

THEORIZING SCREENWRITING PRACTICE

AN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

An International Workshop

22–25 November 2012, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic



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Screenwriting, much like the media environments of which it is a part, is currently undergoing profound and meaningful change. Much like the story departments of Hollywood’s majors at the tail end of the classical-era, the so-called dramaturgical or production “units” of the studios of former Socialist countries were in the early 1990s dissolved or down-sized. As a consequence, script development came increasingly to be influenced by external conditions including heterogeneous pools of freelance writers, unstable markets and consumer behavior, new financing schemes and marketing strategies, grant programs and coproduction agreements, franchising and product placement, and by participatory and transmedia storytelling techniques. Moreover, methods of scriptwriting, especially for television and online platforms, are becoming more time-constrained, streamlined, and collaborative, with show-runners increasingly combining the previously distinct roles of producer and writer. In East-Central Europe, the old system of script editing, doctoring, and mentoring that was fulfilled by the state-owned studios’ dramaturgs, literary chiefs, and “units”, has yet to be replaced in the spheres of independent production or in public-service television by a new model of efficiency. Only recently has this issue received serious attention from European support programs and from the region’s major film schools.

Accordingly, this workshop aims to bring together scholars of film and television, practicing screenwriters, and other media professionals to discuss changing practices, institutional frameworks, and the social status of screenwriting in contemporary screen media. The workshop is both salient and timely, given that turbulent changes are currently reshaping media industries, and given a surge in academic interest in production practices encapsulated by the recent founding of the *Journal of Screenwriting*, the “Screenwriting Research Network”, and a conference series. This saliency and timeliness is underscored by an increase in self-reflexive practice among media professionals as a burgeoning circuit of industry conferences, master classes and festival pitch forums offer various support schemes intended to encourage screenwriters to think more strategically about developing and presenting their projects.

Potential topics for papers and panels for the workshop include but are not limited to:

- Mapping screenwriting labor and career patterns: Who is actually writing film and TV scripts today? Are they professionals or non-professionals? Are they screenwriters or directors? Are they men or women? Are they older or younger people? Are they film school graduates or self-trained writers? Are screenplays pitched to or commissioned by producers or media companies? What are typical career steps and points of entering into the business? How important are film schools and writing courses? Who are the key gatekeepers to a career in screenwriting? How are novices kept out of the profession? Do writers have previous working or personal relationships with commissioning producers, directors or production companies? How do writers network and form strategic alliances with producers, executives or directors? What are the differences between aspirants, occasional writers for screen, and core professionals?
- Screenplays as industrial and creative artifacts, linking histories of modes of production to modes of representation: allowing us to study organization of labor and economy of production together with changing normative standards of narrative and style, including questions of what constitutes good structure, of how it should work, and of what makes certain writing practice acceptable, and identifying individual and group methods of expressing screen ideas.
- Script development formats, regimes and trajectories: how and why are development stages and formats changing over time and across production systems? How are authority, authorship, and labor organized during the process? Who reads and assesses screenplays, how are they doing so? And in what institutional frameworks? How do negotiation, collaboration, and struggle for control of ideas among different various contributors influence multi-authored screenplays?

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- Screenwriting mentoring: how do training programs, pedagogic techniques, industry courses, gurus, how-to manuals, and contests change over time and across production systems? What is their industrial function? And what measure of influence do they exert upon normative standards and actual writing practices?
- Screenwriting politics: there have always been conflicts over authority, authorship, and credit between screenwriters, directors and producers – how have they changed as a result of recent developments in the media environment?
- Alternative approaches to screenwriting: transmedia and interactive storytelling, non-written screenplays, screenwriting software, pre-visualization practices, auteurist and radical methods of writing, fusing pre-production, and production and post-production.
- Methodologies of research in screenwriting: in the Czech Republic, as in other countries, exist vast collections of screenplays, treatments, and synopses, which are often preserved in several versions and accompanied by other materials such as budgets, notes, reviews, correspondence, and production reports all of which have never systematically been studied as an integral part of film history. Archives reveal the extent to which a “screenplay” is usually an organized series or dossier of documents rather than a single text. In order better to conceptualize the notion of the screenplay, screenwriting studies needs to develop interdisciplinary methods of textual and extra-textual analysis, which would place appropriate emphasis on the multi-purpose, intermedial, intermediate, and transitory status of screenplays, thereby recognizing the screenplay’s multifaceted status as literary work, as industrial blueprint, as administrative tool, and as contractual document.

The workshop will consist of a keynote lecture, 3–4 conference-type panels, master classes, and a roundtable discussion. The workshop will also be integrated into the international conference “Screen Industries in East-Central Europe: Cultural Policies and Political Culture” (SIECE, 23–25 November 2011, Brno), to which internationally renowned experts on screenwriting as well as professional writers will be invited as special guests. Proposals are solicited for twenty-minute conference papers, and for panels of three or four speakers, focusing on any topic related to screenwriting practice. Panels of three to four papers will include a brief summarizing reflection of between five and ten minutes in length which will be delivered by an assigned respondent and which is designed to facilitate discussion. Proposals for conference papers should include a title, an abstract of up to 150 words, and between three and five key bibliographical references, along with the presenter’s name, the presenter’s institutional affiliation, and a concise bio. Panel proposals should include a panel title, a short description of up to 100 words on the panel’s focus, and proposals of all of the papers to be delivered (including the information described above). Please submit all proposals **no later than 30 June 2012** to szczepan@phil.muni.cz.

Workshop attendance is free of charge and the official language is English (with the possibility that some small parts of the workshop may be conducted in the Czech language).

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