

SHOW BUSINESS: The Development of a Language for the Screenplay

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Mark O'Thomas observed that 'The screenplay form has taken on a generic, rigorous framework that must be adhered to in order for the industry to acknowledge.'

However Scott Myers, lecturer of The History of American Screenwriting at the University of North Carolina suggests that 'During the last three decades, writers have stretched the boundaries of conventional wisdom in almost every single aspect of what a screenplay is. In effect, there has been a trend toward what,' He calls, 'a more literary type of selling script. Less a guide to produce a movie, more a means by which we can engage a reader in our story, not distracted by archaic conventions.' Both are true.

Béla Balázs believed the screenplay to be, "no longer a technical accessory, not a scaffolding that is taken away once the house is built, but a literary form worthy of the pen of poets..." And one of the highest compliments today's screenwriter can get is "It's a good read."

It's that, the style of the screenplay, its format and how that can be used for creative purposes rather than the merely technical, that interests me here.

Much has been written about the historical milestones in the development of the form. This is not my focus but my journey requires a path. This is a snapshot of my route through description, camera shots, narrative voice and format design. Essentially how we got from this to this.

‘The first scripts...merely indicated what was to be in the picture, and in what order’, writes Balázs, ‘but said nothing about how it was to be presented.’ Such as the scenario for Georges Méliès *A Trip to the Moon* from 1902 where the pre-production document is little more than a shot list.

The first major step toward the screenplay we know today was the need to define intellectual property rights. In 1904 the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company sued the Edison Company for making an unauthorised remake of one of their films. A case AM&B won meaning that on the 25th November 1904 a scenario called *The Suburbanite* received the first registration in the new classification of ‘*dramatic composition*.’ The screen play was born.

One of the figures most closely associated with the early development of the screenplay is Thomas Harper Ince. ‘Under him,’ writes Marc Norman, the screenplay was ‘no longer simply a one-page precis of the film’s narrative but the blueprint for the entire production.’ C. Gardner Sullivan, a writer under contract to Ince, suggested that ‘each scene in our continuity is practically a short story in itself they are so fully described.’

This is a page from Sullivan’s screen play *Satan McAllister’s Heir*, and you can see it gives a sense of the tone. Some mise-en-scene, design and, most interestingly, information that the audience couldn’t deduce from the screen.

Both Steven Price and Scott Myers refer to elements like this as unfilmables. Claudia Sternberg calls this the ‘comment’ mode, an indicator of the authorial persona or narrative voice. To Ann Igelström it is the ‘impersonal fictional voice.’ Allowing us, as Price expanded, to focus not so much on how a screenplay conforms to a system but, rather, how variations within it reveal ‘the individualism of the author.’

But both Hague and Hunter, in their respective books, suggest a rule that ‘only those things that are to appear on the screen should appear within the scene text.’ Is this a conundrum? Screenwriter Larry Ferguson relates an anecdote about the producer Don Simpson who told him he loved the style of his description in *Beverly Hills Cop II*. He said ‘We know we can’t shoot them, but we can shoot the tone.’ It is after all the screenwriters’ storytelling sensibility. And any demonstration of emotion or psychology that can be interpreted by other creatives will find its way onto the screen. This is the purpose of the screenplay. A quality of text that lies somewhere between Elaine Scarry’s definitions of *delayed sensory content* - that which is “instructions for the production of actual sensory content,” and *mimetic content* - that which is figuratively there.

For example this is a page from *Sunrise*. It’s pithy and imagistic much like a haiku. I especially like ‘Asphalt vapor.’ It has the ability to arouse both the visual and the olfactory sense.

The form became largely standardised within the Hollywood of the 1920’s, but as Price and others have noted, the hasty conversion to sound spawned many ad hoc formatting solutions.

A Research Council was convened within the Hollywood Industry in 1932 to try and determine a ‘form of script that will be most legible, graphic, and convenient in practical use’. The style that won most favour was the Warner Brothers’ template. This is a page from *The Desert Song* which shares many recognisable characteristics to the screenplay in use today.

However different styles persisted well into the 50's. On the left is from *Wizard of Oz* with large paragraphs detailing technical description and an aside NOTE to the reader as to story architecture. *Notorious* some seven years later however, is still clearly broken down into well-defined shots.

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon is emotively descriptive and starts to define shots within the action lines with hyphens. A technique still popular today. By way of a contrast this page from *Bad Day at Black Rock* illustrates the MGM style that favours the dialogue over the indented action lines.

Perhaps the biggest influence towards the form we know today was the 'Paramount Case' of 1948 which provided the platform for the selling or 'Spec' script. A Supreme Court anti-trust ruling separated production from exhibition. This meant film companies lost their guaranteed market. Having talent under contract no longer made financial sense and screenwriters were now working for independent producers or sometimes just themselves.

Stylistically, according to analysis of 43 screenplays Claudia Sternberg claims that, after this screenplays tended to contain less detailed camera instructions. My analysis of close to 200 from the same period fails to confirm this. Though I acknowledge, as Marc Norman notes, that as screenwriters started to become untethered from the necessities of production their style also became more literary. This was a gradual change and one that had marked impact on the look of the page.

The Quiet Man from 1952 uses comment mode in a NOTE to the reader similar to Oz but this details delightful character tactics and advice to the creatives as to how the scene should be played.

Compare this to an oft cited example of a pivotal screenplay, *Bonnie & Clyde*, that some suggest was one of the first 'specs', where the same function is elegantly played out within the action lines. '*They have lived so much in cars...*' Could this be deduced just from watching the screen? Perhaps not. But actors can play it.

William Goldman may be the first to take a jokingly conversational attitude to his reader, in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. His knowing asides and meta observations about John Wayne delightfully illustrate the feel and tone of the narrative. This is a style that we will see much more of in the late eighties and it persists today. *Its A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* considers not so much the reader or the creatives but what they believe will be the emotional effect on the audience. In the extreme end of the literary this excerpt from *The Graduate* shows a passage that would not have appeared out of a place in a novelisation.

As we progress Marc Norman reflects that the 70's were a boom time for screenwriters. 'As often as not, screenwriters took the development risk onto themselves.' Which meant they had relative freedom to develop a script in the style of their choosing. Two very contrasting examples are the formatting peculiarities of *The Godfather* with its turned around headings and boxed in scenes. And here we're starting to see clearly the breaking up of paragraphs and each sentence a shot. On the other side *Big Wednesday* has camera frame headings, like *Notorious*, but also uses hyphenates and comment mode that captures the exultation of the surf.

One writer that really stands out in this period is Walter Hill. Narrative style in his screenplay *The Driver* is clear, crisp and uninflected. A basic explanation of what the shot will contain. It owes more to a shot list than a treatment. Hill himself said 'I tried to write in an extremely spare, almost haiku style, both stage directions and dialogue.' It seems to me that it is closest to Murnau's *Sunrise* than anything in the preceding sixty years.

By the end of the 1970s however ‘a dominant discourse around screenwriting was beginning to insist that authorial narration...was inadmissible.’ explains Price. ‘Shot specification, too, would be prohibited.’ He and Norman note at this time the rise of films indebted to reproducible story templates and the profusion of screenwriting manuals. Steven Maras claims ‘the distinctiveness of the screenplay is elusive.’ But with the release in the early eighties of screenwriting software, Scriptor being among the first, you start to arrive at something like a consensus.

One of the most profound changes was the rise and dominance of the spec script within the market and with it, The Reader or Analyst. Joe Eszterhas called them death to serious writing. But the producer Brian Morewitz said “coverage is an institution in the entertainment world.”

And to stand out writers took to exploiting the comment mode and the master of this approach in the early 90’s was Shane Black, whose style irked David Mamet so much that in 1996 he wrote an article for the L.A. Times Magazine excoriating coverage-readers and the effect they have had on screenwriters trying to grab their attention. These are two such style bombs from *Lethal Weapon – The kind of house I’ll buy if this movie is a huge hit*, and from *The Last Boy Scout – Good morning Mr and Mrs America and Yes honey that’s your butt...* These excesses could not be sustained or survive their imitators, but they do leave a legacy.

Corley and Megel wrote that ‘more attention to the language of visual description in screenplays, and more conscious, less mechanical, use of format in screenwriting, is a benefit to the end product of the screenplay: the film itself. ‘

And everything I have mentioned I believe brings us to this point. These are pages from two recent screenplays. *Kate* by Umair Aleem and *The Mother* by Misha Green. Miserly short sentences. Verbs and nouns wielded like stings. The left hand rule used like warfare, the readers' eye flicking back to the left to create a fast read. They owe a debt to Murnau and to Hill. Note the smooth transition of location in *The Mother*.

In 1992 Ron Bass said the screenwriter 'traditionally serves the directors vision' but now screenwriters have finally turned what looked like demotion from anything to do with the camera into control. Corley and Megel again, wrote that 'it is important to match the rhythm on the page with the rhythm of the film we are trying to write.' Evidence this from *The Empty Man* by David Prior. The pace is created by use of French Scenes, slow, full of tension then single spaced short lines show it rack up several gears.

This specificity is the screenwriters' and the formats task. If the shot is a travelling one, such as this famous track shot from *Goodfellas*. Then write that. If it's a close up, like this from *Jurassic Park*, you don't have to write close up just write what you see.

Karl Iglesias said of the screenwriting craft that it is 'the technical ability to control language to create an intentional emotion or image in the reader's mind.' That being so *The Bourne Supremacy* of 2004, exhibits its application at a high level with a virtual shot by shot translation from page to screen. It has that mimetic quality that Elaine Scarry talks about where we feel it viscerally while reading. And lots of hyphens!

This can be extended to the degree that the screenwriter defines the entire production model. This is an excerpt from the recent screenplay *The Fall* by Pete Bridges which is 'Real time. One shot.' Edited only by the track of the camera across a master scene.

The format itself projects the film into your head. This is thoughtful page design. Trottier may tell us that it is passé to capitalise sounds so Dwain Worrell in *Fortress* uses underlining, bold and italics to produce a page that looks dynamic and exciting. *Autobahn* by Scott Frazier takes this a step further with a graphic representation of duration of sound, and meta comments like Goldman – *maybe that kind of thing only works in movies.*

Hold the Dark by Macon Blair, uses repetition and bold to create a clear visual expression of the aural impact he wishes the film to make. Very much what Howard and Mabley had in mind when they wrote that *'The screenwriter must have conscious intentions for what the audience will see and hear and, most important, experience when the script is cast and produced.'* As in here in *Will O'Wisp* where repetition is used to chilling effect to replicate a flicker book.

And once again software is having an impact on formatting styles. Fade In screenwriting software is currently the only one with an image insert function. The writers of the recent *A Quiet Place* used it to boldly illustrate their screenplay. This is an approach that is growing in use.

But it is still a small step however next to *Mad Max: Fury Road*, an incomparably visual read that is a hybrid of screenplay, storyboard and graphic novel. Also a very faithful page to screen translation.

Fade In also allows screenwriters to change the scale of the font to create meaning. *Take Back The Night* by Ryan Riley does this to suggest volume and intensity. First of fists on the left, then of voice on the right. Perhaps more radical is the text effects in *Nightcrawler*, increasing font size gives the sense of rising tension to hysteric levels. This page resembles more concrete or image poetry than anything. And finally *The Babysitter* by Brian Duffield uses it...to...well, create shock.

That's a good place to conclude. This is a work in progress, but even so I hope I have thrown some light on the changes of screenplay style, and how it is currently the most refreshing and exciting writing to read.