it was a spec we felt that it was up to the standard that we wanted a film to be and it was really shocking....

The one we'll make directly after that next year... is like an elevated horror film. It is from a writer director and we picked up the short film he made which was Bafta short-listed; when the Bafta short films were announced, you do your usual thing, you make sure you've seen them all. And I watched that film and it was incredibly successful as a horror film, never mind a short.... And I just thought, oh there's a deeper story underneath what's going on there. And I thought, (it) could make a feature film. Ran upstairs, showed it to Nira, she was like great let's get it; rang up the agent. ... We optioned it and we've developed it with him. For a couple of years, it's not been easy, maybe we can talk a bit more about that the process of working from scratch with a new writer director, or one that's new to features, from a piece of material which they've created.

The family film I mentioned which we doing is a concept which I found from a documentary, just watching a documentary.... It just had a concept at the heart of it which I just thought was really interesting... We haven't based, the film isn't based on characters in the documentary.... So we optioned the

documentary, the concept, which had been devised by the production company who made it; then we put a writer on it.

I can only remember two projects that came through the door as scripts [in sixteen years working in development]... I feel like the amount of scripts that come through the door that are required to be read, fully fleshed out screenplays, the pick-up ratio must be less than one percent.

Lyle: you wonder whether it's worth it even [to read the scripts]

Prior: yeah, the best thing about reading scripts is reading a good piece of writing and realising that that person is a good writer. And then getting into it with them the kind of material we might want to do. Or finding material ourselves and matching that person to it. I think that finding a short story or finding a documentary, finding whatever and then putting the ingredients together in a way that suits you or suits your company, I would love that writer – oh my gosh I've found that amazing piece of material and you build it, and it kind of feels more tailored to the requirements of both the company and the market because of that. Because you know a bit better – there might be brilliant writers out there but they don't necessarily have the insight or the knowledge at that stage in their career to know exactly the kind of thing they should be writing.

This excerpt illustrates on its own the variety of sources of ideas. This doesn't discount the role of the screenwriter-led idea by no means (their next film is from a spec screenplay, though it's interesting to note quite how insistent Prior is about the rarity of such a thing. I've even cut away some of these protestations.) The role of directors coming up with ideas, that they then present to the company as a vehicle for developing, is also strongly emphasised. As with other parts of this thesis – particularly the section on culture – one can also see evidence of the importance of networks and pre-existing relationships. In this instance, actor Nick Frost came up with the catalyst that the company then developed in collaboration with him.

One of the things that comes through particularly strongly from this exchange, however, is the role of process. The horror film referred to may come from a short film made by a writer-director (who is writing the screenplay), but the fact that the production company have taken it on at all was the result of Prior doing ‘the usual thing’ – that is, watching all the Bafta nominated short films. She sees watching the work of new talent as part of her job, though she hasn’t the time to watch all the short films made in the UK. Instead, she covers an industry-sanctioned selection.

The film that is being developed out of the documentary concept is equally a project that springs from development practice. Prior is watching television, with at least part of an eye (or her mind) on potential film content. While this is a neat example of the bleed between professional and private life that is one of the characteristics of modern media work in the eyes of the likes of Mark Deuze (2007, 1), the profound question it poses for the purposes of this thesis is: who had the idea for the subsequent film? Is it the documentary company? Probably not, given they had an idea for a documentary. Is it Prior herself? Or is it Prior channelling the taste of her boss and company (the Big Talk brand)? Or should we wait to decide on authorship, once the company (directed by Prior’s advice) appoint a writer, or then wait again for the director? I shall revisit this point again in the chapter on Authorship, suffice to say at this point that any idea of the screenwriter conceiving of the idea for this project seems far-fetched at the very least, and certainly deeply problematic.

The guiding hand of process is even evident in those projects that can be said to have sole originators. Look at the language used about the development of even the project generated by a sole writer-director, how much ‘work’ it has taken for Prior to develop the project. While this ‘work’ is not further defined, we can to some extent speculate that she means working on versions of the story – either (or firstly) in treatment/prose form before moving to a screenplay. In other words, while the screenwriter/director is ‘writing’ the screenplay, he is doing so under fairly intense supervision from the much more experienced Prior. Prior, remember, also identified the short film as a potential feature film and went to the writer-director with that proposition, not the other way around.

I haven't included it in the excerpt above, because it would reveal the name and nature of the screenplay, but even the spec project she speaks of above 'came in at the right time' to satisfy industry needs. Apparently 'everyone' was looking for that kind of project when it came across Prior's desk. So even though it was a speculative screenplay, dreamt up by an isolated writer, it found a home partly as a result of the conditions in the field at that very moment. As a screenplay, it would be hard to suggest that it was 'field-generated'. Nevertheless, that it succeeded in the field (being taken on, further developed and then financed) is down to the fact that it satisfies and conforms to the needs of that field.

The final part of Prior's interview excerpt also reveals the role in conception that executives and producers can play when it comes to personnel. Though spec screenplays are rarely taken on, Prior reads them in order to track talent and to be aware of new writers. But then, she doesn't see her role as to find those new writers and tell the stories (on film) that they want to tell so much as to match them to 'the kind of thing they should be writing.' This is advice that is meant well and is presumably taken well by the screenwriters in lots of cases. After all, if Prior likes their writing she is often in a position to give them a job – albeit doing something that she feels is more tailored to the market and to their skills. There is nothing wrong with this as such. Nevertheless, it begins to illustrate both a level of control and a level of complication in thinking about idea and concept generation in the UK film industry.

To back up Prior's account, as a more junior development executive at Working Title I also took part in idea generation and discovery. Directed by those more senior, I would research old stories (such as fairy tales, out of copyright adventures stories and the like), write research memos on ancient myths or more recent phenomenon, all the while suggesting possible material for films. This was in large part the job – building up a bank of research, any one piece of which might lead to a screenplay (though the expectation was that not much of it would.) It was a process driven job, partly possible because WT is a well-funded production company that could afford to have someone do this full time. Nevertheless, such a process is what all production companies do in development. They look for, research and generate film ideas.

## Director as Producer

Such a line of argument is in danger of removing from the equation the screenwriter and director altogether. I don't wish to do that but more properly to explicate the various ways projects are given their initial start. For even in the case of what might be considered the auteur end of the industry – in terms of strong, named directors – this idea of joint creation is still prevalent in my accounts. Frank Cottrell Boyce, for example, is the credited screenwriter on *24 Hour Party People*, a film directed by Michael Winterbottom.<sup>27</sup> The initial idea between Cottrell Boyce and Winterbottom had been to do with making a film about the Manchester music scene of the 1980s and 90s. While researching this fairly general idea, Cottrell Boyce remembers 'walking out of Tony [Wilson's] flat on the first day and turning to Michael and saying "he's the movie" – because he just wouldn't shut up. A big category decision was taken.'

Cottrell Boyce then went about constructing the screenplay around this character, which consequently dictated all sorts of other aspects of the movie: characters, setting, genre, the timeframe. All the fundamentals, in fact, needed to start planning the shoot of the film. A general idea, a milieu almost, agreed upon by two collaborators in the first instance (the music scene in a particular time and place) led to research, and the research (in this case a single interview) led to a further crystallization of what the screenplay should be. The birth of the idea for this movie, consequently, can't really be said to come from the mind of only one creator. It came about as a product of discussion, thought and research.

I am aware this is one of the few occasions in this thesis where I've allowed the director a major say in the development process. However, I would argue that Winterbottom, although a very active director, lauded as such, is nevertheless acting more like a producer in the above quotation than a director in the usual sense. Finding ideas, researching ideas, working with writers at this earlier stage of a screenplay's life is what producers do more often than directors. Indeed, one of Winterbottom's long time (and present day) collaborators made this very point to me. Screenwriter

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<sup>27</sup> Although there may be some debate about what sense, if any, Winterbottom could be claimed to be an auteur, it is nevertheless the case that his work is seen by some in this light. A recent book about his work has been published in a Genre Films Auteur series – Allison (2013) – and his work is regularly the subject of canonised retrospectives at film festivals and the like.

Laurence Coriat said: ‘Michael is pretty much a producer himself as well. For instance, in development.’ I will return to this point about the various roles in development (e.g. producer, screenwriter) later. Suffice to say here that even the genesis of what might be termed very ‘director driven’ projects is often more complicated than assumed.

Whether or not such a view is helpful or damaging is, perhaps, beside the point. While a scholar such as Maras (2009) might argue that such a split between conception and execution is damaging, it is clear that many practitioners don’t feel the same way. The major award categories – certainly in the Anglophone world, i.e. the Oscars and the Baftas – institutionalise such a split. This thought was brought home to me when Steve McQueen climbed up the steps at the Academy Awards in 2014 to receive his Oscar for *12 Years a Slave*, a film he directed. But he did not win his Oscar for his directing. He won his Oscar for his role as a producer.

Throughout the publicity junket for the film, McQueen (2013) repeatedly praised his partner Bianca Stigter for introducing him to Solomon Northup’s book, the source material for the movie. He then read it and became convinced that he needed to make it into a film. And this is a common industry conception of what producers do: they seek and identify material that has cinematic potential and subsequently work with writers (in the case of *12 Years a Slave* credited to John Ridley) to develop a screenplay for the screen. So McQueen wins the Oscar for his producing work on the movie. He developed a project that ultimately turned out to be an award-winning film. He also happened to direct it, though he did not win his Oscar for this work.

Like *Winterbottom* (above), McQueen directed and produced the film. He discovered the source material at a very early stage and went about producing a movie, which he also happened to direct.

As said above, structuring idea conception and development as primarily a production company task doesn’t necessarily take the director out of such an equation. It conceives of it as a different task, sometimes also undertaken by directors (just like screenwriting) but not necessarily so. I will return to this point in the chapter on authorship.

## Adaptation

It's worth taking particular note of the role of adaptations in the development process. They play a very large part in the screenplay development process in the UK industry. There are no precise numbers for the split between 'original' ideas and adaptation, though Attentional (2007, 31) estimated that in 2006 roughly 50% of projects in active development were adaptations, while Bloore (2013, 11) quotes Film Four and BBC Films estimates at around 40-50% for the UK. Books, in particular, form a large part of the adaptation section of the development field, especially in the UK context.

Production companies have slightly different strategies for coming across such written material, depending on their resources. In my own work for Working Title, the biggest development spender in the UK, I've read many books to assess their potential. There's a process of 'coverage' there, led by an executive, that often involves securing early access to books and paying for opinions of them from trusted readers. This process is a macro-version of what many producers try to do, perhaps using more limited resources to focus such literary 'coverage' more tightly.

A smaller outfit, like the one run by David Parfitt, has to be more targeted in their approach to both reading potential adaptation material, and selecting those books that need to be read at all. Parfitt told me that he no longer chases after 'hot' books – the Booker shortlisted ones, for example – as he doesn't have the resources to option them in competition with better funded competitors. Nevertheless, he often revisits these books after a few years – when the development process has lapsed at another company, and he can offer the rights holder (normally the writer) a new and fresh approach.

The point to note here is that each of these companies, at a different spectrum in terms of financing, has a process by which to select, and then read potential adaptation material. In the previous section on screenplay knowledge, I reproduced the kind of script report template that is used when assessing a screenplay. The process that I've used for assessing novels and books is very similar. Indeed, the template for the

coverage is often the same, and consequently the thought processes in assessing whether or not to take a project forward are very similar. Does the book contain enough of the elements needed to build an effective screenplay: casting options, strong, active storytelling? Is it the stuff of a screenplay, only in literary form? Or, as Olivia Hetreed pointed out, can it bear the immense pressure of compression that it would undergo changing it into a film – is beautiful writing masking an ordinary story?

In general, therefore, the factors involved in optioning a book may be similar to the ones in optioning a screenplay – similar field values (i.e. what makes a good screenplay) might be invoked in order to argue for optioning a book and taking the project forward. There is, however, an additional factor in the assessment of adaptation material for the screen that initially has little to do with the screenplay development field, and consequently deserves a mention here.

Amelia Granger of Working Title talks about the ‘value’ that a project has – a best-selling novel, by a very popular writer, will have every chance not only of being developed into a screenplay but subsequently being made into a film. In other words, a book may be so popular – may have so much name recognition with the potential audience – that it is deemed worthwhile to make into a screenplay (and film), quite regardless of any other of its elements. It could be terribly written, have a very weak story, have no castable characters or identifiable genre; it could be deficient in every conceivable way, yet if it had the sales figures of a *Harry Potter* or a *50 Shades of Grey*, such deficiencies would be ignored.

Such a state of affairs can lead to difficulties, both in the development process and in the selection process. Development practitioners often have to attempt to second-guess a book’s value. Many books are optioned before they are published, for example, where the purchasing producer is making a judgement on their future value as a film project based partly on the content but also on a judgement of how successful the book might be in the literary field. In the case of *50 Shades of Grey*, for example, development executives the world over may have read this before it became successful and rejected it – only to see months later, that it has achieved such economic value in the literary field, that a film adaptation became almost inevitable.



Conversely, a producer can pick up the rights to a novel before it becomes a success, thereby getting ahead of the game in terms of financing (it would be cheaper to option at this stage) and in terms of being able to more quickly take advantage of the book's success in terms of publicity. In a question and answer session at BAFTA<sup>28</sup> I heard producer Liza Marshall recount this very process in regards to the recent movie *Before I Go To Sleep*, from the novel by SJ Watson.

So sometimes the 'value' of a film idea (i.e. adapting a particular book) has been established from outside the field in the first instance. Nevertheless, whatever an individual producer (or production company's) selection criteria for optioning a particular book, there is at the very least a *selection*. Only certain books are chosen to be read at all in the first instance, then even fewer are optioned and developed into screenplays. As such, the people who make the decisions on what to option have a very real impact on the development outcomes. If fifty percent of the screenplays in active development are adaptations, then who makes the decisions as to what is adapted (and on what basis) has a material bearing on the content of the films that reach our screens.

### **Adaptation v Originality**

There has recently been some debate in and around the industry about the supposed reliance on adaptation (and in particular, literary adaptation) as a source for film ideas. Such a reliance (if it indeed exists) is supposed to be the product of a risk averse executive and producer class, that wants to 'cover their arses' if a project goes wrong by being able to point to the pre-existing success of the underlying property. In other words, 'the public loved the book, it's not our fault they didn't love the film.' This argument was forcefully put across by Phil Parker (2009) in a Screen International article. As part of a wide diatribe against a development culture he sees as too beholden to pre-set norms and formulas, Parker laments the dearth of original screenplays (as opposed to adaptations) as if this were a sign of a lack of creativity.

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<sup>28</sup> This talk took place on 5 September 2014, but was not recorded.

His position is vigorously backed up in the comments section and such an equation (adaptation as inherently less creative) was also encountered by Bloore (2013). An ‘anonymous script reader’ castigates the idea that a story working in one medium can automatically work in another as ‘myopic and naïve’, and points to repeated (and in their eyes doomed) attempts to develop *Foucault’s Pendulum* into a film (2013, 174).

In one light, such responses can be seen as the film development field wishing to assert itself at the expense of these outside influences. For in the above quotation, it is my view that the anonymous script reader is being naïve in thinking that the development of such a named property was down to the belief that a good literary story would make a good film story. Rather, as we’ve seen, it was because there is a certain value attached to developing stories that have reached the public in another way. Likewise, although Parker strongly asserts that there should be fewer adaptations, he doesn’t really make a coherent case as to *why*. That is, why should adaptations be seen as less creative than ‘original’ screenplays?

Many of my interviewees didn’t seem to agree with this view, as expressed by Parker. None of the screenwriters, for example, seemed to think of adaptations as inferior to original properties. Indeed, Frank Cottrell Boyce took a position almost exactly contrary. In his view, the screenplays in the ‘best adapted screenplay’ category of awards ceremonies are better than those in the ‘original’ category because the writer has more freedom to play around with and potentially break any pre-conceived ‘conventions’ of screen story telling. Because there is some evidence – the popularity of the book – that the audience may already like many elements of the story, there is less pressure to conform to other norms. This point was echoed by screenwriter Peter Straughan (2012).

In other words, the success (or value) of an underlying property can be used to trump or overrule other values in the field (what Cottrell Boyce calls the conventions.) Paradoxically, therefore, there is more freedom to experiment. Thus when the anonymous script reader above complains that a book (in this case *Foucault’s Pendulum*) would ‘never make a film’, they were judging it by their own lights (conventions and norms) about what makes a ‘good’ screenplay. Such a system of values may be just as constricting to creativity, and potentially flawed, as anything

else. In this context, an appeal for more ‘original’ screenplays could be viewed as a call in favour of convention, or at least in favour of the creation of screenplays that conform to the values of the development field. In actual fact, one could argue that the influx of books that have a value based outside the development field, is one of the few ways that development practice can be overhauled and challenged.

The second problem with such a position – that of ‘original’ being more creative and laudable than ‘adaptation’ – is that it seems to misconstrue the nature of screenplay development as it is practiced. Or rather, it constitutes a critique of how it is practiced. We’ve already seen how film ideas come from all sorts of places, rarely from the mind of a sole originator who then writes the screenplay in isolation. So why should we privilege those rare ideas that do spring directly from the mind of the screenwriter? Why does the personal story of the screenwriter deserve, or is likely, to be better than an idea from a different source?

Such a view seems to stem from a romantic notion of the lone artist as most worthy creator. In the following chapter, on authorship, I will deal with this matter more fully. It is noticeable, however, that even in this field where ideas for films spring from many sources (and most commonly through the development work of production companies), there is still a desire among certain players to cling to the notion of the sole creator or originator as being the most laudable.

## **Field Generated**

The key point to take away from my interviewees, however, in terms of finding the starting points for the development of screenplays, is that in practice what happens is far from the traditional view of the screenwriter as conceptual originator. Ideas for films spring forth from development activities often quite separate from a writer staring at a blank page. There are processes and industrial practices in place to find, generate and discover film ideas – and such processes and practices are the bedrock not only of screenplay development, but of concept generation too.

In other words, the initial ideas for films are ‘field’ generated. They come from industrial practices in the field, or they come from an individual who is working in the field, and responding to the field’s demands. Before looking at this in more detail, though, first let’s look at the execution stage of the screenplay development process – how the initial idea becomes a screenplay.

## **2. Execution**

I mentioned above that screenplay ideas don’t solely come from a screenwriter staring at a blank page. Yet there is of course a stage in the development of the screenplay when a screenwriter does indeed stare at a blank page before filling it up. This thesis isn’t about what goes on in the screenwriters’ head when they stare at that screen, however. This is not a study of the writing practices and thought processes of individual screenwriters. We’ve already seen, though, that the screenwriters I spoke to rarely develop screenplays in isolation so we can make some observations about this process of arriving at the screenplay.

### **Preliminaries**

If my respondents are to be believed, most screenplay development starts with conversation and discussion. The UK industry may not be as ‘pitch’ dominated as Caldwell (2008, 81) suggests is the case in LA, but discussion forms a crucial part of screenplay development from the very inception of the process. In other words, while writing may be a solitary activity, screenplay development is not.

Time and again my interviewees stressed the necessity of talking things through with collaborators even before work on the screenplay starts. Or rather, the first stage of work is discussing the story to come. William Nicholson describes the early stages of his screenplay work like this:

I never ever start writing without a lot of discussions. ‘What is the story we’re telling?’ I’ll often put a lot on paper. They [the producers/executives] don’t

ask for that, but I want them to know the way my mind is going. I don't want them to be shocked by the first draft. It's terribly collaborative, I want them right from the beginning,

Note the emphasis on what the story is and, in particular, the huge stress on agreement between the collaborators. Although Nicholson is quite clear that it is his job to 'write' the screenplay, he doesn't want to write something that his collaborators won't like or – as importantly – aren't expecting. He doesn't want to shock them, or to have subsequent meetings in which the producer and executive complain about the way he's decided to do something (e.g. a bitter-sweet ending) when he was trying to do that very thing.

This is a theme that runs through many of my interviews and, indeed, for many of my respondents characterises the difference between 'good' and 'bad' development. Practitioners – be they producers, executives or screenwriters – view the importance of 'being on the same page' as their collaborators as paramount. Such agreement, and fellow-understanding, is therefore usually sought in these early meetings and discussions. Indeed, one of the chief points of such discussions to establish what kind of film everyone is trying to make, to make sure everyone is pulling in the same direction. These conversations can go on a long time – Olivia Hetreed calls it a 'big conversation', Amelia Granger refers to day-long meetings more than once in her interview – partly because they happen before anything is actually decided. The idea for the film is in its most liquid state at this point.

### **'Being on the same page'**

In the quotation from Nicholson, above, he outlines what for him is the ideal early stages of the development process – something, incidentally, that he learned through experience. Screenwriters, producers and executives all stressed the importance of this kind of agreement – ideally before even entering into the project of developing a screenplay at all. Producer Andy Paterson, additionally, emphasises the need to have a similar kind of agreement and likemindedness when it came to who was financing the development.

Most of my respondents also had tales of how it had gone wrong. And it normally goes wrong because the various people in the process had different (though possibly unarticulated) ideas about what kind of film they were making. Executive Sophie Meyer articulates the problem:

Sophie Meyer: Film development, the way it works, particularly when you start getting development financiers in the room and they may have a certain reference – they may be thinking *Kes* whereas you're thinking *St Trinians* – those influences can be quite tricky to keep the identity of the piece through what can be a long extended process...but again you have to make sure that everyone is on the same page, if so are we happy with that? Is that a good way to go? Again, conversations about tone, genre, audience which you have to have but it's difficult to make sure everyone's quite saying the same thing.

Lyle: because it's still slightly nebulous because it doesn't exist as a film? It's hard enough to say what kind of film it is, when it's actually made.

Meyer: exactly. And also, say you're using *Kes* as your tonal reference that film could also mean different things to different people. Some people could take away certain things, others may take away others and really digging down into that is hard. A lot of what you've got to go on is the track record of what those writers have done before – i.e. they know how to do comedy drama or whatever it is then hopefully we're all heading to the same place.

This excerpt illustrates firstly the importance of conceptual agreement between everyone involved, in keeping with my other interviews. It shows, too, how hard this can be. The use of 'tonal' references – such as films everyone may have seen – helps in this process of understanding but as Meyer points out, such comparisons are still not infallible. The same film could mean very different things to different people. Note, too, that the conversations revolve around genre (a short hand way to say what 'kind' of film is intended) but audience too. If we combine Meyer's response with the aforementioned quote from Nicholson, we can see that this is a stage – before a first

draft is even delivered – where things can go wrong. If the screenwriter has a different conception (in terms of key elements, tone, genre and the like) from the producer and/or executive before they start, the eventual delivery of the document will be a disappointment and a cause of friction. Common purpose is sought, in other words, but not always found.

There is an additional element alluded to in Meyer's quotation that is worthy of comment. She points to the fact that – given the difficulties of truly understanding one another in the conception stage of development – a lot of what she goes on is 'track record', knowing the work of the writers involved already, knowing they can deliver the kind of thing she's looking for. And, presumably, this is one of the reasons why most of my respondents expressed a preference for working with people who they'd already worked with before (a common trait of the development sector. Susan Rogers (2007, 8) found about half of the screenwriters she sampled had previous working relationships with those who commissioned them.)

We are in a position then, when development works at its best when the people involved – most often producer, writer and possibly executive (either of the financing body or working on behalf of the producer) – are 'on the same page', singing from the same hymn sheet, working with similar references and similar understandings of what those references may mean. It is a field, in other words, that thrives on shared understandings, on likemindedness, on common dispositions and tastes; and such a situation can often be assured by working with people who you already know.

The more of these tastes and dispositions a development practitioner can evidence – the more they can show their participation in the values of the field but, secondly, in the kinds of *habitus*es that other players in the field evidence – the higher their chances of success, by the very nature of how the field operates in practice. This is why, in the knowledge of the industry section of this thesis, it became apparent that certain modes of behaviour, diplomacy and in particular a sharing of taste and sensibility with others in the field, is so important to progression and success in the field. 'Being on the same page' can so often mean, 'working with people like us'. As Rachael Prior said in the knowledge chapter, they look for 'Big Talk' people. Conversely, Peter Bloore (2013, 264) looks at it from the screenwriter's perspective.

His first piece of advice to a writer who is looking for a producer to collaborate with is: ‘Do they share your taste in movies, books, plays?’

### **Interstitial Documents**

Once the screenplay development process has begun, it starts to generate documents. The types of documents vary quite markedly from writer to writer and from process to process. Even within the people I spoke to, there was no agreed way to go about the movement from idea, to short document to longer document to first draft of the screenplay. Each of the writers liked to work in a different way. Olivia Hetreed, for instance, writes an incredibly detailed and long prose document (she calls it a long treatment) which she then turns into a draft of a screenplay. Ayub Khan Din uses index cards to plan out his scenes and then writes a screenplay. William Nicholson writes a one to two page outline document of the story, then writes a screenplay from that.

The executives and producers seemed prepared to vary their practices around the screenplay depending on ‘what kind of writer’ they were dealing with. In the end, they are aiming towards getting a conventionally formatted screenplay.<sup>29</sup> No one I interviewed was at all concerned about what the various interstitial documents created in the process were called (i.e. treatment, step outline, beat outline and so forth) so much as what they were used for.

As mentioned, most of the screenwriters found a creatively important use for a pre-screenplay document – namely, it acts as a planning document. Varying in length, depending on what suits the specific writer, it’s a document they’ve written themselves that acts as an aid to writing the long form script. This is a document that will probably be seen by the producer and/or executive but one that is not intended to be shared outside the development group. Andy Paterson, for example, is very clear about this – a treatment (a prose document, however it is structured) is a ‘working

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<sup>29</sup> There is a lot of work about the history of the screenplay and how the conventions of formatting came about, which lie outside the remit of this study. See Staiger (1979; 1983; 1985a; 1985b), Sternberg (1997), Maras (2009) for examples. If we hark back to the purpose of the screenplay chapter in this thesis, we can see why a producer needs the screenplay to be in a conventional format.



document, not a selling document' that doesn't bear analysis in the same way that a screenplay does.

In some cases, a prose document has to be produced in order to raise finance. Specifically, a shorter document (from as little as one page upwards) can be intended to raise the finance to pay the writer. It may be (and often is) the case that the producer has an idea which they want to develop into a screenplay, but they have no money to pay a screenwriter. In these circumstances a shorter document can be written (by either the writer or producer) that persuades a financier – in conjunction with the curriculum vitae of the screenwriter – to pay the writer to write the screenplay. In such cases, the short document is often different from a planning document. William Nicholson agrees with Paterson in pointing out this contrast – his one to two page planning document is 'for me, only for me' and not to 'sell' at all. Such a selling document may have to indicate things such as tone, pace and genre in a way that is not nearly so important in a planning document where presumably the screenwriter already knows what they are trying to achieve in these areas.

### **Payment and Assignment**

This issue of finance brings us to the issue of payment for development. As I've pointed out earlier in this thesis none of the writers I interviewed normally write speculative screenplays. They are commissioned to write. Further, as we've also seen, most projects in development (or indeed those eventually produced) in the UK do not come from speculative screenplays. In other words, in the development process as it's conventionally carried out – and certainly as it is understood by those in the industry I interviewed – screenwriters are paid for their work, whether the film gets made or not. A traditionally structured development deal with the BFI or a broadcaster might include the major share of the money going towards paying the screenwriter's fee, with a much reduced amount for the producer. Or if the producer is funding development themselves, they may take this 'risk' investment on their own head. The screenwriter may also receive bonuses should the film go into production as well as often a percentage of the film's profits, should there be any.

Such a state of affairs undoubtedly has implications for the working relationships of the players in development. As writer William Nicholson observed:

Look, we're paid a lot of money up front. Producers don't get paid up front, so what are we crying about? If you want to control a project, don't take the money – write it, and say I'm not selling it yet, it's mine you can't sack me because you haven't paid me and that's fine. But once you start taking the money, you are a hired hand.

In his view, he's renounced any claim to controlling the project because he's taken the money up front. He's letting the producer take the risk, and he's happy enough to take his money. As he says, there is an alternative. Nicholson even uses the term 'hired hand' to describe himself but what struck me in the interview was that he wasn't complaining about being a 'hired hand' nor denigrating himself. He was explaining the situation as he saw it. I've included his response here partly because it articulates the practical position of the screenwriters I interviewed, and partly because it contrasts markedly with some other accounts.

The Writer's Guild of Great Britain (2009, 3), for example – as exemplified by their current president, and my interviewee, Olivia Hetreed – holds that rights should very much be part of the equation of UK screenwriters in the development process; that in an ideal world the writing work should be undertaken in the form of some sort of joint enterprise. Bridget Conor (2013, 49) also found a lot of evidence that UK screenwriter's resent being seen of as hired hands, and have some desire to re-align the balance of their control on the material they write.

The point here is not to try to settle some disagreement about how much writers should be paid – and for what rights – so much as to point out that it is usual practice in the UK that they do indeed get paid for their writing work. In return for this, of course, they have to assign any legal rights they might have over the material they write to the producer and/or financier. Debates continue in the industry as to whether or not this is fair – the main thrust of the WGGB position is that it is not, for instance (WGGB 2009, 16). What cannot surely be debated, however, is the fact that this practical state of affairs must have an effect on the development process, and the

dynamic between writers and producers. On the one hand, a screenwriter must sign away (assign) any moral rights they have in the screenplay they are about to write. On the other hand, they are being paid for this work while the producer – who may have spent time and money discovering the idea, or even coming up with it – is paid almost nothing for their work, unless the film goes into production (a one in five chance in the UK, remember.)

This is one of the major ‘struggles’ in the development field as a whole, between two of the groups I’ve studied: screenwriters and producers. And the stakes are very clear – on the one hand, there is a struggle over economic resources (how much will they be paid) and on the other hand there is a struggle over the control of the material from a cultural (and therefore symbolic) perspective. Who ultimately can decide what this work of art is to be? Who has that power? In the screenplay development process in the UK, screenwriters cede this power to the producers (who are often the financier’s proxy) in return for payment.

However, such a struggle as the one pointed out is not necessarily enacted during the screenplay development process. For such a process is normally a contracted one – the screenwriter has already agreed to assign their rights in the screenplay (just as the producer, if it is financed by a third party, has already agreed to assign their rights to the financier) and thus arguments (who has control of the project, who is being paid how much and the like) have already been settled.

### **The First Draft**

This is one of the most important stages of any development process, when the first draft of the screenplay is delivered. Few writers (and certainly none of my respondents) would claim that their first draft is the best, or the one that should go into production or anything so certain or complete. Yet it is vital, nevertheless. As Frank Cottrell Boyce says, previously quoted, it sets the compass for the rest of what follows.

It is also the first time that the story, the idea, has been set down in the format in which it will end up. As I've already pointed out, in most cases in the UK the screenplay is the vehicle that attracts attachments and finance and drives the project towards a production stage. For the first time, the other collaborators can begin to get a much better conception of what the screenplay might become.

In most cases, the delivery of the first draft also heralds further rounds of discussions, meetings and note taking and giving. My respondents agreed that this is a process that needs to be handled sensitively and well. The screenwriters wanted 'positivity', tact and 'license to fail'. They looked to the producer to provide a 'safe' and supportive environment where new ideas could be floated and where they didn't feel on the verge of being taken off the project and replaced. Although there was an admission that there was a lot of value in executive and producer feedback, writer Laurence Coriat (and to a lesser extent Olivia Hetreed) counselled against being too receptive to notes or 'eager to please'. Both stressed that this was a mistake they'd made in the past, where they should have felt more trust in their own instincts and been prepared to push back. As William Nicholson sees it, it's their (the executive or producer's) job to point out what's wrong – 'it's my job to fix it.'

That said, as Hetreed again pointed out, one's collaborators may in fact want different things from the screenwriter and ultimately it was her job to try to do what they asked, whether or not it was what she thought best as the writer. We can begin to see, then, how the role of the aforementioned diplomacy comes in – how a screenwriter may be required to argue a position (say if the producer or executive has a particularly bad idea), to fight their corner as it were, without the relationship breaking down sufficiently for the producer to lose faith in the writer. Such diplomacy works both ways of course. Executives and producers have to be 'sensitive' when dealing with the writer; they may have to change the writer's mind about something, or re-direct their energies, while keeping the writer committed to doing their best work.

I mentioned in the section on knowledge, that in my experience a script meeting is often very similar to a university tutorial and I use it as an example here. A good developer will often ask questions of a writer and their material, will seek to find out what the writer thinks they were trying to do, and will hopefully usher or guide the

writer to solutions. Bloore (2013, 176-200) describes such an idealised process so I won't go into it here, save to add the caveat that in the UK at least – despite this striven for collaboration – the producer nearly always has the option (if they have the money) of hiring a new writer, if the current writer doesn't deliver what they want.

### **Replacing the Writer**

When I first conceived of this study of development, I had anticipated that the practice of replacing writers on projects (especially prevalent in the US) was going to be a bone of some contention. Analysing my transcripts with the benefit of hindsight, it is obviously one of my concerns as an interviewer. Yet strangely it wasn't viewed as an especially heinous thing by any of my respondents. The writers in general thought that it was often done too hastily, or else it wasn't necessarily an effective strategy, but none of them had any moral objection. (It might have been a little inconsistent of each of them if they had, by the way, given that each of them had no objection in principle to rewriting other people's work.)

I had suspected that there would be much more opposition to this idea of replacing writers, certainly among the screenwriters. It is one of the complaints that sometimes rears its head in accounts of development hell. Yet it was not a particular gripe noticeable within my interviews. This may be because my respondents were on the record, or because they had reached a certain level in the industry – which either betokens success or jaded realism. Less surprisingly, the executives and producers had no qualms about hiring new writers. After all, to them it represented a continued commitment to trying to make the film, trying to get the screenplay for the specific project 'right'. As Rachel Prior said, often when she called writers with the 'bad' news that they were taking it the project to another writer she didn't feel too wary of passing on this news, because it represented a continued (and strong, given that a further financial outlay would be incurred) commitment to trying to make the film. Much worse, in her mind, to call a screenwriter and tell them that the project is being dropped completely.

## More Drafts

Regardless of whether or not the original screenwriter is replaced (still not that common in the UK), it is incredibly unusual for the first draft to be the end of the development process. Even the most basic of screenwriter's contracts normally allow for the screenwriter to do 'revisions', based on the notes of the producer and/or executive. Writer's contracts tend to be broken down into stages – with payment released on the delivery of a draft, or a revised draft, a new draft and so on. It is accepted practice in the field that any first draft of a screenplay will benefit from at least some rewriting. William Nicholson reckons it takes him three drafts to get the screenplay into a good place, for example, and not one of my screenwriting respondent's cavilled at the idea of revising their first effort.

It is worth considering this point for a moment. It is common, agreed practice that screenwriters are expected to rewrite and revise their work as a matter of course; a practice, furthermore, that the writers themselves seem to have no objection to. It is certainly not an objectionable practice in itself. Writers of all sorts have long advocated the virtues of rewriting. Yet how many playwrights, novelists, composers or painters would expect – as of routine – to have their work handed back to them with suggested revisions? Of course, feedback is given and used in these spheres also but not in such a formalised, almost institutionalised way. This points, yet again, to the industrial nature of screenplay development (and screenwriting) in the UK that sets it apart in some sense from other creative endeavours; this illustrates, furthermore, that it is indeed an industrial process.

According to my interviewees, in an ideal version of development the screenplay goes through two to three 'redrafts' with minor revisions in between. Such a process, again in an ideal world, involves the screenwriter meeting with their collaborators (producer and/or executive), taking their 'notes' and acting on them: finding solutions to the bits that aren't working, rethinking characters, restructuring plot-lines and so on and so forth. This goes on until the process has reached a point where the producer feels able to send the screenplay out into the world, for a director (if not already attached), actors and finance. It is ready to act as a love letter.

It has been arrived at through the catalyst of an idea (gleaned possibly through a development process), a lot of conversation, possibly a number of interstitial documents, and possibly paid for by a development financier. Producer, screenwriter, possibly executive (either working for the producer, or for the financier) and financier have collaborated to produce a screenplay document. Before we look at how that document works in the world, however, I want to take a moment to consider this process again.

### **Screenplay Development as an Art World**

In his book, *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker (1982/2008) set up a model for the creation of art that hoped to accommodate the various contributors to art, how they collaborate and cooperate, and how all art is collectively produced. He further argues that choices are also artistic contributions – that a work of art is created and ‘arises out of a much larger body of possibilities’ (2008, 197). Such choices and selections, furthermore, aren’t always made by the sole ‘artist.’ And we can very much see from the evidence in this thesis how many of the decisions – the ‘choices’ – made in the development of a screenplay might be made by different people at different times. What is a screenplay ‘note’ if it is not a suggestion to make one choice over another? To make a character funnier, to cut a character, to reverse an ending and so forth? One might almost say that the screenplay development process is an example of a Becker art world *par excellence*.

Indeed, Becker (2008, xviii) himself cites ‘the list of credits at the end of a big Hollywood film as the ultimate symbol of the cooperative networks that made the art I was talking about.’ And certainly, the accounts of the development process that I’ve elicited chime with these ideas when thinking about the early creation of the screenplay (at least when it works well.)

However, in my introduction I set up an opposition between Bourdieu and Becker’s differing accounts of the creation of art. For there is a problem in applying Becker’s thinking on art creation to screenplay development. This model of collaboration and cooperation doesn’t, when applied to development in the film industry, sufficiently

account for the conflict, competition and struggle inherent in filmmaking in the UK. For while the development of the screenplay leads to a creation in itself (there's a screenplay document at the end of the process, which could be argued to be a work of art in some sense), as we've seen the purpose of this document is actually to enable the creation of another, different work of art (the film.) In order to get into a position to make that film, however, the producers have to once again enter a field of conflict and competition. They have to compete for the scant resources available to fund the filmmaking, often vying with many others for these resources. And the screenplay is a producer's primary weapon in this struggle to make a film.

However, as the above illustrates, the process of the creation of the screenplay itself (whether or not it is claimed to be a work of art) bears a lot of the hallmarks of a Becker 'Art World'. For all that there is a lot of emotional conflict and struggle between the players involved, there is a common goal (the creation of a successful – that is financed - screenplay) that they all work toward. For all the argument that might take place, for all the 'negotiation' necessary to keep the project running smoothly, a screenplay produced by the process outlined above, is brought into being by the collaborative work of the practitioners involved, all of whom contribute in some way to the outcome. Indeed, as my interviews have attested, the very success of the development process normally requires 'everyone' to be pulling in the right direction, to be jointly committed to, and working towards, a shared goal of financeable screenplay (and hopefully, completed film.)

### **Other Models of Creativity**

Research into creativity has blossomed in recent years, as R. Keith Sawyer says, with scholars approaching the subject through the diverse prisms of either a focus on individual geniuses, a focus on the thought process involved in creative behaviour, or a focus on the sociocultural conditions of creativity (Sawyer 2012, 4.) Given the nature of screenplay development in the UK, as outlined in this thesis, it is arguable that as a site of study it has a lot to contribute particularly to the third strand of these types of creativity studies, namely a sociocultural approach. There isn't time to go into too much detail about creativity theory in general here, but it's worth pointing out a couple of the more prominent thinkers in this tradition for a moment.



Creativity scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 313-35; 1996, 27-50) argues for a systems view of creativity, where creativity comes about through the interaction of the individual with the field (society) and the wider domain (the culture). Even though this model still places emphasis on the individual's work, it nevertheless is a model that could possibly be added to and expanded upon by a consideration of film development – especially if one wanted to look at the process from the writer's point of view, i.e. casting the writer as the 'individual' in the model (rather than looking at the process from the industrial perspective taken in this thesis.) Indeed, Bloore (2013, 133-134) does this to some extent.

In other words, one could approach screenplay development as a system of creativity in the Csikszentmihalyi sense, where creativity is 'as much cultural and social as it is a psychological event' (1999, 313.) There are limits to this approach, however. Not only does it still perpetuate the idea of the individual creator, in reaction to the outside world, it also fails to take into account the unclear origins of many of the ideas in screenplay development in the UK, as we've seen previously.

Sawyer (2007, 2010, 2012) himself proposes a model of group creativity that could often be used to describe the work of feature film development. He argues for a recognition of the possibility of groups creating emergent phenomena (2010, 378.) Indeed, he explicitly refers to films and to television conception as examples of this kind of group/collective creation (2010, 371; 2012, 327-328.) Even this model can be problematic, however and at times can fail to recognise individual agency. The example that Sawyer quotes at length (2010, 371) is one he uses to argue that the creativity is situated in the group of writers, rather than with the 'showrunner' who is in charge of the discussion. Yet even in the quoted passage (the minutes of a writers meeting about creating an episode of a TV show), one could interpret it in a different way: my reading of the minutes was that the showrunner was very much in charge of the discussion, channelling the ideas, encouraging some, nixing others and by any account certainly 'leading'.

Whatever approach one takes to the question of creativity, however, it is clear that consideration of the screenplay development process can only add to these

discussions. We can go along with Macdonald (2013, 14-15) and follow Janet Wolff's (1993, 71) insight that the conceptualisation process of art in general springs from multiple contexts and sources. This process, as Macdonald points out, is mirrored in the conceptualisation of screenplays and hence movies.

Back to the matter in hand: the development team – producer, screenwriter, either production company executive or perhaps financier executive – have developed their screenplay, such that they are satisfied that it can achieve its first purpose: to go out into the wider industry and seduce people

### **3. The Screenplay out in the field**

In the worst case scenario, no one likes the screenplay. That is, when the producer sends it to directors, actors and financiers, all of them are not interested in making the film. In this instance, depending on the financial situation, either the producer can consider further iterations of the development process (as outlined above), with more drafts of the screenplay, or possibly with a new writer. In such an instance the producer might conclude that they sent the screenplay out too early in the development process. Further development, however, might be dependent on further finance, which might not be forthcoming. A more common option in such a scenario – complete rejection – would be to shelve the project, in the hope that interest might be rekindled at a later date. This last is akin to ditching the project, or at least spending no more time on it. Depending on the deal struck between producer and writer, the screenwriter may have a turnaround clause in the contract – which, after a pre-agreed time, means that the rights to make a film (subject to a repayment of fees) would revert to the screenwriter, who subsequently might wish to re-ignite the project elsewhere.

The above scenarios, while common, often represent the end of the development process (and the end of the project.) Remember at most only 20% of projects in active development make it to the screen – and this is the stage when many of them fail,

when the screenplay fails to attract a director, actors or financier. For, while a screenplay may be most likely to be produced in a process akin to Becker's collaborative Art Worlds paradigm, once the screenplay exists, the producer who owns it has to compete and struggle for resources in the field.

There are many more screenplays than there is money to finance their production. A producer has to outshine the competition for such resources, normally (as previously observed) with a package of which the screenplay is part. Yet in the same way that economic resources are limited, so too are other resources that can help a producer secure those economic resources. The 'name' actors can only make so many films in one year, will only commit to making some screenplays; a project can accrue significant cultural capital if it secures a certain director, but such directors are also scarce. Producers, clutching a screenplay the production of which may represent a highpoint in artistic collaboration, nevertheless have to struggle to gain the recognition and resources to turn the screenplay into a movie. They have to enter a Bourdieu like field of limited resources in order to try to create their art.

### **More Development**

If the screenplay works in its purpose of attracting people and finance to the project of making the film, then development work often begins again. This is particularly the case at the stage when the director comes on board, but – as we've seen – actors may wish to make contributions to the screenplay and, in particular, production financiers will often wish to make their voices heard. That is, they may want further changes to the screenplay. Further arguments over content may ensue. The director will often take a prominent role in these discussions, which can cause tension. As Sophie Meyer points out, at this stage an executive (certainly one in her position) often takes a more background role, while the producer, writer and director prepare the screenplay for production.

This can be a rather fraught stage for the development team too, however, because when production finance joins the table, they (or usually more than one) can become a powerful presence in the creative decision making process. Few of my interviewees

spoke directly about having to change an aspect of the screenplay against their will at the behest of a financier but most of the writers pointed to the need for a good and capable producer at this stage of the project. A producer who can keep the original project on track, while at the same time negotiating the (at times) competing requests of these various new entrants into the process.

Olivia Hetreed suggests that this is one of the reasons to work with a producer she trusts and can rely on, otherwise a project might be skewed in quite the wrong direction on the say so of a financier. Because, after all, while the financing party may not have been privy to all the previous iterations of the story and screenplay, ultimately they have the resource power to either make the film happen or not. It is very tempting for a producer to lamely succumb to such power (especially if we bear in mind that they only get the bulk of their fee if the film is made), while what they need to do (at least in the view of my respondents) is to make choices based on their understanding and conception of the project. As producer Cat Villiers said, she's never found the process of dealing with financiers and their development notes difficult, even though they have the money to make the film because 'I own the material.' She goes on to say, echoing others, that it is 'pointless' to get your film financed by someone who wants to make a different film from you, and that this is something you can sort out as a producer beforehand by picking your partners wisely.

What was apparent both about the initial stages of development, but also about this further development once the 'package' comes together, is that while it can be an arena for anger, misunderstanding and generally falling out (mainly over the creative content) it doesn't necessarily have to be so. Experienced practitioners all stress the desirability of clearing up as much of these problems before the screenplay writing process even gets under way. Where possible, the screenwriters in particular also liked to be working with the director, which again also avoids future disagreements. Once the initial phase is complete, a development team then looks to the producer to 'protect' the previously agreed vision of the project as it goes about accruing the various attachments needed to make a film. Again, although there's potential for pain in this process, it needn't necessarily be painful.

However, it has to be noted that when new attachments join a film project – be they directors, financiers or actors – they often have things to say about the screenplay. All my respondents pointed to this phase of development as a very important one – where the writers, for example, look to the producer to protect the work they’ve already done and where the producer seeks to strike a balance of views so as to keep a vision of the film intact. This very fact, that it is normal and expected practice for these forces to have comments and notes on the screenplay, in itself is further evidence to suggest the importance of the screenplay development stage. The ‘money’ (be they a public body like the BFI, or a US-financed, studio-backed distributor for example), in other words, seeks to exercise its power at this very point in the creation of the film. Indeed, not just the financiers but the stars, the producers, the director, the executives and the screenwriter all seek to get their concerns and interests reflected in the screenplay, as the preceding evidence suggests.

To take one example from my interviews, William Nicholson is always at pains to make sure before development starts how he is thinking of ending his screenplay because he knows that this can be a very large point of contention – especially if, as in his example, the ending is downbeat, if the lovers do not unite, or if the hero dies. As he knows, it is precisely these kinds of debates that happen over the screenplay, *in development*, and the very fact that those involved are so eager to enter into debate over the screenplay illustrates its very importance.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter I’ve shown how screenplay development, even from the very earliest starting points, is a product of process as much as the product of individual inspiration. In the eyes of those who do it, it is a collaborative exercise from concept generation right through to crossing the tees on the shooting script. It contains the input of various voices, the final contribution of which is difficult to ascertain. It is the

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<sup>30</sup> The one caveat I will insert here is that the later someone comes on board a project, the weaker their objections to aspects of the screenplay can be. For example, an actor or director or financier will have attached themselves to a project based on the screenplay – and thus they can hardly say the screenplay is no good, given that they have already ‘approved’ it, in some sense. That said, the oft cited reason for attachments to leave a project is ‘creative differences’, which may often – though not exclusively – refer to differences about screenplay content.

subject of argument and negotiation. As an industry sector, development is also the site of disputes over pay and control. Yet in many ways, any given screenplay is also the product of the kind of collaboration and cooperative effort Becker outlined in *Art Worlds*.

Despite this, however, screenplays are designed as part of the process of making a film. Those behind the creation of the screenplay then have to struggle against fierce competition for limited resources, if they are going to get their film made at all. Producers need to accrue the capital, in all or any of its forms, to help them raise the economic capital, otherwise their lovingly (and possibly collaboratively) created screenplay will fail in its purpose. Screenplays compete in a limited field for resources, and only the very few succeed.

At a deeper level, this chapter has shown that successful development often relies on a high degree of likemindedness and fellow-feeling between practitioners; collaborators like to work with the same people again, if possible. They feel it important to share tastes and dispositions, to ‘speak the same language’, to ‘get’ one another. (It is a social as well as a professional experience, with meetings and discussion.) The greater one’s predispositions and classificatory tastes match others in the field, the more likely one is to be able to achieve success in the development field. As outlined in my chapter on context, we can see that development is like a Bourdieu field, where coincidence and cross-over of *habitus* is advantageous. And in this sense, it is a limited domain. We’ve already seen that it’s hard to get into; that its values are self-reproducing, with little input from outside the field; and, as we can see from the foregoing, the practices do little to challenge this state of affairs.

We have seen, in other words, how the various strands of ‘development knowledge’ come together in practice. How the screenplay development field generates ideas that will satisfy the field, based on the values of that field. And the screenplay development field is designed through its practices to create ‘pre-legitimised’ and ‘pre-consecrated’ work. Films are ‘pre-legitimised’ and ‘pre-consecrated’, through this process of development. It is this very process that makes them so.

## Part IV – Implication

### Chapter Seven - Authorship

#### Introduction

**‘Ethnographies of creative practice have comprehensively discredited romanticized images of the lone artist or author struggling to realise his or her unique vision.’** (Murdock 2003, 33)

While what Graham Murdock wrote more than ten years ago may well be true – certainly, this thesis does not hold the view which he discredits – authorship is still a hotly debated topic, both in film studies as a whole but also in areas such as the new scholarship around screenwriting. Not only does the question of who authors a film exercise scholarly minds, it was equally of interest to many of my respondents.

In this chapter, I want to analyse some of the responses of my interviewees to this debate. How do they see authorship? Following on from their evidence – and the evidence previously outlined in this thesis – I want to propose a model of my own for authorship, or creative leadership, in the UK film industry. Based on this analysis of the development field, the model of producer as creative leader is not intended to hold true for all films; rather I wish to put in onto the agenda as a model for many more films than is currently the case.

#### The Debate

In a debate spurred on by the French critics-come-filmmakers of the 1950s, *Cahiers du Cinema* gave a platform for the auteur theory. Exemplified by the work of Francois Truffaut (1954) and André Bazin (1957) in particular, the theory attempted to place

certain directors at the creative heart of the films they directed; this privileging of the director's role was subsequently taken further, particularly by the likes of Andrew Sarris (1962).

Whether or not the wider world subscribes to such a view in a fully conscious and rigorously academic way, this idea that the director is in some sense *the* author of a film is widespread, and still evidenced even in academia. Film Studies courses run modules on the works of specific directors; books and articles on directors continue to be published in great amounts; film festivals run retrospectives of director's 'works'; and critical and media reception and publicity of new films still revolves primarily around the director and the cast. It is a hard habit to kick. Even in Howard Becker's *Art World*, a book that cites film as the ultimate example of collaborative authorship, when talking about *The Red Badge of Courage* Becker (1982, 85) writes that director John Huston 'allowed studio executives to alter *his* film.' (Emphasis added.)

Auteur theory, both in its original manifestations and in the more radical version pushed by Sarris (1962), drew an inevitable response, not least from those wishing to re-state the value of the screenwriter. Richard Corliss (1972) proposed a model that tried to place screenwriting at the pinnacle of authorship in film. Even right down to the present day, screenwriters have been trying to claim at least a certain degree of authorship back from directors. We've already seen in this thesis how both the WGGB (2009) and the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe (2006) explicitly want to assert that the screenwriter is at least *an* author of the finished film. The recent BAFTA series of screenwriting lectures, started in 2010 but as of writing still ongoing, has as one of its chief aims to assert this very fact (Jeremy Brock 2013). It would be strange indeed for these organisations, working on behalf of screenwriters, to take these steps if they felt there were no need.

Such a conflict – between director as author and screenwriter as author – of course depends on the assumption that there can indeed be an author or authors at all. This assumption was challenged, most brilliantly by Roland Barthes in '*The Death of the Author*.' He argued that the 'author' (or 'auteur') is a construct, that what such an 'author' might mean is not relevant to a reader (or viewer's) understanding of a given text. However, I don't intend to deal with this view here given that such an



assumption does indeed underpin the responses of all my interviewees, as well as much of the debate around authorship in film.

Despite the work of deconstructionists, like Barthes (1968), or sociologists like Becker (1982), the power of the author as an idea does indeed persist, both in popular understanding of film and other creative products, and in an industrial sense. Authorship often plays a key role in marketing films for example, and also plays a significant role when it comes to prestige in the field. The notion of critical acclaim, for instance, is a concept that often involves acclaiming an author, be they singular or as part of a group. Awards are awarded to individuals, to people, not to processes or ‘readings’. (Although, of course, awards are bestowed as a *consequence* of a reading – by jury members.)

In keeping with this view, my respondents were alive to the notion of authorship; they were ready to delve into the debate; and they all assumed that it was a debate that could be had. In other words, the assumption was that films could be *authored*. What was at stake, for my respondents, was not whether there could be an author (or more accurately authors) but who those authors might be.

### **A Film By....**

Like Murdock (2003), most of my interviewees were dismissive of the idea that there could be one sole author of a film at least as regards most films. In particular, they were dismissive of the idea that the director should be considered as the author of a film. The recent spread of the credit ‘A Film By...’ being given to directors was something that cropped up, and was referred to, in rather disparaging terms. ‘The assumption that the director is the author of every film is ludicrous,’ according to producer Andy Paterson, while executive Sophie Meyer notes that ‘the “film by” credit is one of the most contentious things around.’

In 2010 BAFTA in collaboration with the BFI inaugurated a series of screenwriting lectures. The brainchild of screenwriter Jeremy Brock, he later said that the point of such a series was to ‘kill off’ the idea that screenwriters weren’t true authors. In an

article entitled '*Celebrating the craft of screenwriting*<sup>31</sup>', Brock (2013) went on to articulate this view: 'The idea that a film is authored by a single vision is ridiculous, yet more and more directors take the possessory credit...."a film by". In so doing, they demean the efforts of all who engaged in that collective effort with them.'

One of the fullest accounts of a case against the idea of the director as author that I encountered in my research came from William Nicholson. This is the opening of my interview with him, which also illustrates my own initial position on the point.

Lyle: I think a lot of the work that goes on in development has a big impact on what the film is, often before a director gets involved.

Nicholson: Almost always.

Lyle: okay, so would you agree with that statement then?

Nicholson: Totally, totally. The film is completely constructed before a director comes near it. The current cult of the director is complete nonsense.

Later in the interview he went on to say:

Why does a director like Ridley Scott have 50% wonderful films and 50 % terrible films? Well look at where they come from – if you have a good story well written, well-constructed, he's a genius of a director, a genius of a shooter. He will make it look fantastic but he's completely incapable of making a bad story into a good film, as is everybody.

The first thing to note is that my initial question could be considered to be somewhat leading in nature. In the general chit chat before the interview began, I had told Nicholson that I'd listened to his BAFTA screenwriter's lecture (Nicholson 2011) and he had asked about the context of my study, why I was studying development in other

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<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note, as an aside and bearing in mind the discussion earlier in this thesis, that Brock is unafraid of using the term 'craft' in conjunction with 'creativity' and 'authorship.' As are those two writers trade bodies, previously referenced, the WGGB and the ESF.

words. The interview then opened with my answer to this question. While on the one hand, I could be criticised as an interviewer for placing one of my views so front and centre, in this instance I think that such a criticism is unfounded, given that the assumption that underpins the question is one of the initial research parameters. The study was constructed from its very outset on the assumption that much development work goes on in the UK, often without a director involved.

Nicholson's reply is bullish. His claim that the 'film is completely constructed' in the development phase is a very strong version of what we seen already in lesser forms and is emblematic of his claims (made elsewhere – see the aforementioned lecture and in my interview) to being an author of the films for which he wrote the screenplay. He never claims to be a sole author, however, but always claims a share of authorship. He doesn't make clear, in the rest of the interview, precisely what 'constructed' might mean in this context – because clearly in a physical sense, at least, the film does not exist without a director.

Construction, in Nicholson's usage, must be akin to mentally constructed or conceived, though again note the strengthening term 'completely'. In his mind, he is not just writing a screenplay, he is constructing a film.<sup>32</sup> Producer Andy Paterson describes this 'construction', the writing of the screenplay, in slightly different terms. For him, 'Someone has actually conceived and written down exactly what the film is before the director comes on board.' Again, this kind of language reinforces the notion that the film exists in some non-physical sense. The screenplay represents 'what the film is.'

Such strength of language is evidence not only of how these respondents think of the screenplay but also, perhaps, it illustrates a strength of feeling in regard to this particular point of contention – namely, the director's prime claim to authorship. Both interviewees, reflecting the view in the main of all my respondents, were dismissive of the idea of a sole author (e.g. the director) when it came to film. This isn't to say the work of the director went unacknowledged – in many instances, people referred to the director's 'vision', for example – and most were appreciative of 'good' directors,

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<sup>32</sup> Nicholson, coincidentally, is the only one of my interviewees who has also directed a feature film.

and all felt them an integral part of making the film. Few, however, countenanced the idea of such films being solely the province of the director – as suggested by a current industry trope of offering directors ‘A Film By...’ credit.

### **Alternative Models**

It would be impossible for anyone to conclude, faced with the evidence of my interviews, that the development practitioners in the UK view the director as a viable candidate for authorship when it comes to the majority of feature films. There was some difference of opinion as to the importance of the director – their *vision*, their ability – with, unsurprisingly enough, those more associated with the art house end of the market placing a higher value on the creative and authorial input of the director (rather than the managerial and leadership input.) So, Chris Collins of the BFI for example, looked to the director to put their visual stamp on the material – trusts in the director, in other words, to bring some visual storytelling talent and expertise to the project.

Nevertheless, the members of the development field in the UK do not subscribe to the view of a director as sole author. In the majority of cases, they do not think it appropriate that a director get a ‘Film By’ credit, despite the fact that this is often accorded directors – even first-time directors, who have not even written the screenplay.<sup>33</sup> Yet, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, the idea that there is an author still persists.

### **Joint Authorship**

It is not an earth-shattering revelation to propose a model of joint authorship. As I hope the previous thesis has shown – particularly the section on the Creation of the Screenplay – screenplay development is very much a collaborative effort. Given the views of my respondents on the Purpose of the Screenplay, we can further say that a

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<sup>33</sup> E.g. 2014 film *71* is advertised on its posters as ‘A Film By Yann Demange’ although this is his first feature film and the only other credit he gets on the film is as director.

model of joint authorship (of any finished film certainly, but also to an extent the screenplay itself) is prevalent in the field. As previously pointed out, many of the early stages of development very much accord with the Becker (1982/2008) view of a collaborative art world. It is a picture that is in keeping with what Murdock (2002, 33) described as most ethnographies of creative practice.

This isn't to say that any of my respondents claimed to subscribe to a notion that there were no authors. As we saw in the Origin Stories chapter, these are people with highly developed biographies of 'self', that very much place their own actions as key determinants in their careers and their work. In other words, in this view films (and screenplays) are authored, and they are authored by people, identifiable as individuals, rather than solely as products of a system. Nicholson acknowledges the context, but still places his work (and that of others) as operating within it:

This notion that artists are left alone to their own creative genius is such a stupid idea. We all work within traditions, within groups, we all work with the responses of others to our work and that tension between the drive of the creative artist and the needs of all the people who are going to view that work is what makes good work and we should celebrate this and not act like this is some kind of degradation.

He clings to the idea of the 'creative artist' (himself in this case), while dismissing the notion of the 'lone' artist. It is a picture of a self-determining agent, working within a field and springing from a *habitus* that helps to construct that very agent; the very paradox that we see discussed (and sometimes evaded) in Bourdieu. Not the sole romantic artist creating work out of thin air, yet not solely the socially and economically constructed vehicle of history either.

Nicholson conceives of himself as a creative artist, yet one working within (and responding to the needs of) a field of cultural production. And this, I argue, is indicative of how my respondents think of authorship in film. It is the result of groups of creative artists, working in collaboration. Most of my respondents, furthermore, would go as far as to say that one might even be able to establish (or at least estimate) degrees of contribution towards the authorship of a piece of work. There was a broad

acknowledgement, for example, that a director who also wrote the screenplay had a greater claim to authorship (although not *sole* authorship) than someone who did only one of those jobs.

The prevailing view was that the question of ‘who’ authored a film was a complex one that depended on the film in question. In other words, like many other aspects of film production, the creative contributions varied from project to project, and that such ‘credit’ wouldn’t always be that easy to apportion, though not necessarily impossible. This is one of the reasons why, for example, the WGGB are making such an effort to see the work of the screenwriter more fully recognised, to make sure that the writer gets more of the credit than heretofore.

Some of my interviewees expressed the view that, although acknowledging that filmmaking was a collaboration, it would be impossible to accurately calculate the value of different people’s creative contributions within that collaboration. Frank Cottrell Boyce put it like this: ‘You don’t know what the room’s like when you’re not in it.... You don’t know what your contribution to someone else’s creativity is.’

As the beginning of this chapter intimated, the majority of the work surrounding authorship in film has centred on the director’s role, often in distinction to the writer. That is, if one is going to posit the idea of an author (or authors) at all then in most of the literature the chief rival to the director for this title has generally been the screenwriter. And this is a chord still being played, as the BAFTA lecture series and the moves by the WGGB intimate.

However, my research into the development field throws up another candidate – not to be thought of necessarily as the sole author (we’ve already seen how no one in the field subscribes to such a view), but a role that plays a much greater part in the authorship equation that has previously acknowledged: the producer.

### **The Producer as Creative Leader**

I should reiterate that the following argument is not intended to place the producer as some kind of auteur on their own, as always the sole creator of the films they produce. Having challenged the notion that the director or writer can be given such a status, I am not intending to hand the laurels to any other individual. Despite this, however, what I will do in the following is examine the role of the producer as a creative leader – how this is one viable model for filmmaking in *certain instances*. That a consideration of development, in particular, can illuminate to some extent the creative contribution of producers, a contribution that is often overlooked.

One only has to read a history of the golden age of Hollywood and the studio era to come across the idea of the old-style ‘Hollywood Producer’ as being a wielder of immense power, of hiring and firing writers, directors, stars and heaven knows who else in the making of the big studio movies of the thirties and forties. Darryl F. Zanuck and David O Selznick, in particular, are often cited as a producorial leaders by the likes of Matthew Bernstein (2006), Caldwell (2008, 199-200) and Alejandro Pardo (2010). Indeed, according to Caldwell (2008, 200), not only did Selznick hire and fire four different directors on *Gone With The Wind*, he also claimed to have invented the role (for William Cameron Menzies) of production designer. Such scholarship stresses the producer as controller.

In this American context, Bernstein (2006) also makes the case for the producer as a key creative collaborator. While this work does much to emphasise the collaborative nature of filmmaking, it is more of a piece with this view of joint authorship outlined above, although he does make a compelling case for Merian C. Cooper as being the auteur-producer behind *King Kong* (2006, 181-2). Such work not only emphasises the role of leadership by the producer, but also accents the creative aspects to the job.

More recently still, scholarship coming out of the *British Journal of Cinema and Television* has sought to place the work of the British producer back into the spotlight. Porter (2012, 23) points out that ‘The sooner film scholars are able to come to grips with the role of the producer in promoting and sustaining the collective endeavour of film production, the better.’ Hoyle (2012, 79) urges the ‘creative contributions’ of producers to be taken into account whilst Spicer (2004; 2010) often refers to a notion of the ‘creative producer’ – talking about producers such as Michael Klinger. This

notion of the ‘creative producer’ also appears in the work of Pardo (2010), who gives a historical account of producer creativity (particularly in the US) before moving on to present day Europe. He offers up David Putnam, especially, as an exemplar of the creative producer (2010, 13).

John Caughie (1986, 200) is another who tries to capture this aspect of the producer’s work, especially in the UK context, when he claimed that ‘The importance of the producer-artists seems to be a specific feature of British cinema.’ As he points out, there is a tradition in the UK industry of powerful producers such as Alexander Korda, Michael Balcon and the Boulting Brothers. This tradition of a strong producer is alive and well in the UK industry today, albeit often without the ‘star names’ of the past.

And I agree with much of this scholarship, indeed, I intend to argue below that the role of the producer as creative leader has been long insufficiently acknowledged. Yet even as these scholars try to address this issue, I still think that there is a gap in their understanding. For while the point is taken – that the producer is more creatively important than most other scholarship would have us believe – I think that none of these scholars have yet looked significantly at the phase of production that most justifies such a claim: Development.

It is in development, first and foremost, that the producer has most creative input and control; it is in this very phase, certainly in the UK context, where that producerial role comes closest to what we might term creative and authorial. Hence it is perhaps unsurprising that when speaking to those people working in the development field, I came across such a wealth of evidence to support this view as producer as both creative and leading.

We’ve already seen an account of film conception and execution, a picture that very often doesn’t involve a director and that also, very often, doesn’t involve a screenwriter until the producer approaches them with an idea or piece of material for a film. The producer (perhaps in conjunction with their development executive) has chosen a writer, works with that writer to get the screenplay to a place where they think they can then hire a director (which they also choose), before then trying to



finance the film with partners they think best fit what they think the film should be. Consider this from executive Rachael Prior:

[What makes a good film is contained in the script] And then the people that have developed that script are then bringing other creatives to that project that they believe are in line with that vision and when you're sitting around talking to a director, you're going to put a director on who speaks to the vision that you have worked on with the writer, as you well know.

Here is a process described very succinctly. Not only the belief that it is the screenplay that will ultimately determine whether you can make a good film or not (the qualities of a 'good film' are contained in the script); but also that that document has been developed and built up by the production company, under the direction of the producer (or their proxy, the executive); and that the further selection of creative personnel is driven by the needs to fit in with this pre-developed idea. As the last four words of this quotation attest, this is a common enough process in the film industry – Prior knows from my own experience that 'as you well know.'

The figures illustrate this point – most projects are developed in-house and it is this very development that determines to a large extent the nature of those films, in terms of story, character and genre. Amelia Granger told me that her job in development was to find projects that fit in with the Working Title brand, in other words projects that accord with the taste of the two chief producers Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner. And furthermore, her job is to 'look for projects that stand up in their own right, regardless of who the director is.' Who is leading the creation of these projects, if not the production company and producer?

While we might expect producers and production companies to be forthright in positioning their own creative contribution, evidence from the rest of my interviewees often buttressed these claims. The screenwriters placed great store in teaming with the right producer, a strong producer, who 'could get the film made' – and remember, they all freely admitted to predominantly writing their screenplays based on ideas that were brought to them rather than being self-generated. The WGGB's good practice

document drives this point home ‘It is the producer who makes the film happen’ (2009, 6).

At the beginning of this thesis I defined the producer as ‘the person (or persons, there’s often more than one) that is in charge of a film’s production legally, contractually and financially. They are responsible for hiring and firing anyone who works on the production including the writer or director.’ We’ve subsequently seen the major role they play in the development process, how such a role often encompasses coming up with the ideas for films. Such a task – of being in charge of a film’s total production – starts in the development process, where the producer is almost always present.

Take this from executive Dan MacRae. After highlighting the fact that no one knows what producers do, he told me: ‘A producer conceptualises the whole project and has a notion of how that’s going to operate from a germ of an idea to the finished film and has a strong sense of how they are going to deliver.’ As we’ve seen, in many cases the producer also comes up with that germ of an idea too. MacRae’s distribution company relies on producers to ‘deliver’ the film.

So, I’ve pointed out how the ideas come from a milieu generated by the producer. Producers go out either themselves or they instruct employees to go out to find material; to find the kind of writers they think can write the kind of film they want to make; they find directors that they think can direct the film they want to make; then they find the money to pay everyone, then they go through the editing process, the marketing and distribution of the film, at all times moulding, protecting an idea that became a screenplay however many months or years earlier. As producer Cat Villiers says, ‘it’s producer’s job to see the whole picture.’

I shall finish this section with a particularly revealing story from Chris Collins, formerly executive at the UKFC and when I interviewed him an executive in the production fund of the BFI. I asked him about how the BFI supports filmmakers, in terms of who needs to be involved in the development team before the project can be deemed suitable for funding.

It's always a producer involved for us, now. Historically we sometimes developed (low budget schemes) we had direct relationships with writers without producers but we found that those projects which were sort of orphaned really struggled to find a home, however good they were. Even some where we really loved the scripts, being able to bring a producer on to that actually was sometimes quite difficult. Which always slightly surprised me but it's quite hard to get producers to read projects that they haven't gone out and got themselves. And then to love them is a whole other thing.

This is quite revealing. The BFI found no point in developing projects directly with writers, because the films simply wouldn't get made. You can't make a film without a producer. What is especially revealing here, is that it was 'very hard' even to get a producer interested in something they hadn't developed themselves. The BFI (which let's remember, means that there is already a good prospect of financial support for the intended project) struggled even to get producers to *read* projects that those producers hadn't developed, let alone consider as a potential project to produce.

Let us dwell on that for a second. Screenplays that have gone through a development process, that have been to some extent 'pre-approved' for financing by one of the key public financiers in the sector, were not interesting propositions to producers. This tells us two key things about this attempt by the BFI to directly fund screenwriters. Firstly, screenplays don't get made into films without producers. Secondly, screenplays that weren't *developed* by producers struggled to attract them. In other words, and to extrapolate, we may say the *creative* contribution of producers to the development process is essential to the very existence of the films they produce and therefore, by extension, to films at all. Without it, the chances of a screenplay making it to the screen drastically diminish.

Collins' story in itself is evidence to suggest that the idea of a producer selecting a screenplay, of simply being the 'money man' behind film production is both outdated and fanciful. Taken together with the rest of the evidence in this thesis, I think we can say that the role of the producer is in most cases absolutely pivotal to the creative content of screenplays (and subsequently films) and that the idea – still propagated in screenwriting manuals, press texts and the like – that the producer solely enables the

work of the ‘creative’ talents of screenwriter and director is a difficult one to sustain. Phil Parker (2006, 10), for example, claims that: ‘Producers uncertain of their own ability to recognise a good screenplay fall back on successful stage plays and books for adaptations.’ Rather than their inability to recognise a good screenplay, however, what my evidence has shown is that producers very often have a hand in *creating* the screenplays. The Collins story also rather detracts from those, mainly screenwriters, who call for more funding to be given directly to writers to help them flesh out their vision.<sup>34</sup>

There is a further policy implication to this position, one that the BFI seem to have taken on (judging by my interview with Collins) albeit in a rather low key way. That is, that the best way to spend public money on development is to funnel it through producers. That ideas for screenplays, and matching the appropriate screenwriter to an idea, is work best done by producers. Though Collins pointed this out to me in a rather underplayed way, the implication is larger than this would suggest. That despite the rather ubiquitous portrayal of the producer as a business-person, the reality in the UK film industry is that in most cases the producer is also a vital creative element in the making of any film; not only will the film ‘not get made’ without the producer, a screenplay won’t even get successfully developed without one.

As pointed out at the top of this section, the intention here is not to substitute the producer for the director (or anyone else) in the auteur position. Rather it is to illustrate a possible model where a producer could be looked on as a creative leader, on certain projects (rather than on *all* projects.) Furthermore, the arguments alluded to above regarding a strong producer made by the likes of Spicer et al can be further supported and buttressed by this consideration of the development process. In other words, scholars might look to the development phase of production to make even stronger cases for the producer as creative leader, as judging from my interviews it appears that producers in the UK do indeed often lead this phase of the overall production process.

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<sup>34</sup> Such as the ‘anonymous screenwriter’ quoted in Bloore (2013, 272).

It is time, therefore, to recast the role of the British film producer; to place them at the centre of any understanding of how films get made; and consequently to consider them at times canonically; to be worthy of criticism and praise for their artistic contribution to the cinema; and no longer to be always thought of as a background presence, handling the money while others 'create' the film.

## Chapter Eight: Conclusions

Before I had even submitted the research proposal for this study, I had in my mind one starting point. That screenplay development was important, crucial even, and that the knowledge and power exerted in that phase of production had a vital part to play in the understanding of how films are made. This was a position based on my experience in the industry. I hope at the very least, this thesis has shown the truth of this position. Development is a cauldron of creativity in the film industry, and therefore in film-making in the UK. The structure of development, the conventions, the practice, the personality types and the culture itself all have a major bearing on the nature and content of the films that reach our screens.

Once I started engaging with the academic literature around production and screenwriting studies, deeper questions started to form: how is such knowledge gained? What legitimacy does it have? Who are the people that claim to know about developing screenplays and how do they evoke this knowledge in practice? Such questions coalesced eventually into the research questions set forth in Chapter One of this thesis, reproduced here:

How do screenplay development practitioners construct knowledge: what do they need to know, how do they come to know it and how do they use it once they've got it?

And

How do these practitioners account for the aims and practices of screenplay development, as they experience them?

And further

What can such an investigation tell us about the actual practices and culture of the screenplay development process in the UK? And consequently what are the implications for academics, policy-makers and the industry?

### **Film screenplay development as separate and distinct**

In order to go about answering these questions, I first had to establish that screenplay development was indeed a separate sphere from the rest of the production process. If you are proposing an area of study, such as I am, then you have to make a case for that area being distinct.

Consequently, in Chapter One, I illustrated how feature film funding works in the UK industry. How films are funded on a project to project basis and how this operates differently from much of the funding of television drama, at least as regards the screenwriting aspects. We've also seen how screenplay development is, both legally and in practice, initially a separate field of activity from production, a fact born out not only by the special concentration on it as a sector (from the likes of the UKFC) but also by the sobering statistic that at most only 20% of projects in development in the UK make it into production. In other words, most screenplay development activity happens independently of production activity. While the latter may depend on the former, the former carries on regardless, *has to* carry on – otherwise there will be no films.

We've also seen how practitioners in this field perceive screenplay development to be a separate activity from television screenplay development, and how 'development' – while its ultimate purpose is to lead to a film – is spoken about by these practitioners as a separate realm of activity, with its own norms, conventions and culture. The very fact that my respondents understood my requests to talk about 'development' without any need for elaboration or clarification, suggests they are used to talking about it as something happening in its own sphere.

In other words, screenplay development can be viewed as a field of cultural production, the cultural 'product' of which is film screenplays. While such a

conclusion helps to validate further study into film screenplay development in and of itself, it also adds to evidence for those – such as Maras (2009) – who claim that there has been a definitive split between conception and execution in the making of films. His conclusions are drawn from the US film industry, but it is clear from my study that this schism exists in the UK too. Whether or not such a split is a bad thing, is perhaps for others to answer (Maras thinks so) – what is more certain, and what this thesis avers, is that in the UK they are indeed separate and distinct as part of the usual practice.

Caldwell (2008, 7) argues that ‘To more fully understand “film’s production of culture” today means looking more closely at the “culture of film/video production.”’ I agree with him but I would go further and aver that to understand the culture of film production, one needs to also understand this separate culture of film conception, i.e. screenplay development. Project conception is at the heart of what a project is, and what it means, and if we want to understand how work is made, we need to understand also how it is conceived. I hope this thesis at the very least has illustrated, furthermore, that screenplay conception (and by extension, film conception) is also an industrial process worthy of industry-level study. This holds true of the present and future production, whether it be at an industry wide level or in case studies; and of course, it also holds true of historical research.

Film historians arguing for a greater emphasis to be placed on the creative role of the producer such as Spicer (2004; 2010), Bernstein (2006) and Pardo (2010) could find further support and evidence for such positions by looking more fully into the development phase of production. In particular, in the UK context at least, a foregrounding of the development stage may indeed strengthen such cases to a much greater extent than previously thought. Likewise, we’ve seen examples in this thesis of the arguably ‘hidden’ labour of development, currently often done by women, which might also add to the debates coming out of the Woman's Film History Network from the likes of Ball and Bell (2013) and Williams (2013).

These types of historical research projects need to be done before one can accurately assess their value. However, I hope that this current study – while being predominantly concerned with current practice – has suggested some fruitful ways



forward for historical study and that the evidence contained has contributed towards these debates.

The main thrust of the thesis, however, concerned current practice and practitioners and as part of that investigation, I looked into the origin stories of present-day practitioners.

## **Culture**

This thesis in part takes its cue from Caldwell's (2008, 7) exhortation to study the 'culture of film production.' I further took inspiration from Hesmondhalgh's (2010, 146) desire to see studies of the people who 'cause media to take the forms they do' and from Macdonald's (2003, 33-34) call for more investigation into the process of development and the 'industrial custom and practices, and the roles and personalities within those practices.' As my research questions attest, I was particularly interested in how knowledge was constructed by the practitioners within that process. This thesis has, I hope, contributed a further investigation into the issues that interested these scholars in their different ways.

In my search to uncover some of the roots of practitioner knowledge in the development process, I asked my interviewees about how they got into the film industry at all and what prior knowledge they brought to it. This line of enquiry, using the tools of narrative analysis espoused by production studies scholars such as Caldwell (2006; 2008; 2009) and Miranda Banks (2014, 546), subsequently led me to the delineating of 'Origin Stories' into three types. Analysing such narratives of origin – their structure as much as their content – adds to the growing body of production studies data.

Caldwell's 2008 *Production Culture* in particular turned a sharp eye on the stories the industry members tell, about the industry and about themselves, revealing much about how the industry works. The analysis of the Origin Stories in this thesis takes this much further by suggesting another – perhaps even more revelatory – 'genre' that can tell us a lot about how professionals see themselves and their jobs, in the UK film

industry. In this current account, the analysis has shown how those occupying differing roles choose to construct their entries into the field, and how they go about legitimizing their place and asserting their authority. Consequently, it is possible to make some observations about the nature of those roles and how they operate within the field. In particular, how the interviewed producers tended to put forward a narrative of self-generated control and leadership, albeit recognising the collaborative nature of their projects; how the writers formulated their responses using a destiny type story that seeks authority through a notion of pre-determination, whilst also employing a mode of collaboration; and how the executives frame their responses in a way that suggests they get authority from ‘gaining their spurs’, from a gradual accumulation of knowledge, rather than from either leadership or destiny.

In addition to telling us something about these specific roles, the analysis of the Origin Stories as a whole illustrates a wider-held belief about the specialness and exoticism of the industry. Or rather, how development practitioners talk about how they started (and what they don’t talk about) paints a picture of filmmaking and film development that rarely questions the high desirability of working in that sector. This is a culture whose members take for granted the value and desirability of what they do. That’s not to say this is a bad thing in itself. It would be mean-spirited indeed to actively want people *not* to value their job and *not* to think it was desirable. However, such a position might lead to complacency and a lack of critical vigour. It can make any attempt at reform all the harder, and embeds practices ever deeper. If one of the markers of a field is a generally held view that it’s great, then the chances of changes being wrought from within that field are radically diminished.

As a corollary, such stories can help us begin to build up a picture of the screenplay development field and who constitutes it. These accounts of origins allowed for a thick description of the educational, class and geographical origins of the practitioners, which helps to build up a picture of the nature of the field. What began to emerge, as the analysis moved into an account of how knowledge was gained and used, but especially within these origin stories, was a field that evidenced a certain commonality or narrowness of pre-disposition and self-conception that further defines the field in a Bourdieu like way.

Respondents cast themselves as self-determining agents, in charge of their own destiny; it is a heroic conception and suggests that such self-conception is a trait of the field as a whole. It further suggests that such a disposition is important to success in the field and, consequently, that this field (of screenplay development) is dominated by self-legitimizing narratives of self-determination. This analysis goes further than Caldwell (2008), however, when we consider that the practitioners interviewed here are directly involved in the both the creation of the content of films, and in the decision-making process of what gets made at all. Their views and predispositions have a crucial bearing on film content as a whole in the UK, for they are the ones that shape it in its first instance.

### **A Narrow Field, Looking Inwards**

These origin stories pointed to a certain convergence of taste, pre-disposition and background; and such a narrowing was confirmed further, when I analysed the claims to knowledge of my respondents.

The claims to screenplay knowledge I encountered in the field evidenced a heavy reliance on the development field itself for legitimization. Formal education was almost universally repudiated as a source of knowledge, while other sources of theory (books, podcasts, short courses) were only given a limited degree of credence; the level of importance accorded such sources was in direct proportion to the ‘nearness to the field’ from which such knowledge came. This again emphasises the strong reliance the field places on itself in terms of valuing screenplay content. Such a view of knowledge presents a picture of the field as relatively closed to new visions, alternative ideas and innovation. It is a field designed to replicate the values which it has established. The cultural hegemony of screenplay development, in other words, has been illustrated throughout this thesis – in a similar way to how Gitlin (1983) revealed the cultural hegemony in US television production and how, in the words of Lotz (2009, 32), production scholars have been seeking to do ever since.

My research has shown that experience of the field was held as almost the exclusive basis for screenplay knowledge. This has serious implications for the chances of

innovation and originality in the field. How, if knowledge is based solely on the culture itself, can anything change? Is the development field really such a closed system, immune to influence (in terms of its prevailing norms) and consequently, slow (or indeed unable) to subsume and accommodate other visions? It is the field itself which determines what makes a ‘good’ script; such knowledge is learnt from direct participation in the field; and the further away criticism, theoretical observation or alternative theories are from this field, the more quickly they are to be dismissed. It is a self-perpetuating view of script theory, of what is ‘good’, disguised by the more practical-sounding notion of craft.

Even in those areas where we might have suspected that outside knowledge was sought and prized – knowledge of the audience – a large strand of those I interviewed claimed knowledge based on their circle of family and friends. A large proportion of these respondents – especially the writers and producers – consider themselves and the people in their social circles as representative of a wider film audience. This clearly has implications for what ideas and screenplays get moved further forward through the development process. More importantly, it has implications for the content of screenplays. Not only is a small and limited field deciding for itself what constitutes the ‘good’ in terms of screenplays, many of them are also working on the assumption that their limited circle is representative of the audience. Or at least, representative of the audience they wish to speak to in their work (and consequently the audience they might be thinking of, if any, when they create that work.)

As an aside, these last two points add weight to the argument for further studies of development as a culture and its practitioners – say in other international contexts. Other industries around the world may also be conceiving of film content through these small and limited fields, and thus understanding of how those fields produce their products is central to how the industries make films as a whole.

There was only one area of development knowledge and information that was claimed to derive from outside this rather closed field of development and this comes from box office numbers. Yet even here, as we’ve seen, the information contained in the numbers needed to be ‘interpreted’ and ‘understood’ with the use of long experience in the field. The raw numerical data – how many people saw the film, how much

money did it make – is information that can only be used if it is filtered by someone with knowledge and experience of the field. Even in this most external of arenas (what the wider world has made of a film), the ultimate recourse for knowledge is back to the field. In other words, the field sees itself as the predominant source of knowledge, despite the fact that both knowledge of the audience and the screenplay need not necessarily be so detached from the field. Much of the audience, for example, is quite separate from the field. While notions of what might constitute a good screenplay – and therefore a contributory factor in a good film – may also exist outside of the field. Yet such sources are discounted in the claims I came across.

Despite the fact that film is a mass medium – that its producers seek to produce products for a mass audience<sup>35</sup> – the picture that emerges from my research is that those tasked with conceiving films are primarily talking to themselves. The field of screenplay development looks to itself for knowledge, validation and legitimacy.

Perversely, perhaps, the sphere of knowledge that my respondent's tended not to explicitly acknowledge – that of the industry itself – and further the one sphere where one might reasonably expect most of the knowledge of it to come from the field itself, actually was the one area of knowledge that seemed to come from *outside* the field. Pre-existing taste, personality, and 'sensitivity' are much prized when in alignment. This is a field that is comparatively homogenised in terms of these key aesthetic attributes, despite the fact that the audience may have a much wider and more diffuse sensitivity and tastes.

Furthermore, as evidenced in the discussion of behaviour and diplomacy, some of the valued skills in a development practitioner – which do not necessarily bear any relation to the future financial or critical success of the work (i.e. the screenplay) *per se* – nevertheless have a bearing on success in the field. Moreover, despite the repeated disavowals of the use or relevance of a formal education, such skills may very well have been acquired in that very environment. These skills have become so

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<sup>35</sup> This isn't to say that my respondents were all aiming to make blockbuster style films. There is obviously a big difference between the intended 'mass' audience for a film such as *Batman Begins* and a low-budget 'art house' film. However, the term 'mass' is still applicable here as the economics of conventional film production and distribution mean that films need to attract audiences on a significantly larger scale than, say, novels, before they can said to succeed economically.

naturalised – and assumed to be natural in others – that it is not even acknowledged as such.

This is indicative of the field as a whole, that despite the continued insistence on craft and field-based knowledge, a significant degree of skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in the field are brought to it from outside, even if the respondents don't recognise this as such. Much of the unacknowledged knowledge was brought to the field from outside, from pre-existing *habitus*. The importance of sharing tastes and disposition with fellow practitioners, the value of certain modes of behaviour, the similarities of practice with a university education – all came through in my discussions around development knowledge, despite the respondents' failure to acknowledge them. In other words, pre-held views, tastes and pre-dispositions are vital knowledge-sets to take into the field, which again argues against a vision of the field as diverse, accommodating and open to change and innovation. Yet again, it seems to be a field set up to replicate itself, right down to the *habitués* of its members.

In other words, and to frame this point in terms of my initial research question, much of the development field tries to construct knowledge by recourse almost exclusively to experience of the field itself, to the norms, practices and conventions learned from experience and from other players in the field. Such a recourse, however, masks a deeper knowledge base that points to a pre-established *habitus*, often based on formal education, that allows practitioners to feel confident and flourish in a field of like-minded, similarly pre-disposed and educated people.

## **Education**

Such a conclusion has implications for media education. If the field in practice is so closed to outside influences and sources of knowledge, should film and in particular screenwriting pedagogy draw closer still to the field? Such a movement has been evidenced with the UKFC sanctioned, Skillset drive to accredit screenwriting courses in the UK (Macdonald 2013, 68). Conor (2010, 173) also points to the attempt by educational institutions to cosy up to the industry, in an effort to make their courses

more attractive to students. My evidence suggests that such an effort – to construct courses more in line with the industry's aims and objectives – is destined to struggle. The idea that screenplay development knowledge comes predominantly from experience of the field is so deeply entrenched in the field, that the gilding of screenwriting courses with 'industry' speakers or tutors is unlikely to make much difference to a student's subsequent success.

Furthermore, it is far from clear that it is even in the best interests of the industry to have screenwriting education so in line with the norms, conventions and embedded theories associated with industry practice. If the field is indeed as closed as it seems, then the educational backgrounds of new entrants is one of the few potential sources of knowledge that has a chance to challenge industrial norms and conventions. Would the industry in fact benefit from a cohort of new entrants who had the tools and capabilities to critically engage with, and potentially re-evaluate its practices? Rather than pandering to industry norms and practices, it perhaps behoves educational establishments to provide its students with the tools to critically challenge them and thereby provide the industry with the kind of critical discourse and analysis that is otherwise absent.

This current study also throws up questions around the wider educational establishment. In particular, given the crucial roles which *habitus*, taste and pre-disposition have in the constitution of this sector of the film industry, should schools seeking to promote these kind of career choices for their students investigate teaching such things? In *Learning to Labour*, Paul Willis (1977, 3) argued of the working class students he studied that it was 'their own culture which most effectively prepares them' for future work in the most subordinate of roles; that through the cultural forms they created, working class 'lads' collude in a process that ends up with them working in factories or in other forms of manual labour. The nature of the workforce and the economic landscape has changed markedly since 1977, but the observation of the importance of the cultures established in school still resonates. If background and cultural disposition are as important as my study suggests (at least as regards employment in the film industry), then this is also an area that needs to be further investigated, as least if educators want to offer their students as wide an array of opportunities as possible.

## Practice

There has been a lot of discussion in recent screenwriting literature on what the screenplay is actually for, what its purpose is: examples include Maras (2009), Millard (2011) Nannicelli (2013), Price (2010). And while my evidence shows an industry perspective in keeping with notions of a ‘blueprint’ and financial prospectus that others have also identified, one new – or at least much more important than hitherto thought – function of the screenplay emerged. Namely, its role as a love letter, a vehicle of persuasion. For a UK film to raise finance, it needs to attach a director and actors of certain perceived commercial value, and then subsequently financiers: and the screenplay needs to seduce these readers. If the screenplay fails to seduce, it fails.

In one sense this finding may be stating the obvious, but up until now the importance of a screenplay’s ‘attractiveness’ or ‘appeal’ is merely assumed, or hinted at, in the literature – both in the manual style books but also in the academic literature. Bloore (2013, 9), for example, defines the process of screenplay development as repeatedly rewriting the screenplay until it reaches ‘a stage when it is *attractive* to a suitable director, actors and relevant film production funders.’ (Emphasis added.) It is this ‘making attractive’ that I’m arguing is the key function of the screenplay in the UK film industry – certainly it is seen as such by those who create the document.

This has implications for screenwriting studies. For above and beyond those various elements already discussed (what makes a ‘good screenplay’) there is this further, overarching function that needs to be fulfilled.

This final function, without which all the others are irrelevant, needs to be factored more fully into screenwriting studies and analysis. Not only might it help give better accounts of why some films get made over others (e.g. because the screenplay succeeded as a love letter to those readers that had the ability to make the film), it can also give future scholars insight into how power operates in the film industry at any



one time. If, for example, one were in a position to accurately chart the development of a specific project through its various iterations one might be able to concurrently trace how power is operating in the field. Changes made to the screenplay at whose behest? Or conversely, changes made to satisfy who – whether asked for, or in anticipation? At the very least, such a recognition of the screenplay's function problematizes and makes more complex notions of why the films that get made, get made.

Viewing the screenplay as a love letter designed partly to seduce the reader, changes our perspective on it as a document in other ways too. Inbuilt into the document's design is this notion of appealing to those people necessary to get the film made. While in one sense this is obvious, I believe the implications of such an observation are much more profound than have before been realised. Looking at film history, for example, through such a lens might cause a re-examination of the genesis and creation of films.

Conversely, an investigation of how the screenplay as love letter came about – its relationship to star and director power, for example – could provide valuable insight into the past and present workings of the industry, as well illuminating quite how marketing and distribution power is exercised in the industry.

In this current study, such a notion of the screenplay's purpose adds ballast to the argument that the development field (and therefore film conception) as operating in a very closed and limiting field. For the screenplay has to appeal firstly to those in the 'development field', and therefore those writing the screenplay have to appreciate and be aware of what the norms and values of that field are – even when they are designing the document.

While the screenplay is a document that springs from the development field, it is also a document that has to satisfy certain members of that field. Producers have to be satisfied that the screenplay 'works' before the rest of the industry sees it; likewise executives (working for funders) have to be satisfied before they recommend it further up the line. Built into the very creation and purpose of screenplays in the UK – given the collaborative nature – is this need to satisfy other members of the development

field, to conform to the values and norms of that field, to be a 'good' screenplay. In other words, screenplay development in the UK is a world talking to itself.

Despite the fact the planned films may often be intended to satisfy and appeal to (ideally) millions of people, a screenplay only needs limited appeal. It needs to appeal to the members of the field that created it, based on the norms and conventions of that limited field. As Frank Cottrell Boyce said to me: 'Nobody self-censors as much as screenwriters. Even self-censor sounds too conscious, you've absorbed so much about what a film is.' Even as he's writing, he's processing what the field will and will not accept; he's thinking about what will 'work'.

Widening out this discussion to look further at the actual practices of development, beyond this (rather limited) purpose of pleasing a very small readership, begins to reveal the limits of that field. Where we saw that the field looked to itself for 'knowledge', we can also see that in its very inner workings the field seeks to maintain and propagate similar tastes and sensibilities to those that already exist.

Successful development often relies on a high degree of likemindedness and fellow-feeling between practitioners; collaborators like to work with the same people again, if possible. They feel it important to share tastes and dispositions, to 'speak the same language', to 'get' one another. (It is a social as well as a professional experience, with meetings and discussion.) The greater one's predispositions and classificatory tastes match others in the field, the more likely one is to be able to achieve success in the development field.

Development is like a Bourdieu field, where coincidence and cross-over of *habitus* is advantageous. And in this sense, it is a limited domain. We've already seen that it's hard to get into; that its values are self-reproducing, with little input from outside the field; and the practices do little to challenge this state of affairs. We have seen, in other words, how the various strands of 'development knowledge' come together in practice. How the screenplay development field generates ideas that will satisfy the field, based on the values of that field. And the screenplay development field is designed through its practices to create 'pre-legitimised' and 'pre-consecrated' work.

Films are ‘pre-legitimised’ and ‘pre-consecrated’, through this process of development. It is this very process that makes them so.

Such a limited field, a small audience, bounded by field-created conventions, has serious implications for innovation and dynamism in screenplay content. There’s a very real danger that such a state of affairs drastically reduces both originality but also breadth of content. If the field is made up of a narrow band of society (in terms of class, *habitus*, ethnicity, emotional constitution), and the content created has to satisfy that narrow band, then despite the supposed mass appeal of the medium, the actual content is limited and narrowed by the very conditions of its creation.

Films are conceived by a narrow elite, and screenplay development is a field concerned primarily with creating products that appeal to itself, based on a rarely challenged knowledge base. It is an elite that is remarkably similar in temperament and taste, springing from an educational and class *habitus* that isn’t particularly varied – and certainly not nearly as varied as the audience for the final incarnation of its products. Films are conceived by a narrow band of society that is not representative of the film-going audience, and the practices of film conception are designed to reproduce and protect this elite and its values.

### **Policy Implications**

Diversity is an issue that policy makers around filmmaking are continually seeking to address. The BFI statistical yearbook now routinely includes figures for workforce and content diversity in the film industry. The latest report by the Film Policy Review Panel for the DCMS called for greater geographical diversity as well as a recommendation for BFI to have ‘plurality of taste among gatekeepers of funds, especially in relation to development and production funding’ (FPRP 2012, 92).

My evidence suggests that such a ‘plurality’ of taste will not be that easy to find, if the BFI were to look to the development field to fill its development and production gatekeeping positions (as they do currently.) The very condition and practices of the field, as we have seen, promote and encourage a confluence of taste – and not just of

‘taste’ but pre-disposition, behaviour, background, temperament, education and, ultimately, *habitus*. Thus while the call for diversity from the Review Panel is laudable, there are no suggestions as to how this may be achieved – indeed, there is seemingly no recognition of how hard such a task would be.

Judging from my evidence of the development field, for a significantly greater degree of diversity in content and personnel to be achieved radical action is needed. It is beyond the scope of this current study to propose detailed plans for how this might best be done. However, the implication of this study is that simply calling for plurality is not enough; that the knowledge-base and practices of development are so ingrained, and similarity and likemindedness so prized, that anything other than a radical overhaul would likely fail. If this call for diversity in film (particularly in content) is indeed seriously meant, then the development field must be addressed as a matter of priority – for it is from this field that the content comes.

Despite this gloomy picture, all is not necessarily lost. While it is beyond the scope of this study to go into solutions for this lack of diversity and plurality in development as a whole, there are nevertheless factors at play that make doing *something* about it possible. The funding for much of the feature development in the UK comes from one of three publicly owned bodies: the BFI, Film 4 and BBC Films. In theory, therefore, the fact that they are publicly-owned means they are more pliable to policy mandates than private companies might be. As the Film Policy Review Panel (2012, 92) obviously feels they can recommend ‘a plurality of taste among gatekeepers at the BFI’, I see no reason why such a recommendation can’t further be applied to the broadcasters.<sup>36</sup>

There are further policy implications in terms of public funding for film in the UK; not solely the BFI, but also Film4, the BBC and the regional agencies. I advanced an

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<sup>36</sup> One way to increase such plurality might be to insist on fixed-term contracts for all gatekeepers, building in a rotation system. Although such an approach will do little to bring in influence from outside the field, it will nevertheless go some way to diversifying taste in an albeit limited way. Further measures might need to be taken. At the time of writing, judging from the websites (BBC 2014b; BFI 2014b; Film 4 2014) of these three key public financing entities, of the eighteen ‘gatekeepers’ in these bodies i.e. ‘development executive’ or higher (senior, commissioner, head ) only one could be considered BAME. This is to say nothing about their potential similarities of *habitus*, social class and background.

argument for the producer as a creative leader, and certainly my evidence suggests a far more important creative role for the producer than has hitherto been acknowledged. Such re-thinking of the role of the producer might inevitably lead to a re-thinking of the funding of development. That the producer is a pivotal player in this phase of any film's creation and, consequently, that maybe they should be considered as such by the award-making bodies; that public money spent on development should, in other words, be awarded to producers. As we've seen, the BFI found that they had to do this – otherwise the film projects stalled – but it is an area worthy of further research. Given the producer is so critical creatively, as well as from a business perspective, should public policy once again look at how it funds development?

### **The Way Forward – Research**

As I said above, I hope this thesis has illustrated to some extent the importance of screenplay development in the process of filmmaking. This position, in itself, points to further avenues of research in film history. As previously mentioned, looking at the 'hidden labour' of women in film for example. There are opportunities for scholars to contribute to this growing body of work – as exemplified by the likes Ball & Bell (2013), Williams (2013), Porter (2013). Conversely, there are also avenues into film history that a consideration of the development process may illuminate. In particular, it may help those looking to re-evaluate differing roles in film production. Work investigating the role of the producer, by the likes of Spicer (2004), Spicer and McKenna (2012), Hoyle (2012), Porter (2012) and Robinson (2012), could be expanded and invigorated by a further consideration of the process of development and a producer's role in that. This in itself also offers further potential avenues of study for those proposing models of the creative producer, such as Bernstein (2006) and Pardo (2010).

If we accept that the screenplay in most instances is not the sole work of a screenwriter, then this immediately opens up and enriches such historical studies of film; not only in terms of how films came about, but the nature of them too, and the creative contributions of those involved. I hope this thesis has shown that such work could indeed be worthwhile and fruitful. Even though this study is of present-day

practices and practitioners, the implications can be thrown back into the past in such ways.

I hope, further, that this work can point to fruitful ways to develop screenwriting studies. That my screenwriting interviewees didn't conceive of screenplays as literature (or even at times *writing*), but nevertheless felt confident in proclaiming their work as *art* and a form of co-authorship of the film has implications for those – such as Price (2010) – who seek to claim the screenplay as a work of literature. Such claims for the screenplay seem to be an attempt to enhance its status (and consequently that of the writer), yet why should branding something as literature confer increased prestige? If the evidence of my interviewees is to be believed, what is required is not a supposed elevation of the status of the screenplay, so much as a fuller recognition of the screenwriter's (and producer's for that matter) role in creating the finished film.

I further exhort scholars to conceive of screenplay development as an industrial process and I anticipate that such a conception can further illuminate questions around the screenplay. Such an industrial level conception led to the idea of the purpose of the screenplay as a love letter, designed to seduce its readers, and this is a way of looking at the screenplay that can further enrich studies. It is a view that doesn't necessarily contradict the work of Macdonald (2013, 4), when he argues that the process of screenwriting is about the development of the 'screen idea'; but it does problematize it. If we accept that one of the chief purposes of the screenplay (if not *the* chief purpose) is as a love letter, then the question of the screenplay expands beyond solely poetics and into politics: the politics and dynamics of the field.

Such notions of the screenplay, its purpose and the practices of its creation also ask serious questions of those seeking to promote new models. Maras (2009) tried to explore alternative avenues for what he termed 'scripting', and sees potential in the new digital ways of filmmaking. In particular, he wants to move to a position where the historical schism between conception and execution (a problem he lays at the door of the early studio system) can be overcome. He writes (Maras 2009, 186) that 'Today screenwriting seems on the brink of a significant transformation.' The evidence I've amassed out of the UK suggests otherwise. This isn't to say Maras is necessarily

wrong, simply that even in the UK industry which is much less stratified and established than Hollywood, this split between conception and execution is still entrenched. It is instructive to note that even Maras' example (2009, 172) of an alternative way of scripting, that of Mike Leigh, has been working in the same way for years and that he is still an outlier in this regard.

The ongoing debates around film authorship, moreover, can potentially be enlivened by a consideration of the authorship of the screenplay. If the picture is indeed as complicated as the one I've proposed here, what does this mean for theories of intentionality in film for example? Can a *screenplay* ever truly be said to be solely authored, let alone a film? Certainly, my current study adds weight to the recent claims of the Writer's Guild of Great Britain (2009), and the Federation of Screenwriters in Europe (2006) to the effect that the screenwriter should always be considered as at least *an* author of any film.

Even those who wish to cleave to the notion of the director as auteur and/or author, might be advised to look into the development process to buttress their claims. Investigating how the director has interacted with the development field, for example, may allow scholars and critics to make a case for directorial authorship with more vigour and validity. Knowing what input the director had into the screenplay, can immediately help one construct a case for their influence on the nature of the film. Investigation into the influence exerted on the screenplay (in development) is the kind of research – as this study shows – that can help us better understand the very nature of the films that have been made. Questions of authorship, whether one is placing it with the director, the screenwriter, the producer or a combination of them (and others), are questions that have to begin in this development stage. One of the aims of this thesis is to point the way for further research in this area, and I hope other scholars – be they champions of the director as auteur or otherwise – look to development as a field of study.

While this particular research project has been firmly situated in the 'helicopter view' of industry studies, my findings nevertheless also have implications for those seeking to construct political economies of the media. While many of the thinkers in this tradition, such as Garnham (1990), Ryan (1992) and Murdock & Golding (2005) look

to construct macro models of the operation of power, the evidence in this study can contribute to those who are interested in marketing power in particular. Murdock (2003, 19) for instance, argues that to make sense of how capitalism has effected cultural organisation one has to start with the ubiquitous process of ‘marketization.’ My study has shown quite how far such a process has infiltrated the very heart of project conception and creation. Such ‘on the ground’ data can only add to these wider pictures of corporate and capital power.

Ultimately, however, this current study isn’t a political economy as such. Taking a lead from the Critical Industry Studies school, I’ve tried to provide a ‘helicopter level’ account of screenplay development and production in the UK. I’ve shown how certain practices lead to a cultural hegemony of creative content as well as personnel in this most important of production phases. This hegemony of content, furthermore, isn’t necessarily constructed around rigorous research into audiences. There isn’t a particularly robust connection between what the screenplay development field approves of, and what is successful with external audiences (much like what Negus (2002) found among record company executives.)

I hope this study has been sufficiently rigorous in its critique as well as its account of development. Hesmondhalgh (2009, 246) called for critical studies of production and further asserted that such studies should have social justice as one of their underlying aims. Similarly, Ursell (2000, 810-11) saw her own production studies as partly motivated by ‘the task of explaining what makes inequality remain.’ I hope that my current study contributes to this tradition, by further outlining how the hegemony of screenplay development has been built and how it remains in place; how the culture and practices of the development field work against diversity, plurality and social justice and how they reinforce inequality.

Hesmondhalgh’s work was of course one of the lodestones for my research. Together with him, however, the scholarship of Caldwell, along with Mayer, Banks and the other scholars collected in their 2009 volume has greatly informed the direction of travel for this current research. My concerns aligned with theirs when they stated (Mayer, Banks and Caldwell 2009, 2) their own research concerns as ‘how media producers make culture.’ By using the techniques of this burgeoning field of



production studies, I have contributed to this tradition by showing how media producers in the UK make a certain kind of culture. Screenplay development is one of the key phases of film and drama production, and I hope I've shown an examination of it can begin to tell us much about how power operates in the film industry, and why the content we see on our screens is on our screens.

By exploring and critically accounting for this culture of screenplay development I hope, too, that I have opened up other avenues for further production research – not least in suggesting a consideration of development practices in other geographical contexts. How are screenplays developed differently in different countries? What might this tell us about how films are made, their content and the cultures from which they come?

### **End words**

Screenplay development is of central importance to the films that we watch. It is the space where many of the creative decisions are made, where much of the content of a film is decided upon. If we are going to understand the culture of film production, we need to understand the culture of screenplay development. If we are to understand how films are produced, we need to understand how they are conceived. If we do not understand how they are conceived – how screenplays are developed – then we will never be able to gain a fuller picture of how they are produced. Screenplay development is the *first*, and at least in that sense the most important, phase of conception in the production of films. This thesis has shone a light on the people, the processes and the culture of this phase of production in the UK.

I hope in the preceding work that I have added to the scholarly understanding of development and the people who do it in the UK film industry. By doing so, I tried to contribute to debates around the production of culture, the nature of screenwriting and film history in the UK. I hope too, that despite my critical comments as regards its narrowness and constitution, that my belief in the *importance* of the development process is evident. In my introduction, I admitted to being a cheerleader for the

process, and this still holds: we need to understand it, critically interrogate it and, if necessary, reform it. What we must never do, is ignore it.

## Appendix A

List of interviewees in alphabetical order:

Clark, Chris. Independent Producer, previously senior development executive:  
Interviewed on 15 May 2013, via Skype.

Collins, Chris. Senior development and production executive at the BFI, previously an independent producer: Interviewed on 24 October 2012 at the BFI offices in London.

Coriat, Laurence. Screenwriter: Interviewed on 31 October 2012 via Skype.

Cottrell Boyce, Frank. Screenwriter: Interviewed on 22 February 2013 via Skype.

Granger, Amelia. Executive Vice President Film UK, Working Title: Interviewed on 28 September 2012 at the offices of Working Title in London.

Hetreed, Olivia. Screenwriter: Interviewed on 25 September 2012 at her home.

Khan Din, Ayub. Screenwriter: Interviewed on 22 February 2012 at his home.

MacRae, Dan. Head of Development Studio Canal: Interviewed on 7 September 2012 at the offices of Studio Canal in London.

Meyer, Sophie. Head of Development Ealing Studios: Interviewed on 9 October 2012 at Ealing Studios.

Nicholson, William. Screenwriter: Interviewed on 7 February 2013 at his home.

Parfitt, David. Independent Producer: Interviewed on 6 November 2012 at his offices.

Paterson, Andy. Independent Producer: Interviewed on 13 September 2012 at his home.

Prior, Rachel. Head of Development Big Talk: Interviewed on 26 April 2013 at the offices of Big Talk, London.

Rubin, Ed. Head of Development Origin Pictures: Interviewed 2 November 2012 at the offices of Origin Pictures, London.

Thompson, David. Independent Producer, previously head of BBC Films: Interviewed 2 November 2012 at the offices of Origin Pictures, London.

Trijbits, Paul. Independent Producer, previously head of the UKFC's New Cinema Fund: Interviewed on 13 September 2012 at the offices of Ruby Films.

Villiers, Cat. Independent Producer: Interviewed on 8 March 2013 at her home.

Profiles:

Gender	Location of workplace	Race	Level of Education
6 Women 11 Men	1 France 1 Spain 1 USA 1 Liverpool 1 Sussex 12 London	1 BAME 16 White	3 MA or above, 11 University Graduates 1 Vocational College 1 Drama School 1 School

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*24 Hour Party People* (2002), Wr: Frank Cottrell Boyce, Dir: Michael Winterbottom, UK, 117 mins.

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