Screenwriting Poetics and the Screen Idea

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these success-making factors are internal to the individual. The motivation of an individual to propose and pursue a particular screen idea will depend on their judgement about the likely acceptance of the new, within a particular cultural context. For example, Claus Tieber has outlined that in Hindi cinema, the first appearance of 'the active agent' – as opposed to the traditionally passive Hindi protagonist – in a film can be explained in terms of India's social development; firstly as an identifiable proletarian hero during the political tensions of the 1970s, and later with the rise of the new middle classes (2012, 17–18). The shift in attitudes by the viewership made the goal-oriented protagonist more attractive to the field, taking more individual control of his own destiny, as opposed to the passive characters characteristic of classical Bollywood, who were based on a mix of well-known characters and religious magic.

The individual's 'good' judgement is bound up with a network of connections to field, domain and individual habitus, all of which are experienced subjectively. 'I write from instinct', says Richard Curtis, 'I don't know about three-act structure – and I'm scared to find out' (*in* Owen 2004, 102). A script reader 'goes by [her] gut reaction first' and justifies her conclusions later, using more objective criteria (Macdonald 2004a, 246). As a primary gatekeeper, this reader's notions both of what the company is seeking, and also of what constitutes a good screen idea, are crucial to her acceptance of the screen idea. She is clear that her reaction is subjective as well as overtly expressed in relation to coverage criteria; she has internalized the conventions to the point where 'you don't think about the framework when it works'. She states

a good script's a living thing…You become part of the story. You're inside the picture…it engages you – I'm just a bit wary about the word 'engage' [because] it can repel you as well, but that's still a form of engagement…[If it] ups the ante…it makes me engaged with it, so that I keep turning the pages. Therefore it's doing its job. My interest never sags.
(Reader E *in* Macdonald 2004a, 246–47)

For this screen-reader, at least one form of (subjective) engagement is connected with the conventional techniques of raising the stakes or building the tension, but the important thing is that it draws her in, subjectively, emotionally – 'you become part of the story'. She does not enjoy the authority sometimes placed on the mechanisms of the orthodox approach to screen idea development, in conventional screenwork production.

Sometimes it hinders [what I want to say]. [For example] 'the structure works because of…', when all you want to say is 'I love this story…because I was really engaged with so and so, and I followed his

journey'. But you have to hit certain phrases and you have to use certain phrases…so that it's not just [seen as] my emotional response to [it].
(Reader E *in* Macdonald 2004a, 248)

Subjectivity and emotional response are valued, then, but the industrial context requires a more 'scientific' objective justification, a proof. An individual's 'submerged understanding' of their own poetics does surface, such as when they are asked to rationalize their practice for an audience. Alexander Mackendrick (2004) was renowned for writing homilies and aphorisms on small cards, pinning them on his office wall for the benefit of his students. His lecture notes were enlarged on them.

Movies show…and then tell….

Beware of sympathy between characters. That is the END of drama.

Narrative drive: the end of a scene should include a clear pointer as to what the next scene is going to be.
(Alexander Mackendrick 2004, 40; 40; 41)

The question here is what sort of paradigm this system of poetics represents and, more importantly, what the audience is asked to believe. For the writer who is asked to learn and absorb these 'truths', the creative process will (I suggest) ask him/her to take up a position in relationship to those poetics, every time he/she develops a new screen idea.

The voice of the writer

The writer's struggle to write (and what they want to write) is, I suggest, inextricable with their struggle to make sense of, adapt or challenge, the doxa of screenwriting, and/or the orthodoxies around which they find themselves working. This process of 'making sense', of developing a personal poetics, finds a result in the form of their work. It demonstrates itself, as it engages with the field.

Secondly, the field may enhance this personal sense-making by critical reaction to a screen work, and by debate on its meaning and effectiveness, on its value in presenting a coherent paradigm of practice with (potentially) wider application. This commentary is where cultural capital is built up (or lost), a view of the work that may be appreciative and which offers certain types of status to those writers agreed to have made a significant contribution to the debates around the prevailing doxa, whether that is through opposition to it, or skilled use of it.

Thirdly, the writer also finds a voice in the direct address of any commentary they make on the process. This re-objectivization of the subjective experience is a new intervention in the field; observations, reflections and

even manifestos come from screenwriters wanting to rationalize their practice, justifying what they have found to be good. It may be significant, not as discovery of objective principles, but as critique of (and contribution to) the existing doxa. Of those writers (in fact, often writer-directors) who make such rationalizations, their organizing principles may not be fully theorized, even if they are named. Milcho Manchevski uses the term 'Cubist storytelling' to describe his narrative style in his UK film *Dust* (2001), and begins a theoretical critique.

> I am interested in Cubist storytelling – when the artist fractures the story and puts it back together in a more complex (and, thus, more interesting) way. More importantly, when the artist keeps shifting the emotional tone of the film, bringing a narrative film closer to the experiences of modern art.
>
> (Milcho Manchevski *in* Raskin 2003, 8)

Erik Tängerstad brings this note together with an interview in which Manchevski expanded on this 'cubist' influence.

> Film doesn't have to be the way we see it today; to last two hours, to have a beginning, middle and end, leading and supporting roles, three acts, a closed defined ending, with catharsis and happy ending. But the convention is so strong and we have clung to it – like little children – that we expect to see all of this…I did not set off with the idea of making a cubist film. But, I did intend to play with time and structure, and after having walked three quarters of the road, I realised that *Dust* is maybe transposition of a cubist view to film-making.
>
> (Milcho Manchevski from Abadzieva 2002, in Tängerstad 2012, 157)[9]

For historian Tängerstad, *Dust* is not just 'about' feature film storytelling, but makes an important statement about the nature of history; it 'questions the possibility of knowing past events that never became recorded history' (2012, 159). The conjunction of conventional film narrative and conventional notions of history is problematic, for example, with past genocides. It challenges narrative convention, and why not; as Manchevski says, 'the narrative film is not CNN' (*in* Tängerstad 2012, 158).

The film – starring Joseph Fiennes and billed as an Eastern Western[10] – provoked accusations of failure from the critics (Tängerstad 2012, 151–52). Its unusual structure and 'lying' imagery is carefully analysed by Tängerstad (2012, 154–56), who points out the lack of correspondence between what is shown and what is told. Fredric Jameson, who thought the film 'a convulsive attempt to undermine national stereotypes in general, ambiguously reinventing them in the process' also thought it 'sufficiently different from

the standard story of immigration and ethnic identity to offer a suggestive object for postmodern meditation and for the theorization of global culture' (2009, 318). The orthodox paradigm does not fit the narrative Manchevski wishes to tell; he needed to reinvent it, challenge it, from his personal understanding of the field.

Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Aristotle's Plot* (1996) is a conscious filmic critique of neo-Aristotelian values from the perspective of 'an exemplar film-maker of the post-independence generation' in Africa (de Groof 2012). Bekolo's concern is about facing the pressures of different orthodoxies; on one hand, Northern funding (from London or Paris, for example) shapes 'African cinema into a *cinema d'auteur*, Westernised and disconnected from popular genres and African audiences' (de Groof 2012, 117), and on the other, the Hollywood orthodoxy comes directly from US films (widely distributed in Africa) and Nigerian video films. Nollywood has been linked (positively) by Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome with traditional African storytelling,[11] although one Nollywood scholar claims poor production values are just a mis-application of Western techniques, some Nigerian film-makers having studied in the US (Makhema 2012).

In Matthias de Groof's analysis, Bekolo's attack is on an orthodoxy which requires a mimetic realism and conflict rising to a climax and catharsis. 'My ambivalence with Aristotle's poetics is trying just to follow the formula, and at the end getting totally lost because those rules do not apply to who you are', says Bekolo (1999, in De Groof, 121). As De Groof points out, the conversation between Bekolo and Djibril Diop Mambety, which became the film *La Grammaire de Grand-Mère* (1996), underlines the role of the storyteller (a storytelling grandmother).

> The ABCs you get taught at film school can be absolutely transformed. Grandma wants us each time to reinvent her grammar. Grandma wants us to tell her story in a different way each time…Grandma asks me to always reinvent her discourse.
>
> (Djibril Diop Mambety *in* De Groof 2012, 115)

De Groof outlines the strategies used by Bekolo in *Aristotle's Plot*: fragmented storytelling; the function of invisibility; the use of the voice-over and the importance of its fictional status; the strategy of 'blurring'; the setting of the future and 'finally the recovery of the second chapter of *Aristotle's Poetics* ('The Comedy') in the revaluation of African imagery and its appropriation of cinematic technique' (2012, 121). As with Manchevski, Bekolo resists the dominant storytelling orthodoxy in favour of creating a different method, even to show that it is possible in the face of its dominance. It is, as De Groof points out, a practical answer to the question, 'how many ways can cinema tell a story?' (2012, 128).

One of the most articulate screenwriters to agonize publicly about his own work was the British television writer Dennis Potter (1935–94).[12] That he

wrote for television mostly during what John Ellis has called the Age of Scarcity (2000, 39–60) was significant, as the ethos and structure of public television at this time in the UK offered space to new and serious writers, allowing them to reach a mass audience and institutionally privileging their work as 'author' over that of director or producer. John R. Cook has outlined this contextual background to Potter's work, making the important point that the precedence given to the script meant that directors and actors would treat it as they might a stage drama, with heavy rehearsals and a focus on the textual meaning (1995, 4).

> Not simply a regressive throwback to the theatre, the single play, particularly at the BBC, had developed its own distinctive place in the television schedules by the sixties and seventies – becoming a kind of weekly free space on TV for novelty and experimentation…The BBC1 single play slot came to function as some kind of 'cutting edge' for television, extending not only formal boundaries but what could be said, and more crucially, shown on television.
>
> (John R. Cook 1995, 5–6)

Essentially a genre (not least because its content became associated with controversy and the breaking of taboos), the British Single TV Play allowed the writer the opportunity to explore form, theme and style, within the boundaries of TV practice. It might therefore appear to be exactly what any writer was looking for. The writer was treated as artist, which offered opportunities for social critique and, in the case of Potter, a sense of mission. But, as Cook notes, institutional need to use studio space together with other entrenched practices resulted in a focus on writer's themes and dialogue (1995, 5). The connection between theatre practice and TV lingered through a crossover of personnel and what John Caughie called a resistance to theorization as well as experimentation in form, resulting in what Caughie called, 'the astonishing formal conservatism' of single play production (Cook 1995, 5). On the other hand, Cook argues, institutional need for large audiences was not antithetical to social controversy and provocation (including nudity, for example), nor was it opposed to using drama to air radicalism in ways it could not normally be aired elsewhere on TV (Cook 1995, 6). The somewhat extraordinary situation of a 'safe(ish) TV space', justified in terms of both High and popular Art, and contrary to the more regulated spaces of the rest of TV, permitted writers like Potter a 'voice', even when it occasionally withdrew that permission.[13]

But Potter was critical of much television, which he called a 'ceaseless flux' into which the single TV play was always in danger of collapsing (1984, 30). In an essay in which he tries 'to describe what I think I am trying to do when I have a pen in my hand' (1984, 13), he talks only briefly about the technicalities – 'a speech has to be torn up, a scene expanded, a silence explained' – and explains instead he is *waiting* (1984, 21).

> What you are waiting for is your own voice, even though drama of any kind is made up of what it purports to be, and what occasionally really is, other people's voices. But your own 'voice', the one you have to delve as deeply as possible into yourself to find and attend to, can too easily be reduced to the subdued babble of second-order memories (nostalgia), received opinions (prejudices), dismay, or resentment, or a kind of insistent, hypnogogic whispering which takes up so much space between the bones of your head that you delude yourself into believing that you are actively and seriously *addressing* yourself.
>
> (Dennis Potter 1984, 22)

Potter's concentration is on the sovereignty of the self, which is 'all that we have and the most precious of all human capacities' (1987, in Cook 2013, 265),[14] but so many aspects of television, he said, conspired together to diminish or threaten or drown out or even stop the mouth of that individual voice 'which all even halfway creative writing must aspire to articulate' (1984, 22). 'I have conceded elsewhere…that to trundle the adjectival noun *Television* in front of the noble old word *Playwright* is not entirely dissimilar to placing "processed" right next to "cheese"' (1984, 15).

Potter's work, authorial and autobiographical, surprising and non-naturalistic, comes with his own personal obsessions which became tropes (*in Pennies From Heaven* 1978; *The Singing Detective* 1986) and the sense that his subjective engagement with television paradigms comes as a form of resistance to what he called the 'occupying power' (1984, 27).[15] 'His career was a conscious attempt to create a consistent *oeuvre* for television, through the weaving of an intricate web of theme and cross-reference from work to work' (Cook 1995, 2); and critical praise mixed with furore over controversy, for his bold use of flashback, non-linearity, fantasy, adults playing children (*Blue Remembered Hills* 1979), actors bursting into mimed song, effectively forged a personal 'Potteresque' signature.

He did not always succeed in bringing the field with him. The audience, and critics, found *Blackeyes* (1989) incomprehensible, and some of the blame was laid at the door of Potter's inexperienced direction.[16] The popular press found *Blackeyes* (like much of his work) titillating, and Potter's reputation and motivations were obscured. His political purpose remained clear to some, however. As Germaine Greer said later, with a slight hint of frustration, 'you have to listen to what he is *saying*. It's the truth that's outrageous, not Dennis Potter' (*Dennis Potter: a life in TV* 1994).

The individual as author

Before the Renaissance in Europe, as Janet Wolff reminds us, 'what we refer to as artistic work was performed by…artisans and craftsmen, with collective

those around him or her, or is proposing changes that are unacceptable, or cannot accept changes to the paradigm that are already in general circulation in the field, will result in dysfunctional working. Chapter 7 outlines a situation where that occurred.

Notes

1. Kandinsky was quoting from Dmitri Merejkowski's *The Romance of Leonardo Da Vinci*, according to this edition. I am grateful to Nicholas Crittenden's thesis *The Generative Image* for this reference (2001, 155).
2. See Macdonald (2010) for an account of this study.
3. This is the definition of creative work generally, according to Emma Policastro and Howard Gardner (1999, 214).
4. See Thompson (1985, 169–71); Macdonald (2010, 79–82).
5. See Macdonald (2010), and early notes by Brunel in the Brunel Special Collection at the BFI.
6. See Thompson (1985), Macdonald (2010; 2011a).
7. See Bourdieu 'The Author's Point of View' (1996, 214–82).
8. This occurs towards the end of the film, when Luke turns off the rocket-aiming technology in his X-plane to rely instead on his inner sense/God/subjectivity/Force. http://starwars.com/watch/episode_4_use_the_force.html. Accessed 22 April 2013.
9. There are several articles and interviews on *Dust* on Manchevski's website (www.manchevski.com), but Abadzieva's (2002) appears to be no longer posted. Accessed 25 April 2013.
10. The poster for *Dust* reproduced on the www.imdb.com web-page has high Western-genre values, including the strap-line 'live by the gun, die by the gun'. Accessed 25 April 2013.
11. Their claim is that their poor production quality is less important than the stories, which 'shine through the grainy images and inaudible or inappropriate soundtracks' (*in* Dovey 2012, 92).
12. Potter's commentary was prodigious – see the Appendix in Gilbert (1995, 323–63).
13. For example, the BBC's *Brimstone and Treacle*, scheduled for transmission on 6 April 1976, but not transmitted until 25 August 1987, five years after a novelization and a feature film. See Gilbert (1995).
14. See Cook (2013) for a discussion of Potter's semi-religious 'spiritual' view of the self; see also Gras (2013).
15. It should be noted that he instantly wearied of this 'occupying power' metaphor and retreated from it; 'television, the manipulated medium, can only be misunderstood by such neat venoms' (1984, 28).
16. He justified his directing style on the BBC's 35 mm TV serial *Blackeyes* (1989) as a conscious resistance to conventional film grammar, 'in line with modernist innovations he knew from literature', but his producer Rick McCallum claimed the style was the result of inexperience and his justification was 'bullshit' (Cook 1995, 267).
17. See Staiger (1985), and Maras on the separation of conception and execution in film production (2009, 21–23), and Maras on the writer's sense of grievance (2009, 19–20). E. G. Cousins argued in 1932 for the creative leadership of one person, responsible for scenario, direction and editing as 'kinist' (Cousins 1932,

43–54) – though this term now has a different *apartheid* meaning. Naively Cousins proposed Alfred Hitchcock as 'our first full-fledged and recognized Kinist' (1932, 54), alongside others including George Pearson and Maurice Elvey – all three of whom worked with the same writer, Eliot Stannard. Cousins appeared to be promoting the director as *auteur* in fact. Adrian Brunel (a writer-director) described the director as 'theoretically the mastermind ... [but] more generally a collaborator with the Scenarist, the Producer and the Production Manager' ([1933], 156).
18. McIntyre reminds us that it works for 'all the sub-fields in film-making ... [the] domain and field of editing, or directing, of sound-editing' though (ironically) he does not mention screenwriting (2012, 146).