

Jill Nelmes Critical Appraisal - PhD by publication

Introduction:

This critical appraisal is based on an overview of my published research on the subject of the screenplay between 2007 and 2014 when my most recent monograph, *The Screenplay in British Cinema* (BFI, 2014) ¹ was produced. The aim of my research has been twofold: to bring to academic attention the depth and breadth of screenplay writing as a written form, particularly within British Cinema, and to argue that the screenplay can be studied as a literary text.

My interest in researching the screenplay arose from the realisation that the screenwriter and the screenplay have received little attention within the academy. My early research argues that the screenplay exists as a separate entity from the film, while being a vital part of the film production process, and that the screenplay is a written form to which textual analysis and the comparison of different drafts of a screenplay can be applied (see Nelmes, 2007; 2009). A case study of my own screenplay was published which discusses the complex nature of the development and rewriting process and concludes that problem solving is a key part of that process (Nelmes, 2009). As a result of this article I began to look at other screenwriters who have made a significant contribution to the film industry; my research on the screenwriter Paul Laverty and his re-writing of *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* was published in the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* (2010a). The research for this led to the discovery of the BFI Special Collections and I received a British Academy grant to study the re-writing process and the draft screenplays in the Janet Green collection (Nelmes, 2010b).

From the study of these screenplays I developed an interest in the relationship between description and dialogue in the screenplay that resulted in the chapter 'Realism and screenplay dialogue', published in *Analysing the Screenplay* (2011), which I also edited. The idea for the anthology came about because of the lack of writing available on the subject and includes 14 chapters written by highly regarded academics in the field from the US and the UK.

The monograph, *Writing the Screenplay* (2012), was born out of my research and the reading of so many screenplays for films produced in the US as well as the UK. It reflects my

interest in independent film and records my ideas about writing screenplays that have evolved while teaching the subject and a desire to study the relationship between craft and creativity that underscores much of my research.

My most recent published research, *The Screenwriter in British Cinema* (2014), further investigates the content of the Special Collections held at the British Film Institute, which holds many items that span the whole range of the screenwriting process, from outline to different length treatments, drafts of screenplays and shooting scripts (see Nelmes, 2010a; 2010b; 2014). This research looks at the screenwriter in Britain, from the 1930s to the present day, highlighting those who work or have worked in partnerships and teams. It includes detailed textual analysis of screenplays and comparisons of drafts of screenplays, allowing a greater understanding of the rewriting process and how different writers approach this stage. My research points out how many British writers have developed a collaborative relationship with a particular director or producer. This practice has often produced the most accomplished films and has always been central to film production, especially so in the screenplay development process when it is not uncommon for a screenplay to go through twenty or more drafts.

Literature Review - existing source material

Although there has been very little **academic** writing on the screenplay a great deal has been written since the early 1900s on the screenplay as a craft. Despite the fact that this work is often aimed at aspiring writers, some of the analysis is thorough and insightful: Adrian Brunel's *Filmcraft* (1935), for instance, is an important early work on filmmaking that devotes a considerable part to discussion of the screenplay and includes a short section written by Angus MacPhail, a key writer at Gaumont-British Studios in the 1930s and Ealing Studios in the 1940s.

However, academic scholarship on the subject of screenwriting has been curtailed for two reasons. First, the early emphasis on film as an industrial form meant that screenwriting was understood as a craft rather than an artistic form. Second the emergence of the Cahiers du Cinema critics in the 1950s, and the dominance of auteur theory in the US, espoused by Andrew Sarris in his article, 'Notes on the auteur theory in 1962' (1962) and his following

book, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1968) have been hugely influential in promoting the director as the creative force in filmmaking. Unfortunately the focus on the director was at the expense of the writer, despite the fact that the notion of the auteur gave film artistic credibility and did encourage the acceptance of film as an art form and worthy of serious study. The screenplay was thus assigned the function of a 'blueprint' for the film, reducing the role of the screenwriter to 'craftsperson' rather than the creator of a written form. The publication of Douglas Garrett Winston's *The Screenplay as Literature* (1973) did little to help the case for the screenwriter, Steven Price suggesting that it should have been titled 'The Director as Auteur' (2010:29). However one of Sarris's students, Richard Corliss, went on to valorise the study of the screenplay, producing two books about screenwriters and screenwriting; an edited collection, *The Hollywood Screenwriters* (1972) and *Talking Pictures: Screenwriters in the American Cinema* (1974). Unfortunately the notion of the auteur director had such a stronghold that his work received little attention and Corliss gave up his mission, explaining:

I made a strategic withdrawal from the area, lest people identify the noble craft of screenwriting as nothing more than Corliss's Lost Cause ... (1978:34)

Corliss's discussion of the relationship between the director and the screenwriter is particularly helpful in terms of revealing the complexities of the writing process. Ten years later the publication of Tom Stempel's *Framework: A History of Screenwriting in the American Film* (1988) was a landmark text that charted the territory of the screenwriter in the US. Described in the foreword by Philip Dunne as 'the definitive work on the history of screenwriting' (1988: vii), it gives a breakdown of the role of the screenwriter and the screenplay from 1894 to the 1980s.

Certain academic writing on the subject of narrative and discussion of story, plot and structure in film is directly relevant to the study of the screenplay. *Early cinema : space, frame, narrative* (1990) edited by Thomas Elsaesser with contributions from Charles Musser and Tom Gunning, was one of the first books to include a detailed analysis of early narrative film. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson were also pioneers in the analysis of narrative technique: in the mid 1980s Kristin Thompson, David Bordwell and Janet Steiger co-authored *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985) which gave attention to the production process and the development of classical narrative. Their work also discusses plot, narrative

causality and content, elements directly related to the screenplay and ‘the drive to overcoming obstacles and goals’ (1985:13). David Bordwell’s *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1987) offers a particularly thorough analysis of storytelling in cinema, although again the reference point is not the screenplay but the film. Sarah Kozloff’s *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (1988) does focus on a key aspect of the screenplay and is an insightful breakdown of the complex use of dialogue in film that was useful for my research, especially in the comparing of film dialogue with dialogue in the novel. Kozloff points out that there has been a ‘neglect of film dialogue by more recent film scholarship (that) reflects the field’s long-standing antipathy to speech in film’ (1988:6).

With regard to the UK, the study of the screenplay before 2000 was scattered and often merely an adjunct, or incidental, to the more general subject of cinema or film directors. The film historians Ian Christie, Charles Barr and Kevin Gough Yates are examples of the few academics to explore this area in the latter part of the 20th century. The second edition of Charles Barr’s study *Ealing Studios* (1998) includes a detailed chart of the screenwriters and directors on all the Ealing films. His chapter on T.E.B. Clarke, who won an Academy award for the screenplay *The Lavender Hill Mob*, is particularly valuable in recognising the key role of the writer at Ealing. Barr has continued to write about the screenwriter and the screenplay, his monograph *English Hitchcock* (1999) highlighting the work of writers Elliot Stannard and Charles Bennett and Hayes in Hitchcock’s early films. However, while Barr reveals much about the writing process of Hitchcock’s scripts there is no sustained analysis of their content. Ian Christie’s article ‘Alienation Effects: Emeric Pressburger and British Cinema’, published in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (1984: 318-320), is an early discussion of how Pressburger’s upbringing and experiences affected the themes and narrative content of Powell and Pressburger’s films. Christie’s interest in the screenwriting process continued with the publication of the screenplay for *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and related letters concerning the film held in the BFI collection are included (1997). There is also some useful discussion of the screenplay development process in his later monograph on *A Matter of Life and Death* (2000).

In the same period two monographs which specifically studied the screenplay were published that indicated a shift towards academic study; Claudia Sternberg’s *Written for the Screen: The American Motion-Picture Screenplay as Text* (1997) was not widely read as it was only published in Germany; however, Kristin Thompson’s, *Storytelling in the New*

Hollywood (1999) received a wider readership and broke new ground in discussing the nature of narrative in the screenplay form. Thompson analyses the screenwriting process, discussing screenwriting theory, structure and narrative, referring to terms such as ‘turning points’, more commonly used in the craft of screenwriting to define a change or ‘turn’ in the narrative: thus Thompson’s research encouraged a cross-over between academia and practice.

By the mid 1990s more attention was given to women screenwriters, an area I was especially keen to research. Two books on the subject were published in the same year; Lizzie Francke’s *Script Girls: Women Screenwriters in Hollywood* (1994) and Marsha McCreadie’s *The Women who write Movies: from Frances Marion to Nora Ephron* (1994). Women screenwriters in the UK have received less attention by the academy, an exception being Sue Harper’s *Women in British Cinema* (2000), which includes a valuable chapter on screenwriters although the emphasis is on biography rather than textual analysis. Harper discusses Muriel Box’s screenplays, which are also briefly referred to in Andrew Spicer’s later monograph *Sydney Box* (2006), about her producer husband, with whom she collaborated for many years.

Academic writing in the early years of the new millennium was often disparate and difficult to link together; Marc Norman’s disappointing study of the American screenplay *What Happens Next: A History of American Screenwriting* (2008) gives a very general overview with little academic analysis of screenwriting as a form and a great deal of industry gossip. Very few academics in the US were directly researching this area, however in the UK new voices of interest were emerging. Two articles by Ian Macdonald were published in the *Journal of Media Practice* concerned with ‘the screen idea’ in 2003 and 2004 respectively; ‘Disentangling the screen idea’, and ‘Finding the Needle. How readers see screen ideas’. Macdonald’s research focused on the screenplay development process and how film stories were created. Steven Price received funding from the AHRC to study the screenplay as text in 2002 which led to his seminal publication in 2010, *The Screenplay, Authorship, Theory and Criticism*.

Research on specific UK screenwriters has been and still is lacking: autobiographies such as Muriel Box’s (1974) *Odd Woman Out* provide an insight into the working life of a writer as does Kevin Macdonald’s biography *The Life and Death of a Screenwriter: Emeric Pressburger* (1994), which offers a detailed account of Pressburger’s life and works. Adrian

Turner's *Robert Bolt: Scenes from Two Lives* (1998) provides a fascinating account of Bolt's life in which he progresses from being a teacher to becoming the most famous and highly paid screenwriter in Hollywood. Charles Drazin includes a chapter on Angus McPhail, one of the key writers at Ealing Studios, in his monograph on British cinema of the 1940s, *The Finest Years* (1999). Other texts that include discussion of the screenwriter provide useful background historical detail: Burton, Wells and O'Sullivan's *The Family Way: The Boulting Brothers and British Film Culture*, (2000) note Jeffrey Dells' writing for the Boulting Brothers, while Steve Chibnall and Brian McFarlane's later work, *The British B Film* (2009) has a very well researched section on the screenwriter and the writer's role in the 'B' movie, noting the variable quality but that at their best:

they show what can be done under the most rigorous writing conditions: plots get underway swiftly, care is taken to fill out a sense of character and of relationship.
(2009:167)

While these are important and revealing works they give little attention to the screenplay as a form and reveal the paucity of research in the area that my research addresses.

The catalyst for change came in 2007 when the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* gave a call for papers for a special issue on screenwriting. For this highly regarded academic journal to devote an issue to the subject indicated a shift in thinking as to whether screenwriting was an area worthy of study. A wider academic interest in promoting screenwriting as a subject area was becoming apparent but there were limited means of publication and methods of bringing together research on the subject, not only in the UK, but internationally. Realising the potential for study I approached Intellect in early 2009 with the suggestion that they consider a journal on the subject of screenwriting. The first issue of *Journal of Screenwriting* was published in autumn 2009 and has become an important vehicle for disseminating screenwriting research, indeed many of the published articles have influenced my own writing. Rikka Pelo's article, 'Toni Guerra: the screenwriter as a narrative technician or as a poet of images? Authorship and method in the writer-director relationship' (2010), discusses the collaboration between writer and director and was helpful in suggesting ways of approaching my own study of the screenwriter, especially when researching the Janet Green collection and *The Screenwriter in British Cinema*.

Screenwriting research has benefitted from the input of other areas of academic study such as Genetic Criticism which gives attention to the process of written forms in particular and the concept of this being as important to study as the 'final text', particularly appropriate for a form such as the screenplay where the text is re-written with such alacrity. Rosamund Davies's discussion of the screenplay as palimpsest, points out that the screenplay is 'constructed through various layers that have contributed to its genesis, producing a multiple rather than a single entity.' (2013:163) Anna Sofia Rossholm's study of the screenplays in the Ingmar Bergman archive, 'Tracing the voice of the auteur: Persona and the Ingmar Bergman Archive' (2013), offers new ways of looking at archival scripts, in which Rossholm describes the archive as a 'fluid text', and that the differing versions of scripts 'reflect on the transitory nature of the text' (2013:136).

Two monographs published in 2009 and 2010 respectively have helped to bring this new field together and are part of a resurgence of interest in screenwriting research over the last five years: Steven Maras's *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice* (2009) discusses key debates around the subject and history of the screenplay and the 'object problem', the question of, 'Are we dealing with two objects (the script as read and film as distributed) or one?' (2009:11). Maras points out these questions are not easily resolved, 'because of the unique relationship between script and film' (ibid.) but sets useful parameters for dealing with the screenplay separately rather than as a blueprint from which the film develops. Steven Price's book, *The Screenplay, Authorship, Theory and Criticism* (2010) examines the screenplay form in closer detail, comparing other forms of writing such as poetry to the screenplay and suggests that the screenplay could be understood as a contemporary form of literature. Price gives more attention to semiotic textual analysis, discussing the scene text and the dialogue text as well as a chapter on the development of the screenplay of *The Birds* which was extremely helpful when exploring analytical approaches for my own work. In this chapter Price scrutinises the screenplay adaptation, from an initial synopsis to the many drafts of the screenplay. He notes that the drafts show Hitchcock's uncertainty about the script 'present from the beginning and were partly to do with the difference between written and cinematic texts and that a reading of any one of the drafts will introduce a wealth of interpretive possibilities ...' (2010: 93).

The importance of saving and developing screenplay archives is highlighted in Ian Macdonald and J.U.U. Jacob's 2011 study 'Lost and gone for ever? The search for early

British screenplays', which demonstrates how few screenplays exist from that period and the need for more archive research in this area. Nathalie Morris's article on the 'Unpublished scripts in BFI Special Collections' (2010) brought to my attention the number of 'unrealised' screenplays in existence, often for reasons of cost or production complications. Both studies raised my awareness of the various hidden, un-credited and un-produced screenplays and the potential for the study of these scripts, which includes screenplays written by Robert Bolt and held in the David Lean Collection as well as the draft screenplays for the unrealised *October Circle* in the David Puttnam Collection.

Despite the problems the screenwriting researcher faces, the last few years indicate a promising future for the subject: Steven Price's *History of the Screenplay* (2013) and Ian Macdonald's *Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea* (2013) have recently been published and I have just published a co-edited book *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide* (2015) which draws attention to women writers in 54 countries.

Review and Appraisal of Published Work

My interest in screenwriting research developed out of what I felt to be the closed attitudes in academia to a new and non-traditional subject area. There seemed to be little understanding of the importance of the screenplay or the realities of producing screenplays – many drafts written and often never filmed. This limited vision also implied that the screenplay could not be read as a textual object like the play or prose form, which as a writer I found surprising. I was heartened though when I found out that funding for research in this area had been awarded by the AHRC to Steven Price in 2002, in which he was to 'complete a cross-disciplinary study of the screenplay as a textual genre that combines an understanding of the production contexts of screenplays with a literary and historical study of their form, and a theoretical approach to their interpretation and evaluation.'² The realisation that there was some academic support for research in the area encouraged me to write my first article on the subject.

'Some thoughts on Analysing the Screenplay, the process of screenplay writing and the balance between craft and creativity', *Journal of Media Practice*, 8 (2), 2007, pp. 107-113

Frustration at the lack of academic interest in the screenplay resulted in this article that argues the screenplay is a creative form, having much in common with the novel or play but with certain differences:

Screenplays are possibly the most important part of a film and yet there has been very little academic analysis of the screenplay as a form, of how screenplays are written and the extent to which craft and creativity are interrelated.

(Nelmes, 2007: 107)

The article raises a number of questions about the difficult relationship between craft and creativity in film production which is both an industrial and artistic process. I argue that artistry has been attributed to the director while the screenwriters' role has been reduced to the creator of a blueprint rather than being valued as equivalent to other written forms. The article was intended to be provocative and to join a growing body of work that argued for further study of the subject. I was trying to grapple with ideas and questions and wanted to raise these issues within the academic community. Many of the points made have gone on to be of concern in my later research on the screenplay as a form, the collaborative nature of the form, the rewriting process and notions of craft and creativity. The article therefore represents the first steps in my academic writing on the subject.

'Developing the Screenplay *Wingwalking*: An Analysis of the Writing and Rewriting Process', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 5 (2), 2008, pp. 335-351

My interest in writing about the screenplay and reflecting on my practice continued with this article concerned with the difficulties faced when writing a screenplay, which was published in the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* as part of a screenwriting special issue. It is written in the form of a case study based on writing the drafts of my screenplay 'Wingwalking' and examines the complex development procedure, paying particular attention to the rewriting process and asking why certain decisions are taken during that process. This is one of the few published analyses of the drafting of a screenplay based on personal experience but from an academic standpoint. The article points out how important problem solving is to the screenwriting process and that, 'Writing a screenplay is a process of change, of continually trying to improve, to ask questions as to how this can be made better –

and not necessarily finding the right answers' (2008:350). I point out that collaboration with a director or producer often helps in pushing the process forward and I argue that screenwriting manuals can sometimes have a useful function in finding new approaches to problem solving.

When writing this article it became apparent how much cross-over there is between screenwriting theory and practice and how little research there had been in this area. The screenwriting special issue acted as a trigger point in what can be seen as my pioneering research in screenwriting studies. I began to look for other examples of writing to study and it was fortuitous that screenwriter Paul Laverty donated examples of his work which resulted in my next article.

'Re-writing Paul Laverty's screenplay - *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*', *Journal of Screenwriting* 2 (2), 2010, pp. 263-274

My research continued to be concerned with the rewriting process and exploring how and why changes are made to a screenplay by the writer when working on different drafts. Paul Laverty, who has written the screenplays for Ken Loach's films for more than ten years, donated copies of the treatment, character breakdowns and two drafts of his screenplay for *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), which allowed a textual analysis and comparison of the drafts. The resulting article, based on a keynote given at the Screenwriting Research Network conference in Copenhagen in 2010, examines the differences between the treatment, the drafts and the changes made. It concludes that:

The key points to emerge from this study emphasize how re-writing a screenplay acts as a refining and filtering process, retaining the essential parts of the story; the story flow or narrative trajectory is developed and linearity is emphasized by the following-through of the cause and then effect. (2010:273)

I argue that the re-ordering, deletion or changing of scenes contributes to this linearity; and the re-writing process allows characters to be refined and clarified. In the final draft the emphasis is changed to a single protagonist where 'exposition is replaced by emotion, which serves to prioritize the emotional arc of the story'. (2010: 273) The article points out how questions have emerged from the research that are worthy of further consideration: Is it

possible to determine what makes a ‘good’ screenplay by studying the changes in screenplay drafts? Further to this, one could ask, to what extent can the screenplay be studied purely as text, and how important is it to understand the writer’s intention? Indeed these questions become of particular focus when investigating the BFI collections in my later work.

‘Realism and Screenplay Dialogue’, *Analysing the Screenplay*, (2011).

The publication of a screenwriting issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* demonstrated academic interest in the subject, however there was still a dearth of contemporary writing in this area. My concern to establish screenwriting as an academic subject resulted in an anthology of writing by 11 respected academics from the US and the UK on different aspects of screenwriting research, *Analysing the Screenplay* (2010) and included my chapter ‘Realism and Screenplay Dialogue’. This chapter reflected my research on the textual study of the screenplay, comparison of screenplay drafts and the relationship between description and dialogue in the screenplay. The chapter discusses how dialogue aspires to appear realistic but is actually carefully crafted to give this impression. Screenplay dialogue has two main functions: to provide narrative information and to make the narrative more believable by creating a seemingly living, breathing world. I argue that film dialogue is a complex combination of everyday, colloquial language and the poetic, which aims to help the audience enter the film world the characters inhabit as seamlessly as possible and that:

Paradoxically, although screenplay dialogue aspires to seem real, the language used is often sparse, minimal and economic in its construction and has much in common with poetry, not only because of the stanza –like layout and the reliance on rhythm and pacing. The use of lyrical dialogue engages the audience, eliding the contrivance of realism by being entertaining and enjoyable to hear. (2011:232)

The article can be seen as important in pointing out the above relationship and arguing that the screenplay is as valid a form for academic analysis as other creative written forms.

Writing the Screenplay (2012)

The genesis of *Writing the Screenplay* (2012) began in 2009 when asked by the publisher if I would be interested in writing a book on the subject. The resulting monograph reflects thoughts, interests and ideas that have evolved over my writing career and particularly with regard to my research in that period. It is intended to be thoughtful rather than didactic, an antidote to some of the published work that suggests there is only one way of writing a script and which, I argue, gives too much attention to the structure of a story. The book focuses on the independent film, with which I have a much greater affinity, and have devoted more time to studying; see the article on Paul Laverty's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2010a), for instance. The monograph emphasises the importance of working on character to create a good basis for a script and includes two large sections on description and dialogue, aspects which have received little discussion within the academy. I further explored my interest in the relationship between craft and creativity, pointing out that 'some filmmakers argue that the very existence of a screenplay limits creativity and spontaneity' (2012:26). I go on to argue that all art 'has an element of craft; the Elizabethan sonnets, for instance, are carefully crafted and beautifully written pieces of poetry contained in a very rigid format' (2012:27). A later chapter discusses the nature of film drama, where I suggest that, 'Our lives are full of moments of small drama but these are not ordered experiences, whereas drama that is re-enacted or mediated for the stage, the screen or the novel is organised and structured.' (2012:111)

The research undertaken, including interviews with respected screenwriters such as Steven Knight, author of *Dirty, Pretty Things* (2002) and *Eastern Promises* (2007) and the large number of screenplays studied, increased my interest in how other writers approached the subject of rewriting. As a result, I began to look for further evidence by focusing on archival material held at the British Film Institute.

'Collaboration and Control in the Development of Janet Green's Screenplay *Victim*', *Journal of Screenwriting*, 2010, 1(2), pp. 255-271

While researching the above and the article on *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* I discovered a wealth of information held in the Special Collections at the British Film Institute

Library that contains many screenplays and letters donated by producers, directors and writers. ‘The Janet Green Collection’ caught my attention because Green was a female screenwriter who had written three ground breaking social issue films in the 1950s and 1960s, yet her writing had received little recognition and, crucially, the collection held a great deal on the screenplay development process. Green’s most famous film, *Victim* (1961), starred Dirk Bogarde and was the first in the UK to openly discuss homosexuality. The collection includes six draft screenplays for *Victim* and letters which link to the different stages of development that were sent between Green, the producer, Michael Relph, the director, Basil Dearden and the head of the British Board of Film Censorship. I not only had access to drafts to compare the various stages of development but also had records of the many different points of view held during this process: the drama of the script development was acted out in the letters – often with high emotion. For example, Relph and Dearden both complained to Green that she wasn’t giving her all to the writing of the screenplay and wanted her to try their suggestions. Green replied in August 1960:

our experience with you on this project has been to destroy, experiment, destroy again. You have now done this for the third time. (JG 10/6)

Dearden responds to Green’s letter thus:

You accuse us of experimentation. This is an experimental subject if there ever was one and, in our opinion, there has not been enough experiment, mainly because of your other heavy, prior commitments elsewhere ... its very nature demands extra time, care and caution ... The right script could be a triumph, we should set our sights on nothing less. (JG 10/6:7/9/60)

I received British Academy funding to further research the collection and this resulted in the article being published in the *Journal of Screenwriting*. The article concluded that although the screenwriting process in this case was collaborative there had been a battle for control of the screenplay between the different parties. Green, as the sole writer, exerted overall power, only adapting and making changes when she thought she had no alternative. Yet the resulting screenplay was improved by Relph and Dearden’s suggestions and their demands pushed Green to write a better script that was more believable and with stronger characterisation.

The detailed record of both the correspondence and drafts held in the Janet Green Collection has allowed for major insights into the development process and to critique the work of one of the most important but least recognised film writers of the 20th century.

The Screenwriter in British Cinema (2014)

Researching the article on *Victim* whetted my appetite for archival research, especially when I discovered the BFI held many other collections that had received little attention with regard to the screenplay and the screenwriter. I decided to focus on collections which held different drafts of screenplays and accompanying letters that would reveal detail about the production process and allow for a close textual analysis. As the research developed I realised that there was more than enough material to write a monograph on the subject and this was commissioned by BFI Publishing in 2011. Because of the innovative nature of the research and the scope and size of the project I was awarded an AHRC fellowship in 2012 to complete *The Screenwriter in British Cinema*.

I found that there has been no systematic study of the screenplays, notes and related correspondence held in the Special Collections at the British Film Institute; indeed the collections have mostly been studied because of their importance in relation to directors and producers. When the screenwriter is discussed it is usually with regard to his or her relationship with the director rather than the function of the writer or the work they have created. The T.E.B. Clarke Collection, for instance, holds drafts and notes of the writing of the main architect of some of the most popular comedies at Ealing Studios and includes scripts for *Passport to Pimlico*, *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *Barnacle Bill*, however these have not been studied previously. The David Lean Collection includes many screenplays by Robert Bolt but most research has concentrated on Lean, the development of Bolt's screenplays being discussed in the context of the director. The path to the final shooting script is often complex and prolonged and one of the key reasons why there are so many unrealized screenplays, as is the case with Robert Bolt's two screenplays written for David Lean about the *Mutiny on the Bounty*. The collection holds revealing letters between Lean and Bolt about the rewriting process and the failure of the project. Even Adrian Turner's biography of Bolt, which does refer to the correspondence and screenplays held in the collection, offers no analysis of his writing. Other collections such as the Gerald Thomas Collection which holds

screenplays of all the 'Carry On' films has received little attention with regard to the writing of the screenplays. Of the thirty one films produced nearly all these films were written by either Norman Hudis or Talbot Rothwell. The collection contains treatments, draft screenplays and letters which are an invaluable record and of great cultural interest, as well as being productive to study with regard to the screenplay development process and the writer/producer relationship. The research also found detailed records of the work produced by prolific 'B' movie writer Mark Grantham, who wrote many films for the Danziger brothers at New Elstree Studios. A comparison of his screenplays with the films reveals how much creative control Grantham had over his work: the films were made as written with very few changes because the low budget did not allow time for changes and re-writing on set.

Research Questions

For my research for the monograph I decided to focus on the following questions:

1. What does the archival information held in the collections studied reveal about the screenwriting process?
2. What does the study of different drafts of the screenplays reveal about the rewriting process?
3. What does the study reveal about the writing style and techniques of individual screenwriters?
4. What do the collections reveal about the relationship between the screenwriter and other collaborators such as producer or director and the working practices of the film industry?
5. What effect did the historical and social conditions in the period when the screenplays were created have on the screenplay development process?

Methodology

The collections selected for the research project were chosen because they include screenplays, drafts, treatments, outlines, notes, written feedback on the drafts of a screenplay, correspondence and other useful artefacts such as diaries, film reviews and publicity material. This allows for a complete study of the screenplay writing process, from the original idea to the outline or treatment, to the different drafts undertaken before the final draft and shooting

script. Each of the collections focus on either a writer, producer or collective group of writers such as those based at Ealing Studios. The material referred to in chapter 11, an expansion of my earlier article on Paul Laverty, has recently become part of the Ken Loach Collection.

The study of each collection included reading, noting, photographing and photocopying (the latter mostly by BFI staff because of the fragile state of many of the collections) the relevant artefacts. The methodology chosen for analysing screenplay drafts is by close analysis of the screenplays, comparing the differences in each draft, particularly in relation to narrative, structure, character, dialogue and writing style. The changes are linked to relevant notes and correspondence which often reveal much about the decision making process and the issues that affect this. I employed this methodology in my earlier study of the different drafts of Paul Laverty's screenplay for *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (published in *Journal of Screenwriting* 2 (2), 2011).

My research also analyses the tension between the concept of the auteur and the collaborative nature of the screenwriting and film development process. Each collection was studied with regard to the relationship between the writer, the director and producer in the development of the screenplay, although other parties such as the British Board of Film Classification or the financier often have to be taken into account. The correspondence and notes accompanying the screenplays allow further insight into working practices within the film industry. Many British writers have developed a collaborative relationship with a particular director or producer and this practice, at times more serendipity than intention, has often produced the most accomplished films. The collaborative process is central to film production and especially so in the screenplay development process, a point noted throughout all my work.

Chapter 1 – Jeffrey Dell

This chapter discusses Dell's career as a successful but largely forgotten screenwriter who regularly wrote for some of the most influential film producers in Britain, including Sydney Box and the Boulting brothers. He specialised in comedies, often with an element of satire and for which he is better known, but was also an accomplished thriller writer. Three of Dell's screenplays are analysed: the early comedy *Don't Take it to Heart* (1944), a wittily

composed script about the inversion of class; *A French Mistress* (1960), co-written with Roy Boulting, is a less successful and clichéd sex farce that received lukewarm reviews on its release, but the screenplay does have some amusing plot complications; *The Dark Man* (1951) covers very different territory, being an accomplished thriller that was written and directed by Dell and over which he would have had, as director, much more control. The shooting script is often a riveting read, containing vivid description and moments of great tension.

The chapter reveals that Dell was an entertainer rather than an artist but his abilities were highly valued in the film industry and he was often employed as a ‘fixer’ of screenplays, as noted in a letter to Dell from the Boulting brothers thanking him ‘for your most invaluable services on *Lucky Jim* Without your wit and talent we should not have a good script now. We are very, very grateful.’ (JED/27).

Chapter 2 – Emeric Pressburger

In contrast to Dell, Pressburger wrote some of the most significant films in British cinema yet his career has been somewhat overshadowed by director Michael Powell, with whom he set up the production company Archer Films. Pressburger began his career writing for the German studio Ufa, meeting Powell when he became an exile and settled in England. Powell quickly recognised Pressburger’s talent, noting he was ‘a screenwriter who could really write. I was not going to let him go in a hurry.’ (Powell 2000:305) Though the two men collaborated it was Pressburger who would write the first draft and when this was complete they worked on further drafts together. The chapter discusses their working relationship and analyses the first section of two drafts of *A Matter of Life and Death* then offers a close analysis of a later draft of *A Canterbury Tale*, a film that received a puzzled reception on release but has later come to be seen as a classic of British Cinema. The masterfully written screenplay is framed around the detective genre, the search for the ‘glue man’, but the unconventional storyline and the slow pacing dissipate the dramatic tension expected of this genre. This mix of conventional and unconventional technique produced a poetic and magical screenplay with a particularly interesting structure. It is noticeable that Pressburger’s writing uses visual devices to allow the reader to imagine events and to develop the narrative. Pressburger and Powell had a great deal of autonomy which gave them the artistic freedom to

develop the films they wanted to make, but it is Pressburger's fertile imagination, the chapter argues, and his abilities as a screenwriter that enabled the duo to produce works of such exceptional merit.

Chapter 3 - The Ealing Studio Writers

As head of Ealing Studios, Michael Balcon accorded his writers a great deal of artistic freedom that encouraged the creation of original stories. A collaborative method of working evolved in which writers, directors and producers were placed in teams overseen by Balcon and, as a result, many successful films were produced. The key writers at the studio were scenario editor Angus MacPhail, who had worked with Balcon when he ran Gaumont-British, John Dighton and T.E.B. Clarke, although many other respected writers were employed for short periods, including H.E. Bates, Monica Dickens and Kenneth Tynan. Few women writers succeeded at Ealing and only one was employed as a house writer, Diana Morgan. T.E.B. Clarke was especially influential, writing some of the studios most popular films. Two screenplays held in the Clarke Collection are analysed in detail: *Passport to Pimlico* was nominated for an academy award for best screenplay, the collection includes detailed notes relating to the script revisions that lend a fascinating insight into the screenplay development process; a study of a draft of *The Lavender Hill Mob*, which won the Academy Award for Best Screenplay, reveals a script that is elegantly plotted and concisely written with clever use of dramatic irony. Clarke's carefully crafted and assured creation of sympathetic characters resulted in a screenplay that is one of the highlights of British Cinema. Charles Barr argues that Clarke left such a strong stamp on his films that he was an auteur writer (1998:98). Yet, as my research reveals, it was Balcon's emphasis on teamwork and his understanding of the vital importance of the screenwriter, which resulted in a studio that produced many original stories of appeal to a mass audience.

Chapter 4 – Muriel Box

Muriel's collaboration with her husband Sydney Box was one of the most enduring and successful partnerships in British Cinema. She wrote, and in her later career directed, many films with Sydney often acting as producer and co-writer. Their best-known and most

accomplished film, *The Seventh Veil* (1946), won an Academy Award for best screenplay. Sydney went on to become head of Gainsborough Studios and then Pinewood Studios, Muriel taking on the role of head of the scenario department at both studios. The Boxes were extremely influential but they were under pressure to produce large numbers of films, particularly when at Gainsborough, which often resulted in rushed films that lacked quality. Muriel was, in fact, a gifted writer whose later scripts were frequently grounded in realism and films such as *Good Time Girl* (1948) and *Street Corner* (1958) took on board social issues while being engaging and thoughtfully written. The chapter analyses draft screenplays of *The Seventh Veil* and *The Truth About Women* (1957) focusing on changes made to the endings. The drafts of *The Seventh Veil* show how the screenplay developed from a skeletal script with interesting ideas into a compelling melodrama; while the drafts of *The Truth About Women*, a prototype feminist drama, demonstrate how the second version focuses more directly on the battle of the sexes and the ‘case for equality’. The chapter points out that Muriel’s career as a screenwriter has not received the recognition it deserves and, despite the fact that her films often needed more development, she was a ground-breaking and accomplished writer.

Chapter 5 – Janet Green

This chapter is an expanded version of my earlier article about the development of the screenplay *Victim*, and includes further discussion of Green’s other work as well as a detailed analysis of the four drafts of *Victim*. The breakdown of the last section of the screenplay shows how each draft is refined and condensed to produce a quiet and downbeat ending, pointing out the price that has been paid for living a lie as a homosexual.

Green had a prolific career, despite some of her earlier scripts such as *The Good Beginning* being somewhat clichéd and displaying less sympathetic female characters. My research argues that Green’s later films, especially *Sapphire* (1959), *Victim* and *Life for Ruth* (1962) make her a writer of great historical and cultural significance. *Sapphire* was inspired by the Notting Hill race riots in 1956 and was one of the few films in the 1950s to address the issue of race, approaching the subject with sensitivity. *Life for Ruth* was a brave attempt at writing another social issue film about a couple whose religious beliefs prevent them from allowing their young daughter to have a blood transfusion.

Chapter 6 – Mark Grantham

Mark Grantham was a prolific ‘B’ movie writer in the late 1950s and early 1960s who worked for the Danziger brothers at New Elstree Studios in London. Grantham is critical of the poor quality of the films written at the studio, but he wrote over 30 films while there; in 1962 alone, writing four screenplays and two episodes of the TV series *Richard the Lionheart*. The screenplays in the Mark Grantham collection make compelling reading because of their genesis, the short production time frame and the low budgets imposed by the Danzigers’. Grantham’s scripts are often written to great effect and have an energy and fluency that makes them very readable. The chapter analyses three screenplays in detail, arguing the best examples such as *Night Train to Inverness* (1960) are cleverly paced with complex narrative structure and depict characters that are three dimensional and believable. The chapter highlights the historical significance of the collection, revealing that Grantham had tremendous control over his work; indeed his final draft script was often shot as written because studio time was expensive and wasteful retakes a luxury that could not be afforded.

Chapter 7 – Norman Hudis and Talbot Rothwell

The Carry On films, much loved by the British public during their peak years of the late 1950s and 1960s, were directed by Gerald Thomas, who donated the screenplays and other material to the collections. The first six films were written by Norman Hudis, Talbot Rothwell then taking over to write all but the last four of the series, which by then had run out of steam. Although the writers were better paid than the actors the quality of the screenplays was very variable and the production process was tight, producer Peter Rogers keeping costs to a minimum. The chapter discusses two of the most effective scripts, and the fascinating genesis of the first in the series, *Carry on Sergeant* (1958) which evolved from an adaptation of a play by the author R.F. Delderfield and went through various permutations before Hudis was asked to write a new draft. The two drafts of *Carry on up the Khyber* (1968) show how Rothwell combines social satire and parody to produce comic effect. Narrative tension is effective and this economically written script cleverly plays with language and verbal misunderstandings while using visual humour. Indeed in comparison to the screenplay the film is rather sluggish and does not make the most of the quick fire delivery of the dialogue.

While some of the Carry On screenplays are repetitive and smutty, the chapter argues that the best are witty and engaging, and worthy of a place in the history of British cinema.

Chapter 8 – Robert Bolt

Although Robert Bolt only wrote eight produced screenplays he became one of the top screenwriters in Hollywood and also one of the highest paid. His working relationship with David Lean was central to this success and the David Lean collection holds remarkable letters, notes and screenplays on the development process of the films that they made together. This chapter focuses on two screenplays written by Bolt, *The Lawbreakers* and *the Long Arm*, both of which went through a prolonged development process but were left unrealised when funding was withdrawn and Lean was taken off the project. Bolt stayed on, combining the two scripts into one to become *The Bounty*, released in 1984, with Bolt credited as writer even though he did not complete the script. My research on the letters and notes in the collection sent from Lean to Bolt and back, reveals how Lean pushed and cajoled Bolt to write at his best. Indeed Lean developed Bolt's visual imagination although he always acknowledged that Bolt was a fine writer. The Bolt/ Lean partnership was a highly successful one and *The Lawbreakers* has moments of outstanding writing, but Bolt's work lacked the beauty and subtlety of a writer such as Emeric Pressburger. This chapter goes some way to redress the fact there has been virtually no analysis of the writing of one of the major screenwriters of the 1960s and 1970s

Chapter 9 – David Puttnam

As one of the most important producers in British cinema David Puttnam is renowned for his skill in fitting the right person to the right project. He worked closely with talented writers, often initiating projects. His first major success was *Chariots of Fire* (1981) which he developed after reading about the British runners in the 1924 Olympics and asked Colin Welland to write the script. My research on the Puttnam Collection examines how he went on to develop *Local Hero* (1983) with writer /director Bill Forsyth, the film's success being at least partly due to Puttnam's insistence that they develop the script without studio interference. Correspondence and drafts for *The Killing Fields* (1984) reveal much about the

writing and development process of this highly acclaimed film written by Bruce Robinson. Puttnam is very concerned to gather feedback on the screenplay from a variety of sources, including director Costas Gavros, whom he writes to asking for his opinion about the script. The Puttnam collection includes detailed notes of the development of *The October Circle*, an unrealised film that was too experimental in its narrative to suit the large amount of funding required to film. Records of the film offer a fascinating insight into the writing and production process and show how closely involved Puttnam was in its development. For instance, a letter from playwright Tom Stoppard suggests the screenplay should be completely rewritten, possibly by him, but Puttnam is not happy to do this. Puttnam tightly controlled each project, choosing his subject, selecting the scribe and then nurturing the film through to realisation yet, this chapter reveals, it is also evident that he especially valued the role of the writer and all aspects of the screenplay development process.

Chapter 10 – John McGrath

John McGrath was a talented wordsmith better known as a playwright and television writer, who worked with directors Ken Loach and Ken Russell, but who also scripted a range of films of some historical importance. McGrath was one of the creators of the ground breaking TV police series *Z Cars*. The somewhat neglected McGrath Collection holds screenplays and notes for two of his films, both adaptations, the spy thriller *Billion Dollar Brain* (1967) and *The Reckoning* (1969), about an ambitious salesman who decides to avenge the death of his father. McGrath was a writer with socialist politics and this, to varying degrees, affected the content of his writing. The drafts and outlines in the collection on *Billion Dollar Brain* show how the film script became increasingly satirical and anti-American. The two outlines reveal that the drama is heightened and less impressionistic in the latter version. *The Reckoning* is written in a very different style, but again satirises a greedy and corrupt society. The collection holds many notes and drafts of the screenplay and the changes to the ending reveal how the more naturalistic version was selected for use in the film. The chapter argues that McGrath benefited from the freedom accorded to many writers in the 1960s, not only by the BBC but also the Hollywood studios whose London production offices had financial independence when the city was, for a brief period, defined as ‘swinging London’ and the cultural centre of the Western world.

Chapter 11 – Paul Laverty

Like McGrath, Paul Laverty has strong socialist convictions that infuse his writing and he has written all but one of Ken Loach's scripts since *Carla's Song* (1996). While his screenplays may be political they are often sensitive portrayals of working class characters who have difficulty in coping with everyday life, as in *My Name is Joe* (1998) and *Looking for Eric* (2009).. Laverty's scripts are fluid and he continually tests ideas, acknowledging the input of Loach, the script editor and the actors who may change the dialogue at a later stage. The chapter develops my earlier research on the subject and further examines the re-writing process in Laverty's work. It points out how exposition and story information is sacrificed to the greater need for emotional engagement. Loach and Laverty have developed a collaborative relationship based on their left-wing politics and an interest in naturalism as a form. Indeed, I argue, Laverty and Loach's method of working has produced some of the most thought-provoking contemporary British films.

Conclusion:

This ground-breaking monograph draws attention to the lack of scholarship on the subject of the screenplay and the screenwriter. I argue that the screenplay is a literary form and demonstrate how it can be studied by referring to examples from the British Film Institute Special Collections, many of which have not been discussed with regard to the screenplay and the screenplay development process. The screenplays of *A Canterbury Tale*, *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *The Reckoning*, for example, are in their very different ways, superb examples of the form and able to move the reader, to engage, challenge and inspire as would be expected of outstanding literature. In addition to pointing out the complex construction of the screenplays selected I also analyse a range of case studies. This has allowed me to follow the progress of the screenplay development process by referring to drafts and the correspondence held in the collections. As a result of this study much new detail has been revealed about the re-writing process and the vital importance of collaboration in filmmaking. The screenwriter may play a crucial role but is always subject to changes imposed at a later

stage of production, the vagaries of production funding and, in certain cases, the politics of the time.

Publications as a complete study

My published research has been pioneering in the development of screenwriting as an academic discipline and is concerned with furthering an understanding of the screenplay and argues that it is a form worthy of much greater scrutiny. This research has contributed to the growing acceptance of the study of the screenplay as an academic subject. My early writing is of significance because it discusses the need for a new way of looking at the form, arguing that the screenplay can be studied as a textual object with its own particular style and structure that is similar to but different from other written forms. At the same time I argue it should be taken into account that the screenplay is part of a complex production process, in which many drafts may be written and numerous people involved. Further to this my research questions the relationship between authorship and collaboration, suggesting that the screenplay is pivotal to the resulting film. However, the status of the screenplay has rarely been acknowledged because the director remains the central focus of film production. Finally, my research of important archives held at the BFI that have to date received little or no attention regarding the screenplays and correspondence, has allowed me to investigate the work of many key British writers and to place them in a literary, historical and cultural context.

How my publications have contributed to the field.

My published research has made a significant contribution to the development of the field of screenwriting and screen studies. It is widely acknowledged that I am one of the key figures, both in the UK and internationally, writing about the screenplay, screenplay history and screenplay analysis. My contribution to the academy has been, and continues to be, substantial, especially in encouraging the acceptance of screenwriting as a new subject area; from my earlier writing which raises important questions about the status of the screenplay as

a separate 'object', to the more recent archival research that has uncovered new details about the screenplay development process and created a methodology for the analysis of screenplay drafts.

I have drawn attention to and analysed the writing of little known screenwriters who have produced work of great literary merit and deserve a place in the history of British cinema; Emeric Pressburger's beautifully written output and Janet Green's social issue screenplays, for instance. I have also highlighted the value of archives to screenwriting research and the need to urgently preserve and develop future archives, indeed many British screenplays no longer exist, having been summarily disposed of; The Ealing Collection, now held at the BFI, was salvaged from a skip.

As a mark of the significance of my research I have given a number of keynotes on the subject of the screenplay, some of which have been published, most recently at the University of Wisconsin Madison, titled 'Screenwriting Research: No longer a Lost Cause' (2014). My most recent monograph, *The Screenwriter in British Cinema*, has been very well received by respected academics such as Steven Price (Reader, Bangor University) who notes: 'This book is a goldmine of new material, and clearly the product of much painstaking scholarly research. I think that it will take its place as the most important and extensive study of this subject yet written, and an extensive resource for scholars in the field.' (Endorsement, 2014) Professor Ian Christie (Birkbeck, UCL) describes the book as 'ambitious and original', pointing out that 'the Ealing chapter is particularly rich' while 'a chapter on Muriel Box, the pioneer writer and director, provides a fascinating account of how one of her most successful scripts, *The Seventh Veil* (1945) reached the screen in the form that we know it'. (*Journal of Screenwriting* 6.2)

I continue to research in the field of screenwriting: my interest in gender and screenwriting has resulted in a recently published volume of over 1,000 pages, *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide* (Palgrave, 2015), co-edited and part-written with Jule Selbo (California State University), which includes entries for 54 countries. I am currently developing a major archive project in collaboration with the British Library, which holds many screenplays in their collections donated by writers such as Angela Carter, Harold Pinter and Hanif Kureishi. This will include a collaborative grant application and result in a monograph in a similar vein to *The Screenwriter in British Cinema*.

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Publications to be included in the appraisal:

2007 – ‘Some thoughts on Analysing the Screenplay’, *Journal of Media Practice*, 8.2, pp.107-113.

2009 – ‘Developing the Screenplay *Wingwalking*: a Case Study’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 5.2, pp.335-352.

2010 – ‘Collaboration and Control in the Development of Janet Green’s Screenplay *Victim*’, *Journal of Screenwriting*, 1.2, pp.255-271.

2010 - ‘Re-writing Paul Laverty’s screenplay - *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*’, *Journal of Screenwriting* 2.2, pp.263-274.

2011 - *Analysing the Screenplay*, Routledge: London, editor and contributor.

2012 - *Writing the Screenplay*, Robert Hale: London, monograph.

2014 – *The Screenwriter in British Cinema*, BFI: London, monograph.

¹ See list of my publications to be included in the appraisal on page 28.

² Letter to Steven Price from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2002.