

**IAN W. MACDONALD**

University of Leeds

# '...So it's not surprising I'm neurotic' The Screenwriter and the Screen Idea Work Group

**ABSTRACT**

*The Screen Idea Work Group (SIWG) is a flexibly constructed group organized around the development and production of a screen idea; a hypothetical grouping of those professional workers involved in conceptualizing and developing fictional narrative work for any particular moving image screen idea. In this article, I use the notion of the SIWG to draw together the views of key workers about how the process of screen idea development works – or doesn't. My findings are based on a small ethnographic study I undertook in 2004, in which, through in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven SIWG workers, I attempted to understand how they came to occupy their role, how they felt their judgements were made and received, and how far the SIWG's view of the screen idea accorded with the screenwriting doxa (characterized as how to do a 'good' piece of work). As detailed below, their answers were concerned with status, a sense of self-worth and respect, points of tension, power, control, collaboration and trust, and the nature of the doxa itself.*

**KEYWORDS**

Screen Idea Work Group (SIWG)  
screenwriter  
interviews  
doxa  
best practice  
craft skills  
production analysis

1. For example, the UK professional journal *Scriptwriter* has included articles fairly regularly on what is wrong with the industry's relationship with the screenwriter, such as in issues 6 (September 2002), 7 (November 2002), 8 (January 2003), 10 (May 2003), 15 (March 2004), 17 (July 2004), 21 (March 2005), 22 (May 2005)... etc.
2. See, for example, Bourdieu (1984; 1993; 1996).
3. The *doxa* is therefore the internalized practice of a set of norms based around a particular orthodoxy. The *doxa* also informs the habitus, and the feeling of 'rightness' that comes with the *doxa* will contribute to the (re-)composition of the habitus. This disposes the 'agent' to make judgements in the same or similar way in the future, in an almost circular fashion.
4. For more information on this study, see Macdonald (2004c), Chapter 7.

If you believe the stories, film and TV screenwriters are frequently struggling in an already tough freelance business.<sup>1</sup> They are misunderstood, unappreciated and ignored, and what creative power they have is neutralized before anything gets going. Their one bargaining chip – their creative idea – is exchanged for a contract, and from that point on they are at the mercy of anyone that has even junior executive status. One writer I talked to (on condition of anonymity) was bitter about the treatment he'd received from film and TV companies, who wanted his scripts but not his opinions once he had delivered his drafts:

[I] mostly have to deal with idiots [who] don't know what I do, how difficult it is. The pay is ridiculous in the UK. Meetings can easily be cancelled... [there is a] courtesy problem. [I also have experience outside the UK] – but instead they want me to disappear. There's a lot riding on it for me, so it's not surprising that I'm neurotic and nervous.

(Writer 'B' 2003)

So what is the screenwriter's role in relation to the development of the screen idea, and to the others involved in that process? I have argued previously (Macdonald 2004a) that the study of screenwriting as a practice can be approached using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', which he developed to describe how individuals form a system of dispositions within a culture and area of activity, and which then work to structure practice.<sup>2</sup> Habitus provides the practice with its normative codes, which are (re-)internalized as 'best practice', craft skills and so on. Best practice becomes the *doxa* – the way we feel it is done best in the rules of the game – which is articulated as an orthodoxy or doctrine via manuals and other 'how-to' books and articles.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, I have argued that such practice congregates around a shared screen idea rather than focusing on a specific written text (Macdonald 2004b). Thirdly, I have also suggested the idea of a Screen Idea Work Group (SIWG) as a flexible and semi-formal work unit that congregates around the screen idea, and whose members contribute to its development (Macdonald 2004c; 2008). In this article I describe the notion of the SIWG, based on a small ethnographic study undertaken in 2004. In this I attempted, through in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven SIWG workers, to understand how these workers viewed their creative involvement, and how they believed it worked in relation to each other and to their industrial context.<sup>4</sup> The quote above comes from a screenwriter interviewed for this project.

The Screen Idea Work Group is a conceit; it is a researcher's way of understanding how a process takes place around something that is non-existent (the screen idea). The concept is taken from the 'flexible work group' referred to by Helen Blair (2001, 2003), where she talked of a figuration – using Norbert Elias' term – of networks of interdependence between freelance workers in a fairly closed industry. It is

a flexibly constructed work group organized around the development and production of a screen idea; a hypothetical grouping of those professional workers (with, potentially, a few non-professionals) involved in conceptualizing and developing fictional narrative work for any particular moving image screen idea.

Of course one could argue that the kind of opinion contained in this quote from Screenwriter B above is not confined to writers, and that ridiculously low pay, short cuts around courtesy and a lack of interest in previous experience is what some other people also put up with in the film and TV industry. These kinds of comments are individual reactions to the way the film and TV industries are organized, and also represent the common understanding in the business of 'how it works' (or the *doxa*). People know it's a tough business, and there may even be a rough sense of pride in surviving it.

However, the negative and personal nature of such comments still characterize such problems as fixable at the individual level, or as issues for strategic action. There is little sense that they might be systemic, entrenched in the *doxa* itself. In other words, the assumption – whether generally negative or not – appears to be that better treatment for screenwriters lies in recognizing their authority as true originators of the screen idea, and therefore of their deeper, more fundamental understanding of it. Screenwriters deserve higher status and better treatment (the argument might go) because they know the idea better than others. But it stops short of demanding change to the system, of (for example) claiming an authority for the writer that might trump the director. In practice some of those writers who have developed a personal status that might be powerful enough to cross that demarcation line, shy away from claiming it.<sup>5</sup> Others, like Dennis Potter, seek more power by becoming hyphenates (e.g. writer-producer, writer-director), which solves an individual problem without changing what appears to characterize the writer's role.

Some production studies, like Georgina Born's 1997 study of news production in the BBC (Born, 2002) reveal, as David Hesmondhalgh says, what creative staff struggle with – real dilemmas and difficulties involved in making public service broadcasting (Hesmondhalgh 2006: 83). This emphasizes the inner dynamics of institutions while also suggesting 'the continuing existence of spaces where relative independence can exist' (Hesmondhalgh 2006: 84). I suggest that studying the conceptualization of fiction production for the moving image in terms of firstly the *doxa*, and secondly of the specific practices of the SIWG, can be useful in understanding the link between production practices and text. It could explain how 'relatively independent' working is encouraged, shaped, directed and channelled as well as constrained; and also how that process informs the development of the screen idea into something this group of workers recognizes as legitimate in their understanding of a moving image narrative. In this article I use the notion of the SIWG to draw together the views of key workers about how they perceive the process of screen idea development works – or doesn't.

5. The well known and respected TV adaptor Andrew Davies offered an amusing and revealing example of his relationship with his director in his 1995 Royal TV Society Huw Wheldon Lecture (Davies 1995).

6. For example, Todd Gitlin's excellent analysis of the US networks in the 1980s (1985); or Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi's useful study of the MTM production company (1980). Roger Silverstone's *Framing Science* (1985) is a good example of a factual production analysis. All these include useful information about early screen idea development, but the focus on individual cases makes it harder to draw general conclusions about common patterns of development.
7. For example, Parker (1998: 42–43), McKee (1999: 415) or Cattrysse (2003). See also Patrick Cattrysse's article in this issue of the *Journal of Screenwriting*.

This kind of study is, I suggest, a form of production analysis which concentrates on the early conceptualization of the production. Production analysis can help in understanding why a screenwork is like it is, but such studies often concentrate on the later and practical elements of production *post*-script development, and are usually descriptive of specific cases. This limits the generalizations that might be made.<sup>6</sup> Individual biographies or production diaries are also helpful in understanding the creative context, but again such approaches reinforce the sense of individual actions taken in the context of a specified role within a production – Hesmondhalgh's space of 'relative independence'. In relation to the study of screen idea development in general, however, two suggestions offer areas for further consideration. First, John Corner has suggested that the development of screen ideas from pre-production through to viewing the final film can be seen as a series of transformations (Corner 2008: 125). The direction of these transformations is influenced by (or even determined by) decisions made in response to specific and significant elements – from TV network policy to elements identifying a particular company style, to practical interventions in project development like changes in location, budget, schedule or even censorship rulings. In relation to these elements, the more overt judgements and decisions usually occur some way into the production process. However, less obvious is what informs decisions made in the early stages, when people are assessing and developing the perceived general worth of the screen idea. This occurs in the perhaps 'purer' air of script development rather than in pre-production proper, where realities intrude on creative suggestions.

Second, as Newcomb and Lotz have suggested (2002: 76), the emphasis on struggles and power relations in accounts of production sometimes obscures the *collaborative* nature of such work, which also obscures the nature of that collaboration and what underpins it. It may be easier to observe decisions made in response to the kinds of changes mentioned above, than it is to identify the quieter decisions made in agreement with others. But one assumption must surely be that screenwriters and their colleagues wish to reach amicable agreement about the screen idea and its meanings, and that such collaboration is an important factor in deciding the eventual screenwork.

Before looking more closely at the transformations, collaborations and conflicts within the SIWG, two observations on the conventional framework within which screenwriters are invited to work – the current *doxa* – are pertinent, as this is the basis for collaboration and communication. Usually referred to as 'craft skills', the *doxa* is well documented in manuals and underpinned by courses for budding screenwriters, and by the UK's training agency for screenwriting, Skillset, when approving such courses. The professional discourse of screenwriting has recently become more overt with a proliferation of works during the last fifteen years, marked by increasing discussion in the professional arena about specific aspects of orthodox practice such as terminological inconsistency.<sup>7</sup> Screenwriting manuals reinforce the status quo, while their

proliferation offers the impression of difference in the field. However, there is little or no difference. The point is that they all offer a consistent normative framework representing a specific approach to storytelling on screen, even where there is some variation between what Philip Parker has called the 'new structuralists' (2000: 66) and those presenting 'alternatives' such as Dancyger and Rush (2002).<sup>8</sup> Secondly it is important to note this as a discourse which characterizes the process of screenwriting as individual, personal and oriented towards a goal that is qualitative and universal – that is, possessing merits independent of its industrial brief. It connects the industrial need of commercial film-making with the subjective mindset of an individual worker, and it makes a clear appeal to the screenwriter to put aside any questions, and immerse themselves in the process of writing. Debate within the *doxa* is usually restricted to ways of understanding the orthodoxy – the secrets of how it is done. This is seductive, as it offers systematic help to the struggling individual, and promises you can write any content as long as it is written 'this' way.

Of course screenwriting is only 'individual' for as long as it takes for the writer – working within the *doxa* – to complete the first draft (or even treatment). When this is produced, the screen idea is then developed through a social process amongst a 'community of practitioners', as Bill Nichols put it (1991: 14). However, this is not a democratic community as Nichols implies in his model (though there are democratic elements to it), and neither is it elective or self-nominating as Internet groups are.<sup>9</sup> Drawn together for the purpose of developing the screen idea, the Screen Idea Work Group simply refers collectively to all those who have some direct connection with the development of the screen idea.

This notion of the SIWG allows us to consider the screen idea development process both in general terms and in terms of what is specific to that particular production. We can avoid being limited to discussion of activity linked to an individual role as currently demarcated, such as what the director commonly does or does not do. We might identify how judgements and decisions are made within the changing flux of power relations in this group, and in relation to screen idea and to the industrial field and the field of power. We might consider the habitus of the individuals, the extent of the constraints and possible spaces allowed for negotiation within the field of film and TV drama production, the imported status of those individuals, the social power they actually wield, and the actual negotiation processes involved in the working of that SIWG.

It is, I claim, easier to think of a group working in both formal and informal ways to shape this screen idea than it is to accept the commonly described linear model of a succession of individuals crafting a script like some kind of object passing down a Fordist production line. I suggest it also helps to get away from focusing on the importance of the script itself; not as a document of record, because it is clearly the main written evidence of the screen idea, and the main document that people work with,<sup>10</sup> but because the people around it are *not* working with the script alone. They work with their notion of the screen idea in the contexts of that document and of that particular group.

8. To get a clearer sense of the extent of this 'normalisation', in 2003 I conducted a representative survey of concepts and terminology. I analysed twelve manuals (six British and six US), and cross-referenced the similarities. An analysis of terms and concepts produced a very close fit. For a full account of this see Macdonald (2004c), chapter 3.
9. The concept of elective interaction with others, in a hybrid activity between consumer and producer – 'prosumers' or 'producers' – has been discussed recently, e.g. by Bruns (2008).
10. The importance of the screenplay as text is also implicit in academic studies such as Sternberg (1997). She also makes the point that it is an 'unstable' document open to various interpretations (Sternberg 1997: 1), effectively allowing its unreliability and partial nature. See also Pasolini ([1966] 1977).

The orthodox account of creating a screen idea is characterized as a process of script development that involves workers in different roles and having different status. It characterizes these roles as almost set in stone, even if an individual can hold several at once, such as a writer-producer – a hyphenate. The impression given is that a good development process is one in which everyone knows their place and contributes ideas that serve an ideally constructed screen idea. Even in the wider ‘Triangle’ model of producer/writer/director collaboration, there is an assumption of ‘passing the parcel’ as many times as is necessary in the expectation of progress.

Accounting for the creation and development of the screen idea using the SIWG model is less rigid and more wide-ranging. The SIWG is made up of all those people who have a direct relationship to that particular screen idea. We can sub-divide the group into two versions – firstly the group as it exists and works before any concretization of production, and secondly the group as it works once practicalities like actual footage or availability of personnel and equipment inform or even drive decisions. This effectively means a slightly different character to the group before and after the start of principal photography.

Core members of the group before principal photography takes place are considered to be those who are required to write, read, comment on, contribute to or otherwise shape or influence the screen idea as a direct consequence of their role as currently defined. In conventional practice this would be the writer, the script reader, the script editor (a TV term) or development executive (a film term), the producer and/or the commissioning editor or department head, and the director. These are considered ‘core’ in that they will almost always be represented in a SIWG.

Others will also be involved and may be influential during this time. They might include the art director, the location scout, the actors, or anyone else with whom core members have a strong relationship. Executives may get involved, even financial backers who have no other involvement except to read the script and approve it (or not). They may give back notes and get credits as Executive Producers, for example. Membership of this hypothetical group could even extend to a friend in the bar who offers his own ending to the story, for consideration. The point is that membership of the group is flexible, and may extend to the unorthodox, non-professional or even fleeting, but every SIWG has the same purpose and goal – it serves and discusses a screen idea in order to agree, as far as possible, what should constitute the emerging screenwork.

If we use the notion of the SIWG to construct a small survey of opinions of key workers, we might clarify both what occurs during screen idea development, and how this process affects and is viewed by those involved. This could study either a specific group based around an actual screen idea, or could be used to draw more generalized conclusions by targeting key workers who have worked on different screen ideas. As a small-scale exercise to test the practicality of this, I targeted seven workers representing the core roles involved in any mainstream SIWG (see Table 1). These were three writers, a producer, a director, a

	<b>Writers</b>	<b>Others</b>	<b>Total</b>
White	3	3	6
Non-white	1	0	1
Male	2	2	4
Female	1	2	3
Film experience*	2	4	6
TV experience*	2	4	6
London location	2	3	5
Regional location	1	1	2

\*NB: Some interviewees appear in both these categories. Source: author's analysis of interviewee information, 2003/2004.

*Table 1: Origin and background of seven selected script-ideaworkers.*

script reader (TV) and a development executive (film). They also represented some key differences in gender, race, industry experience, and location within and outside London. I was trying to understand what went on in general, using specific but different experiences to build up a composite picture of conventional practice.

In semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes I asked interviewees questions designed to elicit how they got to occupy their role, how they felt their judgements were made and received, how far the SIWG's view of the screen idea accorded with the screenwriting *doxa*, and what might have shaped, constrained or restrained the judgements of those involved. I asked them about screen idea development, the concept of 'good' screenwriting, the training of screenwriters and their sense of the audience. Their answers came back as being concerned with status, sense of self-worth and respect, points of tension, power, control, collaboration and trust; as well as being about the nature of the '*doxa*' (characterized as how to do a 'good' piece of work). The three writers, the director and script reader discussed their personal power in negative terms, with only the development exec and the producer appearing to be satisfied with their personal power and status. This seemed to be based on their direct experiences of treatment received, with all giving examples. The writers in particular talked of being 'constantly rejected' (Writer B 2003) and 'being locked out of decisions' (Writer A 2003) and of being led into directions they were not inclined to go down; 'all the banging your head against a wall thinking yes, but this isn't what I wanted to write' (Writer F 2004).

The opposition of power and control *versus* collaboration and trust was a balance important to all interviewees, and this seems to go to the heart of the operation of a SIWG. Good experiences were those

11. 'Format' here refers to shape, style, tone and genre of this series, not (necessarily or only) to script format.

in which the interviewee felt both empowered and trusted, as well as trusting the judgement of colleagues; and unsurprisingly these occurred with people of similar backgrounds and experience. Bad experiences were those where there was disagreement leading to a breakdown of trust, which seemed to happen when there was a change in personnel or direction of the project for external reasons, together with a difference in cultural vision. It was a separation of views of the screen idea that seemed to lead to breakdowns in trust, the point where what might be an undercurrent of differences in opinion became less of a negotiation and more of a power struggle.

Cultural differences really came to a head in the [nth] series. Until then [the director] had been following the format<sup>11</sup> laid down by other directors. Now there was a chance for him to re-conceive the whole project in his own [way]. He knew more about the American market... From being recognisably English in the old sense, it was given this very North American quality. The music [for example] ... suddenly became very North American. Completely changed the tone.

(Writer A 2003)

Here the aesthetic judgements of the writers were successfully challenged, mistakenly in Writer A's opinion. This particular TV series was always a UK/North American co-production. While the concept of the series was stable, based on a UK audience and culture, the balance of power fell in favour of the judgements of a UK producer and writers. When market circumstances forced some form of change on the production team, the UK producer was not invited to join the new team. The concept of the series spin-off changed towards the 'mid-Atlantic' in the attempt to address the North American market more strongly, and in favour of the judgements of the North American producer and director, who demanded changes and rewrites to the scripts. In the opinion of Writer A, it lost its British television values; 'we can never match the same kind of production values as some of those American series, yet we were trying – to me that was a mistake' (Writer A 2003).

The redevelopment of this series shows a realignment of cultural vision after these market forces intervened, which resulted in a change of personnel and shift in control of the content, and a different set of judgements being made. To that extent it can be said that the writers' dispositions were being challenged by others, and that their sense of what was good judgement was not (fully) working within the new power structure, whether or not the series succeeded in its market aims. It cannot be said, however, that the writers did not (then or eventually) adapt completely to a different market; only that, in this example of change, the stimulus of external forces on opposing dispositions created a rift in views of the screen idea, and that one prevailed to create the form of the new series. The writers had to accept defeat. This example shows how a TV drama series can change radically as a



result of a shift in the operation of the SIWG, even while retaining the original screenwriters writing the same kind of storylines.

What about film production? In another example, Writer B describes the personal dislike that he took to the people in the company that wanted to produce his treatment and first draft. After various contractual moves over some time, the same company acquired the script but not the writer, suggesting the feeling was mutual. According to the writer, the screen idea changed radically after his departure and it no longer 'worked' because the genre did not fit the different context. Here, judgements could not be made in common and disagreement was terminal, for the writer. In this example, Writer B was originally working with one producer with whom he agreed, but eventually another SIWG took over the screen idea and developed it differently.

These examples highlight differences, but shot through all the interviewees' comments was the clear desire to find common ground on which to collaborate. This takes the Newcomb and Lotz observation mentioned above a bit further, in that collaboration seems to be the *desired* way of working. It is when individual struggles for power and control become important, and when market and industrial pressures combine with individual habitus to bring about difference of opinion that can be acted upon, that trust breaks down and collaboration ceases. At that point the character and operation of that SIWG changes. The well-known term 'development hell' suggests (anecdotally at least) that difficulty and breakdowns are not uncommon. Such a conclusion implies that our conventional industrial model places the screenwriter in a difficult position personally; this is often damaging to the ego, and it's tough to survive that.

If the Screen Idea Work Group is based on the desire for collaboration, the basis for that collaboration and communication is clearly the *doxa*. Conventional craft skills, and a shared vocabulary of technical terms were mentioned and used (although one interviewee did not believe the trend towards greater use of such terminology was adding value). There is a universal belief amongst these interviewees in the 'admirable screenplay', a piece of consecrated work whose qualities are difficult to define but which are clear 'when you see it'. It is believed that this is achieved once a screen idea has been developed in accordance with the *doxa*, but which then somehow transcends the ordinary. The admirable screenplay appears to aim particularly at four specific goals associated with industrial practicability: realizability; an appropriate structure; a clear thesis, and some aspect of originality (or perhaps novelty). Good screenwriting, according to all the interviewees except one writer, is something that connects subjectively with the reader. 'Great screenwriting' is something that transcends the framework of craft skills. These are orthodox views that do little to illuminate the process of screen idea development, except to show that their holders have absorbed professional screenwriting culture to a point where they rarely question their practice and accept it as the norm. What constitutes or leads to admired work can therefore only be

divined from the previous work of professionals, including their reputation and their contribution to the discourses of taste. Development Executive G describes discussion of the screen idea commonly in relation to previous screenworks; 'which film are we going to use as our touchstone?' (Development Executive G 2004). As Reader E suggests, it is important to know the field; 'watch as much as possible what else has been made, old and new, good and bad, so that you can see what works and what doesn't, and you can learn why people make the judgements that people make' (Reader E 2004).

This is another invitation to join the *illusio* as Bourdieu terms it (1996: 228), the game of using and constructing the field, including acceptance of conventional notions of what works and what does not. The suggestion from interviewees' responses is that the 'admirable screenplay' is something 'new' and emotionally engaging, a singularity that is usually described as original or from an original voice, and the provenance of which is assumed to be the genius of the writer. The description of how this transcendence occurs is vague, and acknowledges nothing of the cultural and normative context that might define 'new' in the first place. It is not surprising therefore that normative discourse in development always characterizes the production of something genuinely new as difficult.

So, in general how does this hypothetical SIWG appear to work? It is based around the conventional production hierarchy (led by the producer or executive producer), through which decisions are made or confirmed. This is affected by institutional factors, by professional status, by other forms of social status both inside and outside the field, and by power granted to individuals through the operation of both artistic and commercial capital in the marketplace. If the group were to meet, this would be the social framework in which the screen idea was initially discussed. However, there is also a second and leveling factor in operation as development progresses, in its discourse of artistic practice and craft skills – it does allow for lower status members of the group to offer opinion on the screen idea, on almost equal terms. If the script reader, as a junior member, described various problems with the script in articulate and perceptive ways, their influence on the idea is likely to increase. Anyone from teaboy upwards could suggest an improvement that might have a significant bearing on the final screenwork, even if this contribution is eventually uncredited or filtered through the intervention of others. This kind of contribution informs but does not threaten the decision-making process, controlled or directed by the powerful within the group.

This is authorship on two levels. The first level is intended as collaborative within the official hierarchy and conventions, where individuals collaborate to present a coherent version of a screenwork according to accepted parameters and social status. In this there are contributions from official and acknowledged authors, demarcated, specialized, even informal but likely to be credited on the screenwork. Then there is the second, rather more anarchistic process in which ALL those individuals

involved negotiate a place for their ideas within the screen idea. They do collaborate but also compete to present and legitimize their version of the screen idea outside the framework of observable and conventional power relationships. Successful adoption of a contribution does not necessarily reflect the power structure, as all members of the group usually subscribe to some kind of consensus about the screen idea in question, and how it should operate. This means that any contribution to the screen idea is absorbed into the official hierarchy and conventional ways of working and – importantly – is (re-)directed towards the commonly understood goal of producing a particular (type of) screenwork. As Newcomb and Lotz suggested, in relation to the production structure of a US TV drama, 'it would be wrong to suggest that unequal power relations always reflect fundamentally opposed perspectives, or that 'winners' exercise power in order to obliterate the ideas and contributions of "losers"' (Newcomb and Lotz 2002: 76).

12. See Barthes' *S/Z* (1974), and Macdonald (2004b, 2009).

Working on the screen idea then, during the period of script development, is a complex process which acknowledges some contributions but not others, where the power that comes with status is used in decision-making but where acceptance of ideas does not always relate to status, where judgements are made in relation to the *doxa* of screenwriting and its surrounding culture as well as in relation to direct market and institutional pressures and where, as Roland Barthes might put it, a writerly process is directed towards a readerly goal.<sup>12</sup>

The way the SIWG works requires an individual to submit their contributions to a process of review and decision-making in an arena fraught with social complexities, industrial and cultural conventions and individual habitus masquerading as 'sound artistic judgement'. This makes the screenwriter immediately vulnerable, as noted at the start of this article – their status as the originator of the screen idea is initially high, until others have become familiar with it and begin contributing, but then the writer is in practice no different from any other contributor. Of course their official status as writer comes with a level of respect that demands diplomacy in how they are treated, and it is likely that their experience and familiarity with the project affords them a higher chance of making valuable contributions, but the conventional role of the screenwriter requires them to relinquish control of decision-making in the screen idea. On a personal level this is never going to be easy, especially in the freelance and pressurized film industry in the UK, because their dispensability reduces their leverage, to use Joseph Turow's phrase (1997: 26).

This small study (and my accompanying arguments) is merely a pointer to future work. I suggest it indicates the value of studying group practice as an SIWG, and it raises a few possible conclusions that need further investigation. Firstly it suggests that professional screenwriters are likely to believe in an orthodox way of doing things – even if it is approximate in their view – which doesn't just *inform* their work – it *forms* their work. I suggest that thinking of their work in terms of the screen idea and the SIWG helps to recognize how this orthodox discourse

underpins the, sometimes confusing, world of actual production. This is not to suggest that all such groups work in the same way, though one could argue that all have some sort of relationship to the *doxa*.

Second, by understanding the process as one of developing the screen idea, we can link production to conceptualization and to text through the study of the provenance of specific screenworks. This is not just in terms of trying to identify textual progress in screenplay drafts, or of attributing authorship, or of institutional pressures and internal power struggles, or of other drivers such as a public service broadcasting ethos, but also in the membership and activity of a particular SIWG in the service of a particular screen idea.

This approach also re-replaces the study of the screenplay in its context. Instead of looking at it either as an inferior version of the screenwork, or as a literary work of art in its own right, it can be seen as a stylized expression of a screen idea at a particular moment. It is therefore neither separated from its purpose, nor unappreciated for its own beauties. It can be poetic, and appreciated as such – Carl Mayer’s *Sunrise* (1927) or Stanley Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange* (1970), for example, are both sparing and expressive, even poetic and wonderful to read on the page. They work as literary pieces expressing the visual, read according to the conventions of the screenplay. But they also record what was thought to work at that moment, and in that sense they are as valid an expression of the screen idea as the later screenwork. The ‘progress’ of development may not (always) be a linear process.

Lastly the notion of the Screen Idea Work Group is not intended to replace the sense of individual authorship, despite the implication that collectively the SIWG is the true site of the emerging screen idea. Attribution of, or credit for, creative ideas is not the purpose of this way of studying screen idea development. It is instead intended as a way of understanding what actually happens when a moving image narrative is conceived, developed and produced. It is a way of seeing what conventions, attitudes, judgements and taste inform that particular screen idea; and how they interact to produce the work collectively regarded as – if not good – then satisfactory for the purposes of production.

## REFERENCES

- Barthes, Roland (1974), *S/Z*, Oxford, Blackwell.
- Blair, Helen (2001), ‘“You’re Only as Good as Your Last Job”: the Labour Process and Labour Market in the British Film Industry’, *Work, employment and society*, 15:1, pp. 149–169.
- Blair, Helen (2003), ‘Winning and losing in flexible labour markets: the formation and operation of networks of interdependence in the UK film industry’, *Sociology*, 37:4, pp. 677–694.
- Born, Georgina (2002), ‘Reflexivity and ambivalence: culture, creativity and government in the BBC’, *Cultural Values*, 6:1/2, pp. 65–90.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1984), *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1993), *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1996), *The Rules of Art*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bruns, Axel (2008), *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: from production to produsage*, Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Cattrysse, Patrick (2003), 'Training in Scriptwriting', *Scriptwriter*, 9, March, pp. 48–53.
- Clary, Stephen (2002), *Short Documents*, unpublished course notes on documents used in development of the screen idea, London: Arista.
- Corner, John (2008), 'On Documentary', in Glen Creeber (ed.), *The TV Genre Book*, Second Edition, London: British Film Institute/Palgrave, pp. 123–127.
- Creeber, Glen (ed.) (2008), *The TV Genre Book*, Second Edition, London: British Film Institute/Palgrave.
- Dancyger, Ken and Rush, Jeff (2002), *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules*, Third Edition, Boston, MA: Focal Press.
- Davies, Andrew (1995), 'Prima Donnas and Job Lots', The Huw Wheldon Memorial Lecture (for the Royal Television Society), London: British Universities Film and Video Council.
- Egri, Lajos (1960), *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Feuer, Jane, Kerr, Paul and Vahimagi, Tise (eds) (1980), *MTM : 'quality television'*, London: BFI.
- Field, Syd (1994), *Screenplay. The Foundations of Screenwriting from Concept to Finished Script*, expanded edition, New York: Dell.
- Frensham, Raymond (1996), *Teach Yourself Screenwriting*, London: Hodder Headline.
- Friedmann, Julian (1995), *How to make money Scriptwriting*, London: Boxtree Press.
- Gitlin, Todd (1985), *Inside Primetime*, NY: Pantheon.
- Grove, Elliot (2001), *raindance writer's lab: write + sell the hot screenplay*, London: Focal Press.
- Hauge, Michael (1992), *Writing screenplays that sell*, British Edition, London: Elm Tree Books.
- Hesmondhalgh, David (ed.) (2006), *Media Production*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Jensen, Klaus Bruhn (ed.) (2002), *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies*, London: Routledge.
- Kubrick, Stanley (1970), *Clockwork Orange*, shooting script, 07/09/70, London, Hollywood Scripts [distributor]. 107 pp.
- Macdonald, Ian W. (2004a), 'Manuals are not enough: relating screenwriting practice to theories', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 1:2, pp. 260–274.
- Macdonald, Ian W. (2004b) 'Disentangling the screen idea', *Journal of Media Practice*, 5:2, pp. 89–99.
- Macdonald, Ian W. (2004c), 'The presentation of the screen idea in narrative film-making', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University.
- Macdonald, Ian W. (2008), "'It's not surprising I'm neurotic!" The screen idea and the Screen Idea Work Group', paper by invitation at *Behind the scenes of cultural production*, mediatization of culture seminar, 25–26 September 2008, Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen. A version of this paper was also delivered as a lecture at Shih-Hsin University, Taipei, 10 April 2009.
- Macdonald, Ian W. (forthcoming 2009), 'Behind the mask of the screenplay: the screen idea', in Clive Myer (ed.) (forthcoming 2009), *Critical Cinema: Beyond the Theory of Practice*, London: Wallflower Press.

- Mayer, Carl (1927), *Sunrise. A Song of Two Humans. Photoplay*. [Los Angeles, Fox Film Corporation] [DVD]. [London], Eureka Video, 2003 [distributor].
- McKee, Robert (1999), *Story. Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, London: Methuen.
- Myer, Clive (ed.) (forthcoming 2009), *Critical Cinema: Beyond the Theory of Practice*, London: Wallflower Press.
- Newcomb, Horace and Lotz, Amanda (2002), 'The production of media fiction', Klaus Bruhn Jensen (ed.), *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies*, London: Routledge, pp. 62–77.
- Nichols, Bill (1991), *Representing Reality: issues and concepts in documentary*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Parker, Philip (1998), *The Art and Science of Screenwriting*, Exeter: Intellect Books.
- Parker, Philip (2000), 'Reconstructing Narrative', *Journal of Media Practice*, 1:2, pp. 66–74.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo ([1966] 1977), 'The Scenario as a structure designed to become another structure', *Wide Angle*, 2:1, pp. 40–47. (Originally published in Pasolini, Pier Paolo (1966), *Uccellacci e Uccellini*, Milan: Garzanti.)
- Silverstone, Roger (1985), *Framing Science: the making of a BBC documentary*, London: British Film Institute.
- Sternberg, Claudia (1997), *Written for the Screen. The American motion-picture screenplay as text*, Tuebingen: Stauffenberg Verlag.
- Tobin, Rob (2000), *How to write high structure, high concept movies*, Santa Monica, CA: Xlibris Corporation.
- Trottier, David (1998), *The screenwriter's bible. A complete guide to writing, formatting and selling your script*, Third edition, Los Angeles: Silman-James.
- Turow, Joseph (1997), *Media Systems in Society. Understanding Industries, Strategies and Power*, second edition, New York: Longman.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Macdonald, I. W. (2010), '...So It's not surprising I'm neurotic' The Screenwriter and the Screen Idea Work Group', *Journal of Screenwriting* 1: 1, pp. 45–58, doi: 10.1386/josc.1.1.45/1

Contact: University of Leeds, LS2 9JT.  
Phone: +44 113 343 5816 (incl. voicemail)  
E-mail: i.w.macdonald@leeds.ac.uk

---

Copyright of Journal of Screenwriting is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.