

RMIT University

Stayci Taylor

Sluglines as ghostly presence

Abstract:

This short screenplay casts the screenwriter as investigator of screenplay formatting, through the writing of a script within which she performs this practice. That is to say, the writer 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’ (Sternberg 1997), beyond its practical function in screenwriting and screen production. The writer drinks with authors, theorists and the fabled typing monkeys in her exploration of the slugline as punctuation; asking how it might contribute to rhythm and transitions in screenplays. She considers the slugline in its capacity as ‘extrafictional voice’ (Ingelstrom, 2014) and asks: can sluglines guide editing and mise-en-scene, as Claudia Sternberg suggests of the impersonal narrative voice? Can sluglines be used repetitively (as in songwriting) to reinforce imagery and rhythm? The work critically engages with the traditional INT. and EXT. and also floats a broader question: what might the language of online abbreviations have to offer screenplay conventions? A subplot sees a cast and crew meet for a table read, putting voice to an industry potentially suspicious of such an endeavour, and providing a playful commentary on the different ways in which the roles within screen production engage with the traditional screenplay.

Biographical Note:

Stayci Taylor is an Industry Fellow and lecturer with the Media Program at RMIT University. She is published widely in the fields of script development, screenwriting practice and gendered perspectives in comedy, in journals including *New Writing*, *TEXT*, *Senses of Cinema* and *Celebrity Studies*. She is co-editor of a recent special issue of the *Journal of Screenwriting* on script development, and is co-editing a forthcoming book on the topic. Her television credits for broadcast include nine series of an award-winning bilingual serial drama and a primetime sitcom. She continues to work as a television script consultant and editor, and currently has a comedy screenplay in development with the New Zealand Film Commission. Her screenwriting-as-research works include a webisode for a prior special issue of *TEXT*, and a short screenplay for Melbourne Knowledge Week.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Screenwriting – Screenplay

Sluglines as Ghostly Presence

TITLE UP: "The screenplay is erased in the process of production, but only partially, and it emerges as a ghostly presence to trouble the illusion of realism" (Price 2010: 52).

FADE IN:

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

So many people.

In the:

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

There is a tiny Tiki Hut in the:

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

A line of empty shot glasses. Tequila flows from a nip pourer, splashing golden liquid up and down the row until each glass is filled. This is common screen code for CHARACTERS ARE GOING TO GET DRUNK in the:

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

A DJ spins vinyl. This CHARACTER is probably not going to be the MAIN CHARACTER in the:

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

Find the WRITER with a drink at a table.

WRITER

The dialogue has begun. Once this happens, no one will read anything in between ever again. Especially not the slug lines telling us we're, for example:

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

WRITER

But I have no proof of this.

Novelist D.B.C PIERRE enters from inside the BAR.

Three Tiny Tiki Hut tequila shots for D.B.C. PIERRE.

The WRITER waves him over. She wants only one thing from him.

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

Empty pint glasses on the table. D.B.C PIERRE is drunk.

D.B.C. PIERRE

Readers will fly through dialogue -
it's one of the great pleasures of
reading and one that puts them at
the heart of the action.

WRITER

Thank you, Pierre 2012, page 17.

The WRITER turns to the camera.

WRITER

D.B.C. Pierre has perhaps
supported, but not proved my point.
So that's on me.

A plane flies over the -

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

The Tiny Tiki Hut BAR TENDER looks up, wondering who is in -

INT. PLANE - DAY

- where a screenplay is open on the tray table. A FLIGHT
ATTENDANT puts a cup of coffee on top of it. A TV DIRECTOR
remains glued to the inflight entertainment.

EXT. BEER GARDEN - DAY

The BAR TENDER snaps out of her reverie to see a waiting
D.B.C. PIERRE.

D.B.C. PIERRE

Hit me.

WRITER (V.O)

Much of the language in a screenplay is not intended to be read aloud. Only once, perhaps at the:

INT. REHEARSAL ROOM - DAY

Jugs of water, plates of fruit and snacks run down the centre of the table, around which sit the WRITER and her complex readership, namely STAKEHOLDERS, CAST and CREW.

An ACTOR looks to the camera.

ACTOR

When did we all start calling a 'read through' a 'table read'?

ELDER ACTOR

(mutters to herself)

I blame those DVD featurettes.

Other ACTORS feign casual banter in the -

INT. REHEARSAL ROOM - DAY

- and line up stationery in the -

INT. REHEARSAL ROOM - DAY

- where many here will soon and only now understand where the characters are and why they behave as they do, because prior to now these readers have skipped over action and sluglines, telling them the scene takes place in, for example -

INT. REHEARSAL ROOM - DAY

ACTOR

(gloomily)

Is there a reason I have to say this line gloomily?

ANOTHER ACTOR leans into the middle of the table to grab a muffin, thus missing her cue.

TV DIRECTOR

Why the pause?

WRITER

(reads)

"An ACTOR leans into the middle of the table to grab a muffin, thus missing her cue".

The TV DIRECTOR makes a note in his script.

DIRECTOR
That's not clear in this draft.

The WRITER turns to the camera.

WRITER
He skipped over that piece of
action in his preparatory readings.
Ones that probably took place -

INT. PLANE - DAY OF TABLE READ

- where the screenplay is stained underneath the empty coffee cup. The TV DIRECTOR remains glued to the inflight entertainment.

WRITER (V.O)
Or perhaps -

INT. HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT BEFORE TABLE READ

- where the screenplay is open on the bedspread. The TV DIRECTOR is sound asleep.

WRITER (V.O)
I jest. Moreover, I digress. I'm
not here to talk about the action
in the scene text. I am here to
talk specifically about the
sluglines, the scene headings that
tell us, for example, we're -

INT. REHEARSAL ROOM - DAY

WRITER (V.O) (CONT'D)
Because if one is to use repetition
in this way, it reiterates, it
reinforces the environment, thus
maintaining, in the mind's eye of
the reader, the eventual mise-en-
scene.

The WRITER and DIRECTOR turn the page. ACTORS' mouths move as the table read (or read through!) continues.

WRITER (V.O) (CONT'D)
The same poetics of repetition that
continually evoke place -

EXT. IN THE GHETTO

WRITER (V.O) (CONT'D)

Or -

EXT. UNDER THE BOARDWALK

WRITER (V.O) (CONT'D)

Or -

EXT. UP ON THE ROOF

WRITER (V.O) (CONT'D)

Or -

EXT. AT THE CARWASH

Find CLAUDIA STERNBERG, soaping up a classical Hollywood narrative. She looks skyward.

CLAUDIA STERNBERG

This may be too much heterodiegetic personal narrative voice. Even for me.

Find the WRITER, taking a squeegee to the windscreen.

WRITER

Breaking the flow of this poetic act of repetition are the jarring abbreviations INT. and EXT. Isn't the interior implied when we're, for example -

REHEARSAL ROOM - DAY?

Bemused ACTORS highlight lines and make notes.

WRITER

*passionate

Why hasn't our language been allowed to evolve? Perhaps in 2017, for instance, the asterix is more suggestive than the parenthetical for colouring a line of dialogue with emotion or intent?

ELDER ACTOR

*sarcastic

I suppose we should write screenplays in 140-character sound bites.

WRITER (V.O)

Everyone loves referring knowingly to the 140-character minimum of tweets. We live in a world where baby boomers have embraced the emoji. The language of online abbreviations could be spectacularly useful in screenplays but that's for another essay script.

ELDER ACTOR

*sighs

Or whatever the fuck this is.

Enter ANN INGELSTROM.

ANN INGELSTROM

The extrafictional voice is situated inside the text but outside of the fiction.

WRITER

Thanks, Ingelstrom 2014, page 35, for getting me back on track.

INSIDE THE TREEHOUSE - DAY

- sit THREE MONKEYS, typing.

WRITER

The monkeys will now introduce us to 'secondary sluglines'. I've not used these a lot in my practice.

A parade of miniature slugs slime over a ream of paper beside a TYPING MONKEY. She picks one up and examines it carefully between her fingers. Fascinated.

WRITER

Secondary sluglines are also known as 'mini slugs'. And, like the mollusk, forge new paths across the page, creating a new flow of reading.

One MONKEY leaps to the

WINDOW

- and looks longingly outside at the canopy below.

WRITER (CONT'D)

Side-note: sometimes writers use adverbs like 'gloomily' or 'longingly'. Not an adverb fan per se, I've always given 'longingly' a pass.

The MONKEY looks from the canopy to the camera.

MONKEY (V.O)

If she thinks I'm going to apply her adverbs from either the action or parenthetical elements, she's deluded.

The MONKEY jumps out the

WINDOW

- and on to the

BENDY BRANCH

- she uses it like a trampoline, bouncing from it to grasp a

HANGING VINE

- with which she swings through the canopy and

LEAPS

- to land on the roof of the -

TINY TIKI HUT

- in our

BEER GARDEN

WRITER

Yes, sometimes mini slugs take the form of integral actions or sounds.

OPUTSIDE IN THE BEER GARDEN - DAY

The WRITER sits drinking with D.B.C. PIERRE, CLAUDIA STERNBERG and the MONKEY.

WRITER (V.O)

Others have written screenwriting guides using the format of a screenplay. It goes without saying that Charlie Kaufman critiqued screenwriting practice in his multi-layered screenplay for *Adaptation*. So for me to now introduce Robert McKee as a character would be tragically derivative.

LINDA SEGER enters with a jug of beer. She

POURS

- a round of drinks.

LINDA SEGER

Why write POURS in capital letters?

WRITER

I don't know. I'm experimenting. Maybe I see a glamour shot of the amber liquid.

D.B.C. PIERRE

Sack the jury! Write in a fever, rewrite in your cardigan!

WRITER

Software doesn't provide an element for mini slugs. One must hit the caps lock. Manually!

D.B.C PIERRE, CLAUDIA STERNBERG AND LINDA SEGER ARE UNMOVED BY HER PLIGHT.

CLAUDIA STERNBERG

When sound and vision cannot be attributed to a focalizer, the impersonal narrative 'voice' must be regarded as the narrative agent that guides the choice of images (e.g., editing, mise-en-scene).

WRITER

Thanks, Sternberg 1997, page 133 - I believe the sluglines can specifically guide both editing and mise-en-scene.

The WRITER leaps up from her chair. She strides -

INSIDE THE BAR

- where the other MONKEYS sit playing poker.

WRITER

For me, sluglines are like fences. Useful for a shooting script but jarring, or skipped over, in a master scene script. I've played here with repeating them several times, reiterating the location and thus evoking the mise-en-scene. That's not to say the jarring aspect can't be used to effect for an EDIT point (thus, perhaps, rendering transitional elements unnecessary). For instance, perhaps we want a strong cut to:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

A blue agave is cut down and shoved unceremoniously into a burlap sack.

WRITER (V.O)

Otherwise, because the very fact of the desert implies exterior, perhaps -

DESERT - DAY

The stump of the cactus attracts a lone fly.

EXT. BEER GARDEN

LINDA SEGER finishes drinking with D.B.C. PIERRE.

LINDA SEGER

Frankly, I question whether this is making a good script great.

D.B.C. PIERRE

Frankly, I question whether this is a good script.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

The fly buzzes around in erratic circles.

OUTSIDE IN THE BEER GARDEN

Fewer people now drinking -

OUTSIDE IN THE BEER GARDEN

- as the sun begins to set.

INT. PLANE - NIGHT

FLIGHT ATTENDANT (V.O)

Cabin crew cross check and prepare
doors for landing.

The DIRECTOR packs the screenplay into his bag.

OUTSIDE IN THE BEER GARDEN

- an APRONED MAN empties ashtrays.

OUTSIDE IN THE BEER GARDEN

D.B.C. PIERRE slams down his empty pot.

D.B.C. PIERRE

(to WRITER)

Thanks. It's been real.

D.B.C. PIERRE leaves.

WRITER (V.O)

After the last line of dialogue,
will anyone still read to the end?

INSIDE THE BAR

Two MONKEYS argue over the jukebox.

One MONKEY overcomes the other to make her selection.

The music floats -

OUTSIDE TO THE BEER GARDEN

- where only the WRITER and the MONKEY remain. They both sip
on dregs in an awkward silence.

Fairy lights flick on -

OUTSIDE IN THE BEER GARDEN

- where the

TINY TIKI HUT

- glows with a cactus shaped neon sign.

DESERT

A full moon over cacti.

AT THE CARWASH

A roller door closes over vertical wash systems, hanging like cheerleaders' pompoms at rest.

UNDER THE BOARDWALK

PEOPLE walking above.

UNDER THE BOARDWALK

PEOPLE making love.

OUTSIDE IN THE BEER GARDEN

The MONKEY is drunk, head down on the table. The WRITER looks to the camera.

WRITER (V.O)

Is it still a voice over if my lips
are moving?

FADE TO BLACK

END OF SCRIPT

Research Statement

Research background

This short screenplay-as-research explores the role of the slugline (or scene heading). It draws on (and directly references) the work of Claudia Sternberg, who put definition to the ‘scene text’ of screenplays as everything bar the dialogue (1997). While the term ‘scene text’ is sometimes used interchangeably with Sternberg’s ‘prose scene text’ (that component of the scene text termed big print or action in industry jargon), this screenplay brings sluglines – also part of the ‘scene text’ more broadly – to the fore of its enquiry.

Research contribution

The screenplay specifically contributes to the field of screenwriting practice research in its experimental exploration of the possibilities of the slugline, beyond its role in production practices (where, in industry standard formats, it usefully denotes location and time of day). It also playfully engages with the screenwriting persona, such as those appearing in Hollywood screenplays since 1991 – a phenomenon which, as Sternberg suggests, might parallel the rise of screenwriting history and criticism (2014). By creatively articulating its questions within its own text, and weaving citations through dialogue, the work literally offers a conversation about the slugline, and the way screenplays are read. In its explorations of how words work on the page, creating rhythm and disruption, the screenplay also contributes to the wider field of creative writing research.

Research significance

The screenplay foregrounds an under-explored element of screenwriting practice, and opens a field of enquiry for screenwriting scholars, asking how screenplays are read, what wider application might there be for such seemingly innocuous elements like scene headings (in screenplays and other scripted texts), and what it has to offer as a unique form of punctuation. Thus, it offers a disruption to unquestioned formatting conventions and offers possibilities for discussion and experimentation beyond the academy.

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