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The role of fiction in screenwriting (as) research

Abstract:

Here the authors discuss the role of fiction in screenwriting practice research. The screenplays included in the ‘Screenplays as Research Artefacts’ special issue of *TEXT* present a range of stories, worlds, characters, visual scenarios and dialogue exchanges that function as vessels for theories and ideas. These eleven screenplays all use creative practice approaches to research across a wide variety of discourses. All of the works embrace fiction as an important method to convey their respective critical concerns, which, the authors argue, evidences an emerging hallmark of screenwriting (as) research when compared with associated forms in the creative writing and screen production disciplines: fiction as a staple of its storytelling, creative practice and research methodology. The authors suggest that the use of fiction to perform research and present findings illuminates the ways that knowledge can be affective, not merely textual or verbal, something that is exemplified in the selected screenplays.

Biographical notes:

Craig Batty is Associate Professor of Screenwriting and Creative Practice at RMIT University. He is author of over 50 books, chapters, journal articles and refereed conference proceedings; editor of two books and 10 journal special issues; and has worked as a writer and script editor. In 2016 he received an Australian Award for University Teaching for his contributions to creative writing doctoral education, and in 2017 won the RMIT Vice-Chancellor’s Award for Research Supervision Excellence. His current areas of research are screenwriting practice research, script development, and doctoral training in creative disciplines. Craig is also Adjunct Professor at Central Queensland University and the University of Southern Queensland, and Visiting Research Fellow at the UK’s Bournemouth University.

Dr Dallas John Baker is a Senior Lecturer in writing, editing and publishing at the School of Arts and Communication at the University of Southern Queensland. He has published dozens of scholarly articles and creative works, including, under the pen name D.J. McPhee, three fantasy fiction novels, *Waycaller* (2016), *Keysong* (2017) and *Oracle* (2018). Dallas has also published a number of short scripts in various respected journals. He is special issues editor of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, the peak journal for the Creative Writing discipline in Australia. He is convenor of the Scriptwriting as Research Symposium and co-editor of *Recovering History through Fact and Fiction: Forgotten Lives* (2018, Cambridge Scholars Press). Dallas’ study and research intersect with a number of disciplines: creative writing, scriptwriting and Publishing Studies. His current research interests are writing for performance, publishing and ‘self-making’ in cultural practices such as creative writing, reading and performance.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Screenwriting as research – Fiction as research – Affect – Screenplay

In the ‘Screenplays as Research Artefacts’ special issue of *TEXT* (Baker & Batty 2018), which is the fourth in a line of those focussed on scriptwriting as research, but the first to focus exclusively on writing for the screen, we present a range of stories, worlds, characters, visual scenarios and dialogue exchanges that function as vessels for theories and ideas. The eleven screenplays included in this issue use creative practice approaches to research across a wide variety of discourses, from archival work on historical subjects, to notions of gender, sex and sexuality, to more meta concepts regarding screenwriting craft and researching in the academy. But all of these screenplays have one important aspect in common: the use of fiction to do this research work. Whether parody, speculative biography or straight-forward drama, all of the works in this special issue embrace fiction as an important method to convey their respective critical concerns. Perhaps this is one of the hallmarks of screenwriting (as) research when compared with associated forms in creative writing and screen production: fiction as a staple of its storytelling. There are, of course, those who use non-fiction in screenwriting (as) research; but comparatively, and considering the affectual nature of screen drama and comedy, is fiction one of the defining features of this creative practice research endeavour? Let us consider this idea before we outline the works that appear in the issue.

How is fiction useful to research?

Paul Williams celebrates the use of ‘fictional devices in order to explore issues that are traditionally articulated by conventional forms of critical analysis’, advocating the creative language and imagined content of fiction ‘as an alternative form of academic discourse to the conventional essay’ (Williams 2013: 250). As he points out, ‘the richness of fictional discourse compared to conventional literary criticism creates layers of complexity that mirror [the] subject matter’ (Williams 2013: 253), which suggests the potential of fiction to not only represent or perform research (see Haseman 2006), but also to engage readers in a creative-critical conversation about the topic. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (1996) argue that works of imagination, or literature, use fictional content and methods to explore matters of significant social and cultural importance. While rejecting the idea that fictional works contain inalienable truths—truth itself being a construction based on social convention—they suggest that fiction nevertheless reflects and interrogates real concerns. Furthermore, they demonstrate that narrative, imagination and metaphor, among other components of fiction, play an important role in thought processes, including analysis and understanding. Hence, fiction is useful to one’s research endeavours.

Narrative enquiry as a research method (see Johns 2006; Clandinin and Connelly 2000) is well documented in areas such as education, social work and the medical professions, also used as a way of ‘enhancing’ reflective practice (see Moon 2004). While there are clear similarities with this type of methodology, the use of fiction supposes the deliberate act of creating an imagined world in order to enable the enquiry. Fiction as a useful method (or methodology) within research thus aligns with Stroud’s argument that literary narrative ‘holds the power to move individuals to thought, reflection, action, and belief’ (Stroud 2008: 1). This is because it possesses the cognitive qualities that allow for subjective perspectives to be experienced. In other words, fictional narratives enable research ideas to be *shown* and *felt*, not merely *told*. Berry (2016) uses this approach in her ethnographic study of smartphone camera users, in which she presents a series of fictional vignettes to convey her data in ways that not only mirror the ‘creative vernaculars’ discovered within her users, but that also ‘enhance’ the very practice of ethnography through combining observation with creative writing (as a form of thick description).

Dallas Baker (2013) discusses the script as a research artefact in the academy, drawing on narrative components such as form, structure and theme to test and disseminate ideas in fresh

and subject matter-related ways. In a follow-up article, Dallas Baker, Craig Batty, Debra Beattie and Susan Davis lament that ‘scripts can and should be treated as research outcomes, and that scriptwriting itself, in the right context, can be seen as a legitimate and important research practice’ (Baker et al. 2015: 8). Methodologically speaking, ‘in the right context’ signals the need for a fictional work to be *doing* research; to be serving and served by research as opposed to industry requirements, for example – unless the requirements of industry are the subject of the research enquiry.

Fictional works from a research standpoint thus represent what Walter Benjamin argues for in his essay, ‘The Storyteller’:

it is in the nature of every real story to contain something useful; that in every case the storyteller is someone who has counsel for the reader; and that the purpose of storytelling, as it used to be, was the conveyance of something of value, of use, of wisdom (Benjamin 1970a: 86, cited by Nash 2014: 98).

For Nash, an Australian filmmaker and screenwriter of fictional, non-fictional and hybrid essayistic works, ideas – framed here as part of the research process – determine the way she works with material, being open and imaginative so that narrative components lead her practice: ‘Rather than following a predetermined shape, I try to let structure emerge out of the material and be a response to the ideas’ (Nash 2014: 97). Of fiction screenplays specifically, British screenwriter and academic Helen Jacey believes that writers serve a crucial role in society’s representation of itself: ‘a first step screenwriters might usefully take is to define their authorial intentions and what might largely be termed as their “subjective value system”’ (Jacey 2014: 241). Such a ‘subjective value system’, as portrayed through fictional means, functions to probe, explore, expose and test out propositions about the world (society, culture, politics, etc.) that encourage audiences to think. For Christopher Pullen, writing about queer screen practitioners who use fiction to challenge norms and self-represent: ‘Whether directly or indirectly, screenwriters write about themselves; or at the very least, they frame their personal ideas, contexts and skills in the mediation of a narrative’ (Pullen 2014: 285).

Direct links can be made here with the academic screenplay which, when created and written under research conditions, also serves to probe, explore, expose and test out research questions or propositions (see Batty and Berry 2016; Batty et al. 2015; Lee et al. 2016). Operating as ‘a vital incubator for risk taking, reflexivity and fearless critical thinking’ (Batty and Berry 2016: 182), the academy asks screenwriters undertaking creative practice research ‘to bring multidisciplinary perspectives and creative research strategies to bear on issues and possibilities, and often to think outside the existing boxes’ (Cherry and Higgs 2011: 13). As the screenwriting practice academics in this issue attest to, we pull apart, test and offer deeper and/or alternative modes of writing for the screen, considering aspects such as form, structure, theme, character and dialogue. Being in the academy asks us to position ourselves as researcher first and foremost (see Knudsen 2016), thus we use screenwriting as a mode or approach to research within a broader understanding of creative practice as a research methodology. The use of fiction within this methodology offers a way of *thinking through the screenplay*, where narrative components – however imagined and infinite – ‘do’ the research.

Fiction and the screenwriter-researcher

Shaun Kimber uses the genre of horror as a lens through which to understand how critical approaches can inform creative practice (i.e., fiction screenplays), enhancing and moving the genre forward from derivative to innovative. Using theory ‘as a way of getting to the sinister heart of the story [you] want to tell’ (Kimber 2014: 49), critical ideas are not additional but rather complementary to practice, enabling screenwriters to use the fictional worlds they create to both refer to and transgress horror histories. As Kimber argues, ‘horror storytelling is

enriched through an alignment of a well-researched knowledge of horror industries and audiences, the creative application of craft skills and techniques, and the imaginative understanding of conceptual and theoretical approaches to horror', which ultimately inspires horror screenwriters 'to further re-animate horror storytelling through the creative blending of theory and practice' (Kimber 2014: 61).

Drawing on a range of areas for creative-critical consideration, such as horror histories, paradigms, themes and industrial contexts, Kimber makes a compelling case for how 'successful' fiction relies on good research, and how research using fiction can also be made accessible to, and be of benefit for, many stakeholders. He writes:

Great horror storytelling, I want to argue, can be achieved through the linking of a well-researched knowledge of horror histories, industries and audiences, the creative application of craft skills and techniques, and the imaginative understanding of conceptual and theoretical approaches to horror (Kimber 2014: 46).

If 'the creative intellect of horror screenwriters can be reanimated through the meaningful and constructive alignment of these intersecting practical and theoretical contexts' (Kimber 2014: 46), then for Nash, writing about teaching Australian film history to undergraduate students, purposely seeking creative responses to theory allows powerful connections to be made between 'learning' and 'doing'. She explains how, like fiction's ability to probe and question ideas in creative and nuanced ways, students are asked to respond to topics in ways that can perform theory and, importantly, do so in ways which are authentic to the subject matter. As she reports: 'The results have been unprecedented in my experience as a teacher, the engagement of the students and the creativity of their responses both surprising and inspiring' (Nash 2014: 103).

This pedagogic approach is aligned with Nash's own practice as a screenwriter and filmmaker, for whom 'stepping into the unknown' and working from her instincts is very important during the script development stage. Nash explains how she learns new skills 'on the job through getting [her] hands dirty rather than following the rule books' (Nash 2014: 97). Fictionalising her thoughts about and encounters with the subject matter, script development for Nash involves 'reading, thinking, dreaming and debating with others; exploring the known world first and then heading out into the unknown to hunt and gather images, sounds and ideas' (Nash 2014: 97). Only then, she argues, can the 'mysterious, alchemical process' start to occur, where 'ideas that have been fermenting begin to take shape and express themselves cinematically' (Nash 2014: 97). From these descriptions of a very organic and dynamic process of script development, we might argue that the very form of fiction invites a prevailing sense of wonder and play into the world of research.

Concerned with gender representations, stereotypes and their place in script development, Jacey shares some of her experiences of working on screenplay projects that have piqued an interest in critical approaches to cast design. On masculinity specifically, she is interested in how academic writing directed towards creative practice can 'help screenwriters consider men from new critical angles, ones that can help them in their creation of male characters' (Jacey 2014: 238). Outlining various contemporary genre categorisations of stories that involve men's relationships with one other, such as the bromance, Jacey brings theory and fiction together 'in order to understand ways that screenwriters might approach male character development' (Jacey 2014: 238). She is thus interested in how fiction can be used not merely to represent critical ideas, but moreover, as a form of *transgression* that can re-define ideas and, potentially, provide paradigm shifts.

Also concerned with gender, Marilyn Tofler discusses an approach she developed to writing the satirical female voice. Reflecting on her practice-based screenwriting PhD, which worked

through and proposed ‘methods of screenwriting useful for the creation of social satire, featuring a female protagonist’ (Tofler 2014: 256), Tofler explains how drawing on a rich history of satirical comedy theory and practice (e.g., a textual analysis of the film *Something’s Gotta Give* (Meyers 2003)) enabled her to produce and test out practical tools and techniques for writing screenplays that embody ‘an implicit moral standard’ (Frye 1957, cited by Tofler 2014: 267). In other words, fiction – in her case, a comedy feature film – was used as a way to develop and disseminate knowledge about gender and comedy.

Discussing queer voices on the screen, Pullen writes that despite historical denial of overt expressions of homosexuality, ‘screenwriters have involved themselves in the process of self-representation, evident in their screenplays and cultural disseminations’, which involves them ‘speaking to mainstream audiences about the context of their identity’ and ‘involves a personal intimate subjectivity’ (Pullen 2014: 271). Pullen makes reference to screenwriters and filmmakers Lisa Cholodenko, Tom Ford, Jonathan Harvey and Christopher Isherwood, and how through fiction they actively embed a homosexual identity into their practice, ‘constructing a modified future through personal narrative inventions’ (Pullen 2014: 277). This idea of a ‘modified future’ suggests a sort of creative activism, in which fiction, with its infinite possibilities and (potential) mass appeal, can highlight issues and provoke change. ‘Screenwriting as a creative practice thus offers the opportunity to present contemporary visions of identity’, activated by those involved in screen production in an attempt to ‘stimulate new opportunities for identification’ (Pullen 2014: 272).

Fiction and knowledge as affect

The use of fiction to perform research and present findings illuminates the ways that knowledge can be affective, not merely textual or verbal. As Cooke notes ‘knowledge may be able to be figured as affect ... as something that happens in the mind’ (2011: 60). It can also be understood as something that happens in the body. Knowledge as affect is experiential; it comes in the form of cognitive and bodily reactions to the narrative, or the images and sensations it evokes. Affective knowledge, then, is not contained in the text or script but rather arises from participatory acts such as reading or viewing. Knowledge in this context is dynamic and processual rather than static or bound by what is contained on the page (Baker 2018). In other words, knowledge, especially when explored and disseminated through fiction, is *transtextual*.

Studies in writing for performance that have focussed on scripts-as-texts rather than live performance have rightly emphasised the ways that the textual meanings of a work are produced in ‘the radical contingency of performance—the unpredictable, often playful intersection of history, material conditions, social contexts, and reception that ... makes theatrical meaning a participatory act’ (Bulman 1995: 1). It is important to note, however, that this participatory act is not dependent on live performance; it also happens in the act of reading. The script on the page is also a participatory space.

John Hall (2013: 358) notes:

Writing is verb and practice, and textuality the general outcome of all writing, a second or third nature that weaves through the world as the already written, reactivated every time an act of reading or textual memory takes place. Textuality is produced and reproduced through writing and reading, its material and aesthetic forms proliferating without any sign of decay (emphasis original)

Hall’s poetics aside, it is clear that this textuality includes the meanings and, importantly, knowledge produced and disseminated by the written work, for us here, by the screenplay. In other words, screenplays as texts, as published works of research, are knowledge objects that

have the potential to trigger a number of processes in the reader. These processes include, but are not limited to (see, also, Baker 2012; 2018):

- An affective experience containing non-verbal knowledge related to the scripted story;
- An engagement with the narrative that is intertextually linked to multiple other narratives the reader has been exposed to in the past;
- An assimilation of information contained in the narrative and connection of that information to other information leading to new understandings about both the new and the old information, which is new knowledge;
- Simultaneous creation of both a privileged or dominant meaning and individualised and highly idiosyncratic meanings of the narrative experienced, which is also new knowledge;
- An experience of pleasure or dissatisfaction;
- New memories of that experience of pleasure or dissatisfaction (and of the meanings of the narrative) that link to (and thus alter) other, sometimes similar, sometimes apparently un-associated, older memories;
- Ongoing and unpredictable change to the nature of the reader's subjectivity driven by these new experiences, by the new knowledge and new and altered memories.

If we consider affect specifically (the first in the list above), the affective experience (for the reader), containing non-verbal knowledge related to the scripted story, underpins the whole of this special issue. The knowledge these eleven screenplays contain and produce is performative; that is, knowledge occurs through the act of reading (at least initially), and thus 'produces not only a theoretical understanding [but is also] as an affective experience' (Baker 2012: 178). This is an alternative route to knowing, a different way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in creative research works such as screenplays, which we experience in an embodied way. This is certainly true of performed works, but, we argue, also of works read on the page – despite their potential to be produced as screen works. 'We laugh, we cringe, we cry, we feel good, we feel bad, we sympathise, we identify, we rage' (Baker 2017: 327) when we read these screenplays, even if they are 'only' on the page at this point in time, and also if they are deliberate research pursuits. Such affective experiences inform us about 'material realities and lived experiences that we may never have otherwise understood' (Baker 2017: 327). To put it simply, affective experiences are another way of producing knowledge (see Haseman & Mafe 2009).

The use of fiction in the 'Screenplays as research artefacts' special issue

As we can see, and as the screenplays in the special issue (Baker & Batty 2018) demonstrate, fiction occupies a special place in the academy and wider culture as a mode through which ideas and issues of various types can be highlighted, tested out and, potentially, transgressed. Screenwriters working in (and out of) the academy are the intercessors of thought: they draw on research, of various types, as vital fuel for their narratives, and use screenplay craft to shape and deliver fictional stories that *think* and *do* this research work.

The screenplays included in the 'Screenplays as Research Artefacts' special issue of *TEXT* fall into three categories:

- Self-reflexive metanarratives using fiction to explore screenwriting craft and research (including adaptation);
- Drama narratives using fiction to explore issues such as gender, sexuality and death;
- Speculative biographies (biopics) using fiction to illuminate the lives of Australian women.

The screenplays by Batty, Taylor and Cake all use the screenplay form to explore screenwriting itself in terms of its modes and conventions, its practice and its pedagogy. *A vacuous screenplay in search of rigour*, by Craig Batty, uses fiction to interrogate not only the very mode of creative practice research, but also the broader (and varied) institutional research cultures within which it operates. It does this by featuring a variety of painful and often comic encounters between academics trying to articulate their practice as research, thus showing how creative researchers can overcome the difficulties associated with articulating how one's creative practice is also research. The short screenplay *Sluglines as ghostly presence* by Stayci Taylor casts the screenwriter as investigator of screenplay formatting, through the writing of a script within which she performs this practice. Taylor uses a creative practice methodology to critique and examine screenplay formatting conventions through screenwriting practice itself. Specifically, she explores the role of the slugline (or scene heading) and the creative possibilities of this element of scene text beyond its practical function in screenwriting and screen production. Susan Cake's screenplay, *Inside the writer's head*, uses characters to explore the often competing rational, intuitive and emotional aspects of screenwriting practice, and in doing so contributes to the body of screenplays-as-research artefacts. The characters in Cake's screenplay articulate thought processes behind ideation, the role of research and considerations of audience in developing screenplays, and challenges learners of screenwriting to consider why they write.

The special issue includes six screenplays that can be characterised as drama, which is the screen genre equivalent to the fiction category in literature. Phoebe Hart's *Ordinary Pain*, an hour-long television pilot 'dramedy', emerges out of a scriptwriting as research project within the academy, and seeks to reposition characters with an intersex variation as 'an everyday social type'. *Ordinary Pain* explores family, gender, sexuality and place in engaging, inspiring and funny ways, and is informed by reflection on and within screenwriting practice. In a similar vein, Dallas Baker's screenplay is informed by queer theory relating to gender and sexuality and explores the complex negotiations and disclosures that gender non-conforming persons are often forced to undertake in social situations largely structured by heteronormativity. The screenplay foregrounds dialogue and direct address as a subversion of mainstream (masculinist) screen conventions that accentuate the visual (masculine) over the verbal (feminine) and verisimilitude over self-reflexivity. *Flying*, by Charles deSalis, employs the literary tropes that make the modern novel challenging to adapt for the screen, including shifting internal realities, dreams, fluid frames of reference, stream of consciousness, multiple points of view, and subjective and objective time. As a practice-led research project, the writing of *Flying* involved reflecting on the process and engaging with the dissonance that exists between the scholarly discussion of adaptation and professional practice.

Margaret McVeigh's screenplay, *Urban Girl*, owes its inspirations to the landscape and characters of the author's country childhood, as well as to the image of the female figure in the landscape – urban or rural. Informed by critical theory about Gothic literature, this script uses a sense of foreboding and entrapment (and lyrics from an 'excessive' country music soundtrack) as metaphors for how a young woman may be trapped by roles and expectations that thwart her in her quest for true love. Bryan Wade's *Seven ways to fate and all* is the outcome of a practice-led research project exploring the exponential growth in British Columbia of fentanyl-detected illicit drug overdose deaths. This fictional screenplay portrays characters from many walks of life, teenagers, parents, actors, politicians and the homeless, and shows how they struggle with the impact of illicit drug usage. Rather than a screed about illicit opioid use, the screenplay attempts to inform, open conversations and transform attitudes. *Who Killed Desdemona?* by Scott Alderdice introduces a clown-based approach to an interpretation of Shakespeare's play, *Othello*. The screenplay introduces clown-based play and

interactivity with both text and a live/video attendant audience in negotiating a process of performance-in-rehearsal, wherein the clowns critically and irreverently unpack and interpret Shakespeare's text through intermittent discourse and enactment.

The speculative biopic screenplays (by Donna Lee Brien and Debra Beattie) both focus on women from the past whose experiences or accomplishments have been obscured by time or discourse. They are both fictional works based on archival research on their historical subjects. Both aim to use fiction to bring to light aspects of these women's lives or careers that are not widely known. The screenplay by Brien, *The Anniversary*, is a fictionalised version of events in Sydney, Australia, 1894, that led to the criminal sensation that was known as 'The Dean Case'. The focus of the screenplay is the attempted murder of Mary Dean by her husband, George Dean. The criminal case ensuing from the attempted murder aroused intense public interest. Brien's screenplay dramatises those events, suggesting both a range of motivations for George Dean's crime as well as emphasising Mary Dean's vulnerability and bravery in the face of the prolonged domestic abuse she suffered. Beattie's screenplay, *The Art Lovers*, is the fictionalised story of the struggles and triumphs of an early Australian female artist, Daphne Mayo. Mayo, a sculptor, worked and was highly successful in the early twentieth century, a time when very few women took on this physically demanding occupation. Included in the special issue is an excerpt from this feature-length screenplay in development. The excerpt highlights the challenges Mayo faced, especially as an Australian within a rigid British culture, when she was the only woman studying sculpture at the Royal Academy in London. The work is a fictionalised re-telling of an anecdote that Daphne herself penned as prose, which was discovered during research conducted over months spent in the Fryer Collection of the University of Queensland.

Conclusion

The screenplays included in the 'Screenplays as Research Artefacts' special issue of *TEXT* present a range of stories, worlds, characters, visual scenarios and dialogue exchanges that function as vessels for theories and ideas. The eleven screenplays all use creative practice approaches to research across a wide variety of discourses. All of the works embrace fiction as an important method to convey their respective critical concerns, which evidences an emerging hallmark of the growing field of screenwriting (as) research: fiction as a staple of its storytelling, creative practice and research methodology. As discussed above, the use of fiction to perform research and present findings illuminates the ways that knowledge can be affective rather than merely textual or verbal, something that is exemplified in all of the screenplays selected for the special issue of *TEXT*.

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