

Stories, Conferences and Manuals: The normative function of screenwriting manuals in their historical context

Paper presented at the "Theorizing Screenwriting Practice Workshop" at the Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

25.11.2012

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Screenwriting manuals

There is hardly a field in the film production process where one can find more literature on than screenwriting. As a film scholar and a film historian I am interested in the question whether these manual are able to deliver insights for film studies and if so how should they be read, treated and contextualized? I am not concerned whether these books are of any help for actual screenwriters but with the functions of these manuals within and outside the film industry.

In general there are two positions held in film studies: those who ignore the manuals (which in most cases also still ignore screenwriting as a whole). This position can still be found in some textbooks and introductory literature.

The other position wants to integrate manuals into film studies and treat them as if they were scholarly literature. This position can be found among others in Classical Hollywood Cinema (CHC), and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's writings about the subject.

Needless to say, neither of these two positions is able to give a satisfying answer to my question. Both imply that studying screenplays means

studying narrative structures and modes of storytelling, both are focusing on film analysis and almost nothing else (with the exception of Bordwell). Both forget to contextualize manuals and distinct the various fields or discourses we have to deal with.

A third position emerged within the last years that took the manuals as texts to be analyzed in the context of self-regulation and self-control. Although this approach brings some aspects of the manuals to the foreground, others, more important ones, I would argue, are still ignored. The most important one: screenwriting as well as filmmaking in general, is not an individual, but a collective process.

Manuals, screenplays and free markets

In order to understand the functions of manuals within the American film industry it is crucial to put the manuals into their historical context. When, why and for whom were these manuals written? Which functions did they fulfill - economically, structurally, and didactically? Are they reflecting and/or changing the mode(s) of production and, if so, in which way?

Bordwell's treatment of the historical manuals from the 1910s is important and influential for two reasons: he reads these historical documents as evidence for his construction of Classical Hollywood narration. So firstly he reads this material on the same level as studio protocols, memos, etc. He implies that the manuals give insights into historical screenwriting practices, in the organization of screenwriting within the studio system as well as in the narrative structure of Classical Hollywood films.

And secondly he uses it to construct his version of Classical Hollywood narration that is quite similar to the one(s) that the more recent manuals (published from the late 1970s until today, not those from the 1910s) are

propagating. Bordwell is therefore an important starting point for the examination of the misunderstandings and misreadings of screenwriting manuals to come.

Bordwell and his fellow travelers overlooked several important points:

Screenwriting manuals were not written at all times in screen history. They were and still are not written for actual screenwriters but for aspiring ones, for wanna-bees, for a specific market and a specific target group and therefore they were only written at times when a free market for screenwriters existed. In the US such a market only existed before the late 1910s and then again from the late 1970s until today. In between there was no demand for new writers, therefore no manuals were published. The number of sold copies is targeting a market much larger than the small number of actual screenwriters who can make a living by their craft.

The so-called *scenario fever* was a phenomenon of the early 1910s, when the film industry was searching for people who could supply them with ideas for films. Columns in magazines, manuals and screenwriting competitions were omnipresent. Manuals from the 1910s until the early 1920s are quoted in CHC to argue, that they would unveil storytelling norms and conventions of the film industry. The fictional feature film began to become an economically interesting format from 1912 onwards. By 1917/18 it became the new standard product. But the vast majority of all screenwriting manuals were written before this shift to feature films. They instructed their readers on how to write one-reelers with one plotline. Therefore they can only be taken as an argument for CH narration if one considers the feature film as a simple development of the one-reeler and shorter formats. Such a view is overlooking all the crucial differences between telling a story in 20 or in 120 minutes.

In addition, the most important aspects of CH narration – goal oriented protagonist, three act structure etc. – cannot be found in these manuals. The publishing of manuals phased out in the late 1910s, early 1920s. Ann Morey dated the end of a free screenwriting market as early as the mid-1910s: “After the freelance market collapsed in the mid-1910s, the likelihood of a private individual’s placing a screenplay with a studio was small” (Morey, 71). Manuals were written until the early 1920s, from then on almost no manual was published until 1976. The ones that were written in between can be counted on one hand. When the classical studio system collapsed in the 1960s, new modes of filmmaking emerged. The market for screenwriters was re-opened. Manuals as we know them today started to get published, screenwriting began to be taught as an academic discipline.

There are two points to make:

1. The manuals Bordwell is quoting to construct CH narration were mostly written for one-reelers, not for feature films.
2. The manuals do not give insights into the actual historical organization and structure of script development, they were anything but official. (From the 1920s on screenwriting societies actually opposed the remaining correspondence schools and the dubiousness of screenwriting advice.) The terminology within these early manuals is very heterogeneous, there is no standardization of terms.

In the late 1920s the screenwriting market was closed, screenwriters from the east went to Hollywood because of the depression and sound changed the way screenplays were formatted and written. The story conference as an institutionalized way to control and organize screenwriting was established. Conferences discussing screenplays

were no innovation of the late 1920s. D.W. Griffith had regular meetings with his script editor and Thomas Ince seems to be the first one who used story conferences as a way to control, guide and develop filmmaking. But as an institutionalized form, as a sign of the classical studio era, the regular story conference started in the late 1920s.

A story is not a story but a conference

From the late 1920s until the 1960s story conferences were the heart and soul of the classical studio system. The conference and therefore the screenplay was the tool to control creative work.

From the very first screen idea producer and screenwriter(s) met to discuss every step within the script development. At a late stage directors were added, representatives of the Production Code Administration joined the conferences at a certain point (if it seemed necessary), younger screenwriters took part to learn the craft and finally a secretary took notes of which some survived that give film historians valuable insights into the daily workings of the studio system.

The so-called creative producers within this system, guys like Irving Thalberg, Darryl F. Zanuck, Buddy Adler and others were not just giving orders or making decisions during these conferences. They were discussing every detail of the script, every word of dialogue, every cut or dissolve.

It was clear that the producer had the last word, but nevertheless screenwriters had to take part in an ongoing discussion about their work, that could last from weeks to (in some cases) years.

There was no list of rules, no manuals where the participants of these conferences drew their categories from, with which they could justify their decisions. The arguments to keep or change scenes or elements were not in all cases on the level of storytelling. In general writers sometimes argued according to artistic motivation, producers tried to look for the expected reaction of the audience.

The criteria that guided discussions and decisions included verisimilitude, causality and motivation, but there was no mention whatsoever about three-act structure, goal-driven protagonist, or plot points. Not in these terms, not in others. Classical Hollywood storytelling did not follow the later formulated notion of it, it was in fact based on discussions and not on a normative dramaturgy.

These conferences dealt not only with storytelling, but with the whole film production process. The screenplay to be developed was not the written form of a well-told plot, it was the plan that made a film possible and that meant that it should offer all the pleasures and gratifications of a commercial, mainstream film. These pleasures should be built into the script, and not just the suspense of “what will happen next?”.

The development of a screenplay therefore includes regular discussions about attractions (in a broader sense that Tom Gunning is defining the term) and the evocation of emotions. The script is never discussed as only a way to tell a story, but always with regard to the film's reception. When it came to deciding between a perfect dramaturgy and an effective scene, the latter almost always won. There were also discussions about the way stars should be given the perfect environment to deliver their skills. In short: story conferences during the classical studio era dealt with all the practical aspects of filmmaking with regard to the desired reaction, not just with the story.

As the classical studio era faded out, filmmaking changed its organizational structure. The creative producer as the one person who controlled every aspect of filmmaking vanished. The job profile of producers changed, knowledge and experience in screenwriting was no longer a requirement. Stars and directors became more independent from studios, directors became more involved with story development. And the most important difference to the classical era: the amount of communication during the process decreased.

In the 1960s epic films were written and produced that denied any notion of effective, Hollywood storytelling. Forms and structures were almost getting out of hand. Big budget films - epics, sandal films and musicals – all of them with narrative structures one would not teach in screenwriting seminars and all of them flops - are just a sign that “old” Hollywood had some serious problems, and one of them concerned screenwriting.

New Hollywood then was new in terms of visuals, aesthetics, characters and so on. But in terms of storytelling New Hollywood was looking backwards. Genre became interesting again and so became a notion of classical Hollywood storytelling that in fact never was. New Hollywood was successful because it used simple, effective modes of storytelling. New Hollywood followed an imagined version of classical Hollywood, the storytelling of these films, at least of the successful ones, is neither new nor classical, it is neo-classical.

At this point in history, when permanent discussions between producer and screenwriter(s) were replaced by a vacuum of power and an uncertainty about filmmaking in general that led screenwriter William Goldman to write the famous line that in Hollywood “nobody knows anything.” (Goldman). No studio insider of the classical age has ever said anything comparable no matter how incompetent he/she felt that

studio people were. Because in the classical era, there was a deeper level of involvement prevailing throughout the production departments, most people were very experienced, , they knew their conventions and most of all they knew that there was only one way to find solutions: to talk about it. In other words: in the studio system everything was negotiable.

At this point in the history of American cinema Syd Field's "Storytelling" was published and became a success that was followed by myriad epigones, all propagating the same shallow do-it-yourself style screenwriting advise that could not became successful at any other moment in the history of Hollywood.

Hollywood's search for answers, the re-opened market for screenwriters and an un-defined hierarchy within the screen-idea working group made manuals successful. They fulfilled a real need, first of the film industry and then of the millions of wanna-be writers, film buffs and active fans.

The three-act, plot point, goal-oriented formula replaced the ongoing communication between producer and screenwriter. Conferences took place between director and screenwriter. The formula that Field and his successors created, replaced the blurred hierarchy of the classical studio system, mostly so because films based on that formula were successful. This is not to say that any Hollywood film after 1976 is based on manuals, but the essence of the manuals became "the rules". In the actual conferences during the studio system nobody is referring to rules. There were no rules. There were conventions, experiences, and audience's expectations. Based on these factors, filmmakers had their criteria on which their decisions were based upon. These "rules" and the formula of the manuals replace the system of permanent conferences.

Outside the industry the manuals fulfilled similar functions like the ones in the 1910s: they re-established the ideology that everyone could make it in Hollywood, the old Horatio Alger myth. It involved film buffs and fans into the construction of a greater community and set up a popular discourse about screenwriting within the boundaries of Hollywood filmmaking.

These functions in and outside the film industry made the manuals successful. If today many scholars and critics are getting bored by Hollywood films and are instead heading for television series, for “quality TV”, this shift is also caused by the success of the manuals in Hollywood on the one side and the mode of production, especially the mode of script development of these series. The “formula” can not be applied to these series, the decisions made during the script development are again based on communication. But this time it is the screenwriter, the creator of a series, who is at the top of the hierarchy, because s/he is also the co-producer, who discusses the screenplays with a group of writers. Again creative control is organized around ongoing discussions, and not by fixed rules. The way script development is organized is always closely connected with the aesthetics and the quality of film or TV series.

Conclusion

So what shall we do with these manuals?

First of all we should read them in their historical context.

Shall we read them as a means to analyze storytelling?

In those cases in which screenplays were written according to these manuals, and a lot of them were, especially during the 1980s, this might

makes sense. But for all the films that were made before 1976 it leads nowhere. Narratology has supplied us with various theories and methods, even the most idiosyncratic ones are more detailed and more serious than anything that can be found in manuals.

Shall we see them as insights into the work of screenwriters, into the practice of screenwriting?

Manuals are written for those who are willing to buy these books, not for those who earn their money with screenwriting. Screenwriting is a process in which many people are involved. Successful screenwriting is still to a great amount a matter of communication, and the screenplay is a mean of communication. The screenwriting process and its organization, the analysis of the industry's internal discourse could and should be part of something like production culture studies, or the formulation of an aesthetics of production as a much needed expansion of film studies. Can manuals help us to get insights into such a production culture? I doubt it.

Screenwriting is communication, it is not the work done by a single person sitting at his desk, it is done by filmmakers talking with each other. And screenwriting is not only about storytelling. A successful film consists of more than just a well-told story. The screenplay is framework for all the elements of a film, it is the document that makes the film possible. (And it is by no means an artwork in itself.)

So what should we examine, study and analyze in the field of screenwriting?

Modes of storytelling, forms of organization of creativity, the relation of production and creative structure, production culture, in their respective historical contexts. Manuals are a part of these histories and contexts. We should put them where they belong historically, study their influence

and their functions in and outside the film industry. But we should stop to overrate them. They are no windows into the mind of writers. And as I tried to make clear in this presentation: all of the above mentioned aspects are far more interesting than a single creative mind, and far easier to examine.