

THE OBJECT THAT IS NOT YET AN OBJECT: THE SCREEN IDEA

Ian W. Macdonald¹

Abstract: Until a few years ago, film scholars thought of the screenplay as an interim, even ephemeral, document designed only as a rough description of a film – Pasolini’s “structure designed to become another structure” (Pasolini [1966] 1977, 40) – and worked to understand it as a particular form of literary document, something more than just a professional “blueprint”. But this focus on the script-text alone tends to deny its importance in a broader process. Screenwriting is about more than just films, and more than just “writing”; and there are more documents involved than just the screenplay. Nowadays writers write for film, television series and seasons of series, web series and video games. Simple TV dramas have become complex television, films have grown into franchises. The “Screen Idea” is a simple term which refers to a focus on the work developing a narrative for the moving image. It is a way of referring to an as-yet unformed and dynamic, changing “object”. To borrow from Pasolini, it is an object which is not yet an object.² In this address I argue that “the Screen Idea” can be seen as a key to understanding the creative process in screen narrative, across different media. It helps to explain how the producer is first the user, and in conjunction with creativity theory allows us to see the interplay of various elements in shaping screen narrative. It does not ignore the text, even the literary text, but fundamentally it is about understanding how our writers are creating meaning in screen narrative, and what their discourse tells us of their beliefs about how to do this. In the age of multi-platform media, we are no longer dealing with conceiving single texts for one medium. In fact, we have to account for an object that has yet to become, not one, but several objects.

Key-words: Screenplay; Screen Idea; screenwriting; creative labour; transmedia; David Lean; Robert Bolt.

Contact: I.W.Macdonald@leeds.ac.uk

Dr. Zhivago (1965) was directed by one of Britain’s greatest directors, David Lean. It was shot in Spain, by Nic Roeg, before he was replaced by Freddie Young. Its magnificent tableau and narrative sequence has more in common with the visual awareness of the silent era, an entirely different way of storytelling. David Lean learned his skills as a film editor with the

¹ Ian W. Macdonald, from the University of Leeds (United Kingdom), is author of *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (2013), co-founder and first Coordinator of the Screenwriting Research Network (www.screenwritingresearch.com), founding editor (2012-15) of Palgrave Macmillan’s book series *Palgrave Studies in Screenwriting*, and co-editor of the *Journal of Screenwriting* since its inception in 2009.

² Pasolini talks of the “dynamic structure” of a scenario, “its will to be a form which moves in the direction towards another form” (1977, 47).

silents, and it shows here, but the calm beauty of what we see on screen is nothing like the development the film went through. To quote something from the writer of the film, the great Robert Bolt, who adapted Boris Pasternak's novel;

“I wake every morning with this story stretching in front of me like a road in a mist... and I walk in circles for a day or two, ready to throw back my head and howl with rage and helplessness. I've never done anything so *difficult*. That *bigger* Pasternak! It's like trying to straighten cobwebs.” (Bolt in Brownlow 1996, 505).

Difficult or not, David Lean liked a big canvas. He directed films like *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *The Bridge On the River Kwai* (1957), as well as the unsurpassed 1946 adaptation of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. And here's possibly his greatest epic, *Nostramo*, from the novel by Joseph Conrad, made even greater because it was written by two of Britain's greatest screenwriters, Christopher Hampton and Robert Bolt.

[Blank Screen]

Here it is.

[Blank Screen]

At least according to our usual way of thinking about film narrative, this is all we have.

[Blank Screen]

No film. Sadly, David Lean died just six weeks before principal photography, and it was never shot.

However, there are 47 boxes of written material at the British Film Institute. How can we ignore these? And indeed how can we ignore any such work, just because it was not filmed? We might forgive the general public, who only want to see the film, of course. But as film and media scholars can we justify ignoring this work?

This is like literary scholars ignoring a previously unknown book by Charles Dickens called *More Tales from the Marshalsea Prison*, and saying it is of no consequence because it was never published. That wouldn't happen.

A few film disciplines have thought about this. Adaptation scholars have considered the re-formation of narrative between forms, like between the novel and the film, but they tend to work with finished texts, not those like *Nostramo*. Production studies has considered the moment of creative development, often from an industrial perspective. TV scholars are used to considering

narrative development throughout a series, again from the finished text. And some scholars have addressed the literary conventions of the film script. But while all these add to our knowledge and understanding, we still don't have a sense of how this all links up theoretically. We have actually neglected the study of screenwriting, not just looking at old scripts and notes for literary value, but considering how people think about the film they are hoping to make.

So my main questions here are – how can we understand what's involved in creating screen narrative? And can we come up with a way of understanding it that makes sense across different forms and platforms?

So this talk is about an object that is not really an object, which we can call the Screen Idea. I shall argue that we haven't paid much attention to the discourse of film conception, that part of practice which imagines the film and its potential existence. And there's a stronger need than ever before, to think about this across the range of media there is now, with stories expanding across several platforms.

Our problem is that there is no single, clear object to focus on here, except perhaps some bits of paper like the script – which we tend to read as a literary, rather than cinematic, blueprint. And as a document the script is describing another document anyway, as Pasolini once said.³ So we usually focus on the tangible object that we have instead, the completed film, the final text, and then we work backwards from that to discuss what works and what doesn't, as if this was always a question of “what makes this a perfect film?” Instead of asking... “what were they actually trying to do here?” It's a strange thing. If film studies tend to work backwards from the film; in film production, on the other hand, all the attention is on the goal, on what it might become, before it exists, even if it ends up looking very different. The focus is on what is possible, on where the idea for the film is going. Why don't we study the process this way round?

The Screen Idea

A friend of mine, Professor Denys Riout of the Sorbonne, wrote a book about the conceptual artist Yves Klein (Riout 2010). The book was subtitled *Expressing the Immaterial*. And this resonated with me, in thinking about what goes on before the screenplay is written. In

³ Pasolini (1977, 40) “if the author decides to adopt the ‘technique’ of the scenario as an autonomous work, he must accept, at the same time, the allusion to a cinematographic work (in the making)”.

creativity theory, nothing comes from nothing. At the beginning of the whole process there is always an idea for the screenwork, even what some people have called the germ of an idea. It exists, but only in your mind. When you share this idea with someone else, as with conceptual art, you know the other person will have a different perspective on it. We can't see it, but it's here, between us. It exists only in our minds and our discourse. Even with pre-existing texts which are being adapted, the Screen Idea remains unique, what we choose it to be. David Lean's notes picked out elements from Conrad's novel that he thought of as important – another filmmaker might have treated this differently (and that is in fact what happened when his screenwriters changed, from Hampton to Bolt). The very desire to express something, at a particular date, time and place, is what gives that immaterial Screen Idea form and shape. The more it is developed, the more is known about it, the more it emerges from the subjective, the more we accept and discuss it as if it was an object with a separate existence.

So in one way the Screen Idea is a very simple notion – it's just a label stuck on something that will have form later. It's a staking out of territory. It's a plot of newly-purchased land on which carefully selected crops will bloom, later. Or not. The seed might fall on stony ground and the Screen Idea may be – in fact, is, more often than not – abandoned. But it is probably the most important part of film-making; the time when anything is possible, when whole worlds can be eliminated without a thought, when new worlds take their place, when heroes can within seconds change from the idea of Leonardo di Caprio to possibly Ralph Fiennes to potentially Kate Winslet.

The term the Screen Idea was mentioned in Phil Parker's screenwriting manual, *The Art and Science of Screenwriting* (1998, 57), but here's my definition for academic purposes:

“Any notion held by one or more people of a singular concept (however complex) which may have conventional shape or not, intended to become a screenwork, whether or not it is possible to describe it in written form or other means.”

The Screen Idea is, for me, a key concept. It's a way of stepping back from discussions based on single forms like the film, the TV drama series, the web series; and of reminding us that all narrative forms are only variations of story. As well as being this “macro” concept, the Screen Idea has the advantage of also being specific in a micro sort of way, in referring to a particular

project. Indeed the value of the Screen Idea label is that it helps us keep hold of specificity in the dynamic and changing environment of screen narrative development and production. And this is the dual purpose of the Screen Idea – it focuses firmly on the initial idea, the basic purpose of the eventual work, plus it accommodates the fact that all works change as they become further developed. It allows for the dynamic and multiple nature of screen production, while remaining connected to its origin.

Creative Labour

We can't focus on the Screen Idea without considering who creates it and develops it. We can see how a Screen Idea Work Group congregates around it, every time. Everyone involved focuses their attention on the Screen Idea, even as it mutates, morphs, changes and develops into what they collectively want. It is the group that manages this process, in subtle and often unknown ways as well as in response to major decisions by powerful people in the group. It is a thought community, as I think Vera-John Steiner has described it.

My colleague from Copenhagen University, Eva Novrup Redvall, has used the Screen Idea as the basis for systematic research, in her approach to studying Danish TV drama series like *The Killing*, *The Bridge* and so on (Redvall 2013). She proposes the Screen Idea System as “a framework for understanding the writing and production of new television series as an interplay between three main shaping elements” (Redvall 2013, 7), of the individual, the domain and the field. The field here means everyone involved in TV production, and the domain means everything produced for TV, or published about it. This is adapted from creativity theory and Redvall uses it as a way of understanding what appears to be a successful international formula in Denmark for a particular type of TV drama. The company, DR, have in fact formalised their own beliefs about good practice into a written manifesto of principles, called Dogmes. These dogmes inform the way DR organises its work groups, how the individuals work within them, and how – as Redvall says – “those work groups... propose new, original variations in a constant interplay with the ideas of quality and appropriateness in the domain and the field” (Redvall 2013, 30). Of course we've seen studies of TV series before, from people like John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado, but we have not seen before the assumption that all screen narrative is developed around a Screen Idea which must have a work group, which operates in relation to a domain and a field and the orthodoxies therein. Redvall does not claim this directly, but I do.

The Screen Idea itself does not exist. We can only see its shape by its effect on those around it. A bit like a black hole in space. So the best way of understanding its shape and form is through the discourse of those working on it.

John Caldwell and others have underlined the value of studying industry discourse, as a way of showing the rationale for practices. Kristin Thompson has explained it's about what people think they are doing. So studying what they say about that work, how they justify their choices and decisions, how they present their work, can surely tell us a lot about how it relates to narrative meaning, to storytelling and the alleged "right" way of telling stories on screen. It can tell us about mental/cognitive frameworks, and the industrial frameworks being used, about power and status, about trust, about competition and collaboration in creative work.

Horace Newcomb pointed to "the significance of narrative and genre for the study of contemporary media" (Newcomb 2004, 413) so I suggest we need to understand the writer's perspective when he or she is constructing that narrative. This then involves their individual background and habitus, memory of previous consecrated works, personal memories (such as of powerful images), their understanding of industrial purpose and technical possibilities, social interaction, collaboration and power play; all within the Screen Idea Work Group.

And what they're doing as a work group, I suggest, is working out the rules of the game as they fit, or don't fit, a particular story. This is about what the group sees as important to this story. They'll look at the big story frameworks like genre, as Newcomb suggests, but there's also beliefs about film storytelling in general that apply, like the idea that tension should rise and fall in a saw-tooth fashion. Such beliefs come together in what I call a screenwriting orthodoxy, which clearly informs how professionals expect to write, or to read, a well-constructed film. So the purpose of the work group is not only to simply think up new ideas for films, or perhaps variations on old ones, but also to address how the film should relate to the field of production and its beliefs on what makes a good film. So this then leads to the general belief that there must be a correct way of screenwriting, a best way of doing things.

At the more artistic end, Screen Idea development can even be seen as a form of film philosophy – every attempt to create a Screen Idea and write a script is an attempt to answer the question "what is a screen narrative?", or screen story. It engages in practical terms with existing ideas of narrative, genre, and orthodox ways of doing things, and proposes new interventions.

But what about the more recent generation of fans and prosumers, I hear you say – those who use the internet to add to a narrative created by others? Well, Roger Silverstone and others have talked of a Cycle of Consumption, essentially from production to consumption and back again (Silverstone 1994, 126-32). It underlines the point that film-makers both represent consumers, and are consumers themselves. So the fans can also be film-makers, and therefore become part of a Screen Idea Work Group. An outer ring of fans which might become core writers for a specific Screen Idea. Of course.

For example, you might already know there's a fan community called *fujoshi*, or “Rotten Girls”, who are enthusiastic about a genre of slash video called *yaoi*, or Boy's Love, which edits male characters into romantic relationships which were never intended by the original producers. *Sherlock* (2010-2016) is popular with Rotten Girls who like queering the meaning,⁴ presumably because there's more than a suggestion of a submerged bromance between Holmes and Watson anyway – that's part of the intriguing nature of the original series, not to mention the earlier TV series, films, books and 19th century stories in periodicals. What this shows is that the Screen Idea is never finished, whether we think of it as a classic or not. There's always more to work on.

Now re-working older material is no different from what professional writers and film-makers have always done. This is just using new technology to tell new stories based on old ones – what changes is the accessibility of technology, both in production and distribution. And consequently, there is a shift in the work group which creates and transmits such stories. And as a consequence of that there is a shift in power every time – new people are in control of the narrative.

So the Screen Idea exists as a focus, firstly as the purpose and goal of the work group that is developing it; and secondly as a way of establishing – as soon as possible – intellectual property that can either be exploited, or protected from the wrong kind of exploitation, depending on who owns it.

Now when I'm reading a screenplay by a student, we are a Screen Idea work group. I often find myself saying “this is a feature film idea, not a short film”. I can see it fits with my understanding of what makes a feature, and that my student hasn't grasped that yet. But the idea is still there, under discussion about how we develop it, either way, in our small work group of 2

⁴ *Sherlock and John*, by “Hannah and BBC John” is one such mashup, to be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRj9GKmqGR8>. Thanks to my Masters student Xu Yingjie for telling me about Rotten Girls.

people. There's no reason why we can't break with convention and try something radical. In the real world nowadays we might even see it as two versions, or more. And of course much screenwork is now built around several narrative platforms.

Expansion of Media

Storyworld universes are now more common in TV, and the business community in the USA notes that "cinematic universes, built upon interconnected characters and properties are increasingly becoming the norm." (Rindskopf 2016). The Marvel Cinematic Universe is perhaps the best known, even if one blogger pointed out that "[if] it doesn't always work narratively, it certainly works financially" (Rindskopf 2015). In fact we're talking about several universes here. The original Marvel Comics story universe, known as Universe 616, was joined for a while in comic form by a parallel universe set in the year 1602, and the Cinematic Universe, which started in 2008 with *Iron Man*, is also parallel to 616, and is known as Universe 199999. According an article by Wilson Koh in *Celebrity Studies* (Koh 2014), the *Captain America* movie release in 2011 was preceded by specific comics designed as a prequel, plus reprints of early comics around Captain America. Some of the characters were also present in ongoing Universe 616 stories, also released in conjunction with the film. What we're seeing here - apart from a sense of a company throwing all its ideas and the kitchen sink, all at the same time, at its consumer base - is a cheerful disregard for narrative consistency in the service of trying out new story ideas, and capitalising on them. Henry Jenkins notes that comic-book producers "have embraced the principle of narrative multiplicity, simultaneously creating multiple comics that feature differing riffs on the core version of any given superhero" (Koh 2014, 488-9).

"Under this new system readers may consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character, different understandings of their relationships with the secondary characters, different moral perspectives, exploring different moments in their lives... So that in some storylines Aunt Mary knows Spider-Man's secret identity, while in others she doesn't" (Jenkins in Koh 2014, 489).

And the creators decide the rules. It's the same with any Screen Idea.

Back in 1961 Umberto Eco's study of comics, again cited by Wilson Koh, argued that the superhero concept had loosened the ties of causality, so dear to classic Hollywood narrative. The

superhero exists, he said, “within a... climate that operates contrary to classical and rational notions of time as a linear event-narrative” (Koh 2014, 493). The usual rules had changed for this genre, he was saying, in a way that would otherwise challenge the norms for storytelling in general.

And the same thing applies to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It had not totally reconciled the narrative rules of their universe before releasing individual stories. New story ideas could be, and were, tried out. The audience accepts this, and as long as they're OK, it's OK. The core characters can return to a basic status quo in another adventure, and actually this is not new. We were used to seeing this in a milder form, in older media and genres before complex TV – like traditional sitcoms, or the James Bond franchise.

So, increasingly in this age of multiple platforms and 360-degree commissioning, our films and TV series narratives do not always exist within clear consistent boundaries. As Jason Mittell says, after Henry Jenkins, there are paratexts that orient the viewer around a TV series mothership (Mittell 2015, 295). But whatever the texts that are produced, the common, consistent elements involved in this process of creation are (1) a loose work group, working within various agreement structures and organisations, understandings, cognitive frameworks, institutional practices and personal and social interactions; and (2) a stated purpose, a Screen Idea, however simple or complex.

New narrative forms are also coming up and challenging narrative practices all the time. Keith Stuart, the videogames editor of The Guardian newspaper, said recently that “videogames are environments built around play, not work.”⁵ Videogames are theatre in an expanded space, and they push the limits of narrative, as they push at the limits of their spaces. Alternate Reality Games have been around for about a decade or longer, and are specifically set up to “quote – push a universe outside of its medium”, says Montreal-based ARG company Alice and Smith, on their website (www.aliceandsmith.com/expertise/). Last year Alice and Smith set up what they claim is the first permanent Alternate Reality Game, *Blackwatchmen*, a game which is played on coded websites, newspaper ads, phone calls, text messages and in real-world locations. Its users enter the game through rabbit holes, and explore the reality of the game via clues and structures offered to them by the puppet masters. The important thing for their Screen Idea is the suspension of disbelief in their mantra of T.I.N.A.G. – This Is Not A Game. But it is a game. The

⁵ Keith Stuart was addressing a research seminar at the University of Leeds, in 2016.

open-ended nature of the game does not disguise the careful construction of narrative, like a soap. And the involvement of the user is not confined to empathy for the hero but includes solving puzzles that the hero would have to solve. Again this is not so different from older media and genres, as in the long tradition of US film and TV detective shows, from *Dragnet* to *Columbo*, and others. The TV series *Lost* is a puzzle game, says Keith Stuart, as does Jason Mittell (2015). There's also a resonance with existing real-life games like orienteering or treasure hunts⁶ or what Leeds University students call "The Assassins Club", a wide game in very dubious taste where students have to go round the campus surprising their targets, and claiming they have killed them. Go figure.

Uses to Academia

So how is all this useful to academics? I want to mention four things, with two examples.

Well, first, it opens up the field of screenwriting studies. Instead of focusing only on the text of a script, and seeing it as an incomplete blueprint for another text – the film – we can see it as an expression of something which is as complete as it is possible to be, at the point and the place it was written. By accepting the notion of the Screen Idea as the over-arching concept, we can value not only the documents that exist but also the process that developed them, as one continuous whole. So in my view, understanding screenwriting, not as a narrow and artificial category of employment, but more broadly as an activity of creative conception and development, takes us into the world of creative ideas, rather than only some kind of literary genre. And away from focusing entirely on the final text of the film. The Screen Idea serves the whole process.

Secondly, the Screen Idea means we don't have to study screen narrative in separate silos – film, or TV or games media, and so on. The traditional industrial demarcation is breaking down, and we can't study only one thing, because there's too much overlap anyway. The Screen Idea allows scholars to study narrative that is not restricted to an individual film or TV series, or a particular script, or to source material outside the screen, or a specific genre, or specific companies or industrial groupings, or to individual artists whether that is director, writer, producer or others. Plus the Screen Idea gives us a way of bringing in any and all forms, rules, customs and practices. These are all variables, as technical convergence reminds us. For

⁶ Or reality TV series like *Treasure Hunt* (1982-89) and *Hunted* (2015-16).

example, to all intents and purposes, film and TV now differ only in the size of budget, or in industrial organisation. So the label Screen Idea gets us away from the more restrictive, and now semi-redundant, labels of just “film” or just “TV”.

In similar ways, thirdly, we can look more clearly at authorship. *Auteurism* is widely used in writing about media, and there is pleasure to be had in identifying signature styles of film directors like Milcho Manchevski, or Agnieszka Holland for example, in their episodes of David Simon’s TV series *The Wire*. And Simon himself is an example of the show-runner, a relatively recent term which is another attempt at assigning an author to TV series, for purposes of control, both artistic and industrial. In discussing screen narratives we love to find the main person responsible, but we have to remember it is a generalisation for much of the time. The term “David Simon” is really a way of referring to his authority plus the team he has led, including others like Ed Burns or George Pelecanos, in relation to the vision of the Screen Idea they have in front of them. At Danmarks Radio their first Dogme rule says the author is “the one with the vision” (Redvall 2013, 69), meaning anyone who effectively holds the creative baton. The *Nostramo* Screen Idea Work Group was very much driven by David Lean, so it is right that it is seen as “his” project, his film, but if you compare the work done by writer Christopher Hampton, with that done later by Robert Bolt, the two are quite different. Hampton’s script is more theatrical, dialogue-based, as against the simpler, more cinematic and perhaps genre-based script from Bolt. So, if Lean had not reconciled his differences with Robert Bolt, and had shot the Hampton script, it would have been a different film. How does that square with Lean as auteur? It’s just that even an autocrat like David Lean is never the sole author in screen narrative, and Lean and his writers were quick to acknowledge the contributions of others. The authorship here is about the collaboration – in other words, the Screen Idea Work Group.

Fourth and possibly most importantly, I suggest the use of the Screen Idea as the focus point allows us to study more easily the screenwriting orthodoxies and other orthodox practices that are accepted as *de rigueur* within development situations. The discourse of the whole literature of screenwriting advice has been analysed recently by myself and other scholars like Bridget Conor, and it is clear that in the US and the UK certainly there are some very standard notions and fashions which appear to be influential. Unsurprisingly these are often interpretations of earlier works around narrative, such as Chris Vogler’s 1996 re-working of Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero’s Journey*, or Robert McKee’s emphasis on the authority of

Aristotle (McKee 1999). I want to give you an example of how a well-received film can be linked to the influence of standard Hollywood screenwriting orthodoxy. You can do this by studying the final film, of course, but it becomes clearer if you go into the development of the Screen Idea.

The Revenant (2015) is a film strongly authored by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, and an amazing feat of film-making if you think of the conditions of the shoot. From a cinema perspective there's no problem with seeing this as essentially Inarritu – under his artistic control, from script to performance to the visuals on screen, and including changing the whole icy landscape using explosives and a helicopter. The article by Edward Lawrenson (2016) in the critical magazine *Sight and Sound* is typically *auteurist*, concerned only with establishing Inarritu's artistic credentials, with a nod to the performance of, and difficulties suffered by, his leading man along the way, including – plot spoiler alert! – climbing into a dead horse. In the Cinema Studies world, this is useful stuff. Like David Lean before him, Inarritu has taken on big-canvas film-making, and it is what we see on screen that we respond to, in wonder and admiration at the melding of spectacle and narrative.

But if we study it from a screenwriting perspective, we can see how closely the narrative conforms to the orthodox screenwriting framework known as the Hero's Journey, made popular in the screenwriting world since the 1990s by Christopher Vogler, a former story analyst for Disney. We're talking about an industrial template here, used for films, TV and videogames alike. In this case there's a development process that begins in 2007 with a draft that focuses on a very special gun, an Anstadt rifle, as the device which links the hero Philip Glass with his struggles with his past life, the loss of his family, and the injustice done to him by Fitzgerald, his nemesis. In the 2010 version the rifle is made more personal, because it now has a star carved on the stock by Glass. There are also bigger parts for French traders, and native Americans, focusing on a more racist, emotional struggle. In the final film in 2015, the special rifle has gone, replaced as a device by his part- native-American son, killed directly by Fitzgerald, which makes the hero's motivation for the chase and revenge even stronger in present-day terms. This was always a Hero's Journey, but the development has followed not just a path towards current issues like race, but it has followed the screenwriting orthodoxy by emphasising the individual and the personal, in a fight against forces of evil.

So it's the orthodox screenwriting framework which underpins and forms this process, rather than just the unique artistic judgements of an admired director. *Sight and Sound* briefly acknowledges the divergence from the original novel, but has no awareness of the formation of this divergence, or what it means for screen storytelling in more general terms (Lawrenson 2016). And I leave it to you to decide if the earlier version was more or less subtle, or artistic, than the final one, which could be seen as more of a slam-dunk approach. So this is not about the perfection of the film; it's about why those earlier versions were not seen as effective. It's about industrial storytelling. Even the powerful and respected David Lean could not get away from these frameworks. He said, in his notes on *Nostramo*, "I am set firmly on the rails of my training, but sitting in the dark of a cinema I accept almost any deviation from the well-trodden 'laws'. So does the audience... But back at [my] desk I find it almost imperative to obey the conventions... I wish I could be a little more courageous" (Lean, in Macdonald 2013, 212). The scripts for *The Revenant* are available online at www.imsdb.com.

The Object which is Not Yet an Object

So the Screen Idea is a way of naming what writers, directors and others are aiming at, when developing screen story. Of course the Screen Idea never becomes a concrete object, so you might think the title of my talk today is a bit misleading. If so, I apologise. Carmen Sofia Brenes talks of the Screen Idea as a "goal which is striven for but which is not present" (Brenes 2014, 3), and Marja-Riitta Koivumaki talks of it as "an activity of visioning" (Koivumaki 2016, 69). Even when, especially when, the work group involved is changing, as it does throughout development, this is still a common, shared goal being passed around from one to several and back again. When working on *Dr. Zhivago*, the writer Robert Bolt said to David Lean

"I sense that we are in great danger, or that I am. It's not the sort of stuff that can be written "on approval". It needs a lot of heat and commitment and confidence; we can't write these scenes as a committee of two; I must write them myself so that they are one thing, one vision – otherwise however well they may fit a list of specifications, they will not be alive, will have no style or idiosyncrasy; and yet they must be what you want because you have to direct them, and they will be as hard to direct as to write; so we must thrash at it until we are sure we understand one another, and then you must leave me alone to do it" (Bolt in Brownlow 1996, 506).

So we scholars need the term “Screen Idea” to represent the imaginary, the unfixed, the changeable, the fleeting, the impossible, the pure where purity cannot be sustained in the screenwork, the choice that can drive the narrative forward, or can be reversed and which then makes all the difference in the reader’s mind.

You could just say, screenwriting represents the film, as shown by the script. But of course, the script only represents the idea of the film. So the Screen Idea has to remain always an imagined object, shared imperfectly amongst the work group for as long as they are active. It exists only subjectively, during this process, and in that sense my title is accurate, because it is an object which always remains “not yet” an object.

And yet, there is still a solidity to this not-yet object, complete with the literary and cinematic pleasures we seek in both books and films. Consider this last example; scene 97 in *Nostramo*, in a late version of the script (1991).⁷ This scene is set on a lighter, a cargo boat, on a Caribbean sea.

Close your eyes.

Imagine...

97. LIGHTER AT SEA. NIGHT

SILENCE and DARKNESS. Miniscule SOUNDS begin to be heard; the ripple of water, the creak of timbers, the groan of ropes. An IMAGE appears.

The PROW of the LIGHTER is pushing through calm blue-black water, creating a small BOW WAVE created with PHOSPHORENCE. Beyond the PROW the mirror-like surface of the GOLFO PLACIDO reflects an extravagant tropical vista of STARS and SPACE. Space as seen by a giant telescope; pink-tinted GALAXIES, NEBULAE and cloud-like STAR CLUSTERS.

⁷ Item 68 in the listing in Macdonald (2013, 230). This script, credited to Robert Bolt and David Lean, is in the British Film Institute’s David Lean Collection, Box 13/21. Text and formatting transcribed by the author.

NOSTROMO at the helm silhouetted against the stars as if he were steering the LIGHTER through the heavens. On SOUND the earthly creak of wood, the splash of water.

DECOUD looking at NOSTROMO, seeing him in a new light, the Argonaut.

He gazes around, awed by the solitude, experiencing the mysteriousness of the great waters for the first time.

DECOUD
It's desolate.

Silence for a moment, then there is a sudden NOISE and a flash of LIGHT. DECOUD jumps.

NOSTROMO has struck a match and is bending over the COMPASS. On SOUND, the sail flaps.

NOSTROMO
Wind's going.

The MATCH gutters out.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brenes, Carmen Sofia. 2014. "The Poetic Density of the Story as Key Issue in the Film Negotiation between Writer, Director and Producer". Potsdam, 7th Screenwriting Research Network International Conference 16th – 18th October 2014.
- Brenes, Carmen Sofia. 2015. "The Interaction between screenplay, performance and Screen Idea in two Latin-American films". London, 8th International Screenwriting Research Network conference 10th-12th September 2015.

- Brownlow, Kevin. 1996. *David Lean. A biography*. London: Richard Cohen.
- Caldwell, John T. 2008. *Production Culture. Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Caldwell, John T. 2009. "Screen studies and industrial 'theorizing'". *Screen* 50:1, Spring, 167-179.
- Conor, Bridget E. 2010. "Everybody's a writer'. Theorizing screenwriting as creative labour". *Journal of Screenwriting* 1:1, 27-43.
- Conor, Bridget E. 2014. *Screenwriting: creative labour and professional practice*. London: Routledge.
- Conrad, Joseph. 2002. *Nostromo*. New York: Dover Publications Inc.
- Jensen, Klaus Bruhn (ed.). 2002. *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies*. London: Routledge.
- Koh, Wilson. 2014. "'I am Iron Man': the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Celebtor Labour". *Celebrity Studies* 5:4, 484-500.
- Koivumaki, Marja-Riitta. 2016. *Dramaturgical Approach in Cinema. Elements of Poetic dramaturgy in A. Tarkovsky's films*. Helsinki: Aalto University.
- Lawrenson, Edward. 2016. "Call of the Wild". *Sight and Sound* 26:1, Jan, 22-26.
- Macdonald, Ian W. 2013. *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McKee, Robert. 1999. *Story. Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. London: Methuen.
- Mittell, Jason. 2015. *Complex TV*. New York: New York University Press.
- Newcomb, Horace. 2004. "Narrative and Genre". *Downing* 2004, 413-428.
- Nichols, Bill. 1991. *Representing Reality...* Bloomington. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Parker, P. 1998. *The Art and Science of Screenwriting*. Exeter: Intellect Books.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. 1977. "The scenario as a structure designed to become another structure". *Wide Angle* 2:1, 40-47.
- Redvall, Eva Novrup. 2013. *Writing and producing television drama in Denmark; from The Kingdom to The Killing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rindskopf, Jeff. 2015. *The Marvel Cinematic Universe Movies Ranked, from Worst to Best*. Available in <<http://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/the-marvel-cinematic-universe-movies-ranked-from-worst-to-best.html/?a=viewall>>. Accessed 24-III-2016.
- Rindskopf, Jeff. 2016. *The three best and worst crossover movies*. Available in <<http://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/the-3-best-and-worst-crossover-movies.html/?a=viewall>>. Accessed 24-III-2016.
- Riout, Denys. 2004. *Yves Klein: Expressing the Immaterial*. Paris: Editions Dilecta.
- Silverstone, Roger. 1994. *Television and everyday life*. London: Routledge.
- Thompson, Kristin. 2004. "Early alternatives to the Hollywood mode of production: Implications for Europe's avant-gardes". In: Grieveson, L. & Kramer, P. *The Silent Cinema Reader*. London: Routledge, 349-367.
- Vogler, Christopher. 1996. *The writer's journey. Mythic structure for storytellers and screenwriters*. London: Boxtree.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Blayden-Ryall, Miles *et al.* 2015-2016. *Hunted*. Shine TV for Channel 4.
- Gatiss, Mark & Moffat, Steven. 2010-2016. *Sherlock*. Hartwood for BBC.

- Hodgetts, James *et al.*. 1982-1989. *Treasure Hunt* Chatsworth TV for Channel 4.
- Iñárritu, Alejandro, 2015. *The Revenant*. Regency Entreprises/RatPac Entertainment.
- Lean, David. 1946. *Great Expectations*. Cineguild/National Symphony Orchestra.
- Lean, David. 1957. *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Columbia Pictures/Horizon Pictures.
- Lean, David. 1962. *Lawrence of Arabia*. Horizon Pictures.
- Lean, David. 1965. *Dr Zhivago*. MGM/Carlo Ponti Production/Sostar.
- Rosenfeldt, Hans (creator). 2011-2015. *Bron/Broen/The Bridge*. Filmlance/Nimbus for SVT.
- Simon, David. 2002-2008. *The Wire*. Blown Deadline for HBO.
- Sveistrup, Søren (creator). 2007-2012. *Forbrydelsen/The Killing*. Danmarks Radio.