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Scriptwriting as a research practice: expanding the field

In October 2013, special issue 19 of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, ‘Scriptwriting as Creative Writing Research’, presented a landmark collection of scripted works – for stage and screen – under the rubric of verifiable research outputs. Concerned with content, form and context, these seven works from academics working in Australia demonstrated the potential of the script to embody – to *perform* – research. The works showcased the potential for stage plays and screenplays to be valued as research artefacts in their own right, without the need for them to be performed or produced in order to be ‘counted’ within the higher education sector.

In the preface to the first scriptwriting as research issue, co-editor Dallas Baker argued that scriptwriting ‘is a practice. More to the point, scriptwriting is a *writing* practice that deserves scholarly attention’ (2013: 4, emphasis in original). Baker also argued that the scriptwriting that occurs in the academy is different from that which occurs outside of it, in that academic scriptwriting has a stronger critical research focus and often reflects the distinct vision of a single writer-researcher (2013: 4). He then notes that:

Academic scriptwriting is also much more self-reflexive. It is a practice undertaken in the context of a discipline and in ways that mean that the writing is informed more by discipline specific knowledge than by commercial demands or the expectations of wider audiences or readerships. This makes the scriptwriting that occurs within the academy distinct enough to be worthy of study in itself (2013: 4-5).

Apart from the intention to treat academic scriptwriting as distinct from other scriptwriting, one of the motivating factors behind the first Scriptwriting as Research special issue was the need to explore and define what might be possible in the field of Screenwriting Studies or script research. How might creative scripts be treated as complete texts, worthy of publication and study irrespective of performance or production? How might scripts be recognized and assessed as research outputs? How might the practice of scriptwriting act as a research practice; as a methodology for exploring and disseminating knowledge about a given subject? And, where might such an activity, scriptwriting as research, be undertaken; in which discipline might such an activity find a suitable (and productive) home? Indeed, a significant inspiration for the

first issue was the perceived ‘discipline bias’ operating in Film, Media and Theatre/Performance Studies that relegates scripts to a minor position as a research focus, in favour of finished films or television programs and more traditional research outputs (Baker 2013).

To address this discipline bias and take some steps towards answering the questions posed above, the first ‘Scriptwriting as Creative Writing Research’ issue published a range of scripts that, apart from telling a story, were also the products of creative and research practice concerned with disseminating new knowledge about their subject, and with experimenting with the script as a narrative form. This was an unprecedented step in a number of ways.

That special issue was the first of its kind not only to publish unproduced scripts, but also to treat those scripts as stand-alone research works. That issue was also unusual in that the scripts were published in a Creative Writing journal and not in a journal from the Theatre, Film and Television or Media disciplines. This was a deliberate move on the part of the editors to start to define the field of scriptwriting as both a *writing* and a *research* practice and establish its appropriate home. As the preface argued:

The study of scriptwriting is better situated within the domain of Creative Writing than that of Film Studies or Screen Production. Creative Writing has been a leader in the development of Practice-Led Research and continues to produce outstanding work on the subject (Webb & Brien 2011, Smith & Dean 2009, Brien 2006). Thus, the discipline of Creative Writing is well-equipped to make a foundational and significant contribution to the emerging area of Scriptwriting Studies by doing what it already does best: privileging scripts as texts in and of themselves, as well as artefacts of a creative practice, that produce and disseminate new knowledge (Baker 2013: 13).

The reception (and success) of the first issue demonstrated a number of things that made a further issue viable. Firstly, it became apparent that to firmly establish the notion that scripts written in academic settings are worthy of publication irrespective of performance or production requires more than a once off issue. Also, the editors of the previous issue received a great deal of positive feedback from Australian and overseas scholars, and multiple requests for information on how to submit for any future such issue. This second issue is thus designed to achieve three things:

1. Consolidate the notion that scripts written in academic settings are worthy of publication and study irrespective of production;
2. Answer demand for further opportunities for academic scriptwriters in Australia and overseas to secure publication for their scripts; and,
3. Contribute to the emerging practice of treating creative scripts as research outcomes and scriptwriting itself as a research practice.

It is still exceedingly rare for unproduced scripts to be treated as complete creative and research works that deserve publication. *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* is perhaps the only quality academic journal to do so anywhere in the world.

Eighteen months after the first special issue, ‘Scriptwriting as Creative Writing Research II’ consolidates the work of its predecessor and, this time, uses its various contributions to expand the field. As the works in this new issue demonstrate, radio, stage and screenplays can – and do – use research to underpin their creation (practice-led research); their content and form (research-informed practice); and their critical and industrial contexts (research-led practice). The eleven works herein thus present a variety of scenarios for knowledge generation and dissemination, from playwriting history to screenwriting approaches, and from docudrama to innovative performance.

What is especially satisfying in this issue is that we have been able to feature the work of research degree candidates who are using the academy to test and play with ideas, and using research methodologies to both understand and expand their existing writing practices. This issue therefore advocates a space for research training as much as it does bring together the work of established academics trying to negotiate the Australian research verification systems (i.e., ERA and its criteria for evaluation).

Expanding the field of theatre and performance scriptwriting

There is a rapidly growing body of work that is emerging in the overlapping realms of applied theatre, performance studies, drama education and arts-based research (Barone & Eisner 2011). This work recognises the power of creating scripts and performances as part of the research process or outcomes from the research. As Beck, Belliveau, Lea and Wager (2011) have identified, there is a broad spectrum of practice that can be categorised as research-based drama or theatre and this can be conceptualized across spectrums of research (systematic, first hand, informal) and performance (considering audience, intent and aesthetics).

Historically, work within this area has often utilised ethnographic research methodologies, with interview transcripts forming the basis for the research and subsequent script. This methodology enables for the voices of research subjects to be made present in a much more direct and nuanced form than through traditional research reporting (Mienczakowski and Morgan 2001, Saldana 2003, Norris 2007). This type of ethnodrama also allows for the presentation of divergent perspectives and views that may be quite distant from that of the researcher, and that also represent debates and issues in the field (Madison 2006, 2007). Scriptwriting as research has also been deemed an effective tool for exploring identity through auto-ethnographic scripts and performances (Belleveau 2015, Spry 2001, 2011). The script and performative modes allow for the incorporation of multi-modal elements and arrangements and the embodiment of reflexive framing and challenges.

Scriptwriting as research is not confined to first-hand accounts and the presentation of participatory data. As Beck et al. (2011) point out, plays based on other accounts of events and experiences have always been a feature of drama. Therefore, scriptwriting as a

form of dramatic historiography (Postlewait 2009) and creative nonfiction (Forche & Gerard 2001) is another way that scriptwriting acts as research.

The scripted dramatic form also has the potential for making research data and reporting far more accessible for diverse audiences, even contributing to awareness-raising and activism (Norris 2000, Madison, 2007). Different forms for such presentation of data vary considerably. ‘Verbatim Theatre’ is one form of documentary drama that employs (largely or exclusively) tape-recorded material from the ‘real-life’ originals of the characters and events to which it gives dramatic shape (Paget 1987). As a research and presentation tool, forms such as Readers Theatre also offer great potential. Readers’ Theatre is a form of dramatic, scripted reading where the actors are not expected to memorise their lines but to read with expression with the intent to convey an artistic interpretation of the text to the audience (Donmoyer 2008). Greenwood (2012) has used the Readers’ Theatre genre to generate and display qualitative data and Norris argues that: ‘the structuring of data into Readers’ Theatre is a form of analysis; that their placement of certain student quotes into a Readers’ Theatre piece is, in itself, an analytical act’ (2000: 44).

The role of the researcher as playwright often raises important ethical issues and the role of the researcher needs to be negotiated with participants and audiences. While the playwright/researcher has a responsibility to their participants they also have a contract with their audience (O’Toole 1992, O’Toole & Lepp 2000). Whereas the researcher might be more concerned with wanting to inform and educate, the dramatic scriptwriter also has to give consideration to the audiences’ expectation to be entertained. If a work is to engage a viewing or reading audience as a creative work then attention has to be paid to the aesthetics of the work (Bresler 2011), to the creative shape and form of the work as well as its content. Saldana (2003: 218), one of the pioneers of the field, noted that the researcher who wishes to present their ethnographic research in dramatic form needs to have an understanding of fundamental playwriting principles such as plotting, characterization, monologues, dialogue and staging.

This brings us to the purpose of this special issue and the potential for recognising the creation of dramatic scripts as works of research in their own right. While a number of dramatic scripts have been published previously in journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, there have been few avenues available for the publication of dramatic scripts as creative writing, with particular attention paid to the aesthetic as well as academic contributions of the work. The publication of this special edition is an important contribution to cross-disciplinary work that is expanding the field, especially with more of a focus on the creative aspects of the writing and creative writing as research in itself, not necessarily reporting on research. To position this work alongside that arising from other disciplines and directions is a substantial development and one that we hope will continue to generate further inquiry.

Expanding the field of screenwriting

With an academic history in vocational training, screenwriting has emerged as a research discipline over the past five or so years. Studies of screenwriting have been conducted throughout the history of film and screen studies (Corliss 1975, Stempel 1991, Murphy 2007, Boon 2008), but it was not until the formation of the Screenwriting Research Network and the *Journal of Screenwriting* in 2010 that screenwriting became recognised as a serious field of research. Having its own identity has led to a ‘more sustained and diversified theorization under various framings, such as history, authorship, culture, philosophy and poetics’ (Sternberg 2014: 203) – and, for academic scriptwriters, creative practice.

Publication of scholarly works on screenwriting has given rise to the importance of the screenplay, the role of the screenwriter and the screenwriting industry. This work includes historical studies of screenwriting (Maras 2009, Nelmes 2013, Price 2010, 2013); studies of screenwriting cultures and the industry (Conor 2014, Macdonald 2013, Redvall 2013); studies focussed on the screenplay as an object of research (Nelmes 2010); and critical studies of screenwriting practice (Batty 2011, 2014, Lee 2013, Millard 2014). The ‘increasing acceptance of the study of the screenplay as a form’ (Nelmes 2014: 301) locates value in the screenplay as an artefact that sits within – or sometimes outside of – a screen production. This notion does open up avenues for practice-based research, but it also highlights what can be viewed as a common *issue* in screenwriting research – that much of the research is about the *product* of screenwriting rather than its *practice*. As with comparisons of literary studies and creative writing, research tends to be focussed on the screenplay, not on screenwriting.

Works about practice and process, including reflections on writing screenplays in and out of the academy (Batty 2013, Jacey 2010, Millard 2010) exist, yet there is still a lack of attention given to creative practice in this discipline. A small number of established scholars are known for their focus on screenwriting practice (Batty, Jacey, Millard, Selbo), and a number of other scholars are emerging (Baker, Nash, Taylor). Interestingly, many of these people are based in Australia. Combined, these scholars have authored works including: reflections on the screenwriting practice doctorate (Baker 2011, Batty 2013, Jacey 2010b, Taylor 2014, 2015); discussions of the creative processes involved in script development (Millard 2010, Nash 2013); and critical examinations of screenwriting craft (Batty 2011, Jacey 2010a, Nash 2014, Selbo 2010, 2011).

As highlighted, there have also been attempts to highlight screenwriting as a research practice by publishing original screenplays in scholarly outlets. *TEXT*'s ‘Scriptwriting as Creative Writing Research’ (2013) is the largest example of this. In 2007, *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* published Craig Batty's short screenplay, ‘Tom, Dick and Harry’, however, work of this type is still under-represented in the academy, especially in light of other disciplines, such as the broader area of creative writing, which is making stronger in-roads.

Reflecting on the current state of screenwriting research, Sternberg (2014) writes that while creative practice is a feature of some of the literature, there is definite scope for more. This type of work, which might include ‘practice-led or arts-based research as well as analytical insights of screenwriters into their practice’, she says will usefully – and for screenwriters in the academy, *crucially* – ‘offer additional pathways for future writers and researchers’ (Sternberg 2014: 204). In a way, special issues such as this one respond quite specifically to Sternberg’s concern, advocating for scripted works to be recognised as research artefacts. Embracing screenwriting as a research practice with its own ‘site of knowledge’ (Harper 2006: 3), these works should draw on not only the contexts of creative practice as a phenomenon, but also the contexts of creative practitioners themselves, who embrace the potential of research ‘to assist them in the construction of a work at hand, and/or of their future work’ (Harper 2007: 19).

The works in this issue

The scripts gathered here are diverse both in content and form. Some of the scripts are written for radio or stage, some for cinema or television. As a result, the scripts herein use a range of different formatting styles. Some, such as the scripts by Sculley and Hassall, actively experiment with script formatting, which is emerging as an issue in script research and Screenwriting Studies. There are however a handful of themes that connect the scripts in this issue, though they are not the only themes at play in the selected scripts.

The first theme that may be apparent to the reader is that of drawing on real life characters or events (or histories) to produce a script that fills gaps in historical knowledge as well as tells a story that might otherwise go untold. The works by Beattie, Davis and Trifonova all integrate historical knowledge or information with creative practice to produce scripts that address gaps in history or in storytelling. A second theme is evident in the works of Baker, Taylor and Harris, among others, that of exploring notions of gender (femininity/masculinity and performativity) in the context of a stage or screenplay.

The third theme has to do with the script form itself and notions of practice-based research and scriptwriting. These scripts explore the relationship between the script as research, between scriptwriting practice and the writer or reader, or the relationship between reading or writing scripts and bodily experience. The works exploring this theme are highly reflexive, often intertextual and interdisciplinary and most are clearly situated within the academy. The works by Batty, Dooley, Hassall, Sculley and Wilkinson and Anderson all explore these ideas in some way or another.

Each script is accompanied by a research statement that articulates the research background, significance and contribution of the work. As scriptwriting is an emerging research practice, the editors wished to give the authors space to describe in as much detail as needed the relationship between their creative and research practices, and the ways in which the written works operate as both research outcomes and pieces of creative

writing. As a result, these statements do not always strictly adhere to Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) guidelines in terms of length, though they can be easily adapted if submitted for assessment as part of the ERA process. For a better sense of how these scripts work as both creative works and research outputs, brief summaries of all the scripts follow.

Theme 1: Historical intervention

John & Jennie by Debra Beattie is dedicated to the memory of all those friendships and loving relationships marred and often destroyed by the sectarianism so prevalent in country Queensland in the years before Statehood. The film's opening credit is a close and textured montage of the details of a beautifully embroidered silk handkerchief with the letters J and J entwined into the shape of a heart, sewn with long strands of thick golden hair. This 'billet doux' was kept in a cigar box for over fifty years and symbolizes a commitment and affection that endures because it is cherished and protected.

Sue Davis' script asks the questions: What lies at the heart of our creative and research journeys? Are we always seeking to understand something about ourselves no matter what the subject? What makes writing and the creative journey worthwhile? *Questions for George* ponders such questions as the researcher explores, in creative form, her journey to explore and write about the life of one of Queensland's early playwrights, George Landen Dann. Davis's own questioning frames the investigation, creating a Readers Theatre style of documentary script drawing on evidence from interviews, newspaper clippings, letters and other documents.

Trifonova's *Man of glass* is a creative film script that takes complex ideas and historical concepts to develop an intriguing narrative that raises questions about identity, psychopathology and truth. The work stimulates interest with strong imagery and the use of heightened, stylistic language. Drawing on Camus's existential 'outsider', the script poses existential questions about the fragility and ambiguity of identity, the possibility or impossibility of escaping who we are, and the common yet dangerous obsession with becoming someone else.

Theme 2: Gender

Dallas Baker's script, *Beside manners*, is a creative exploration of notions of masculinity and male sexuality. It creatively explores the idea that male sexuality and gender exist on a continuum and defy simple categorization. The script was developed using an interdisciplinary approach including traditional research into theories of gender and sexuality and fiction writing techniques such as associative and stream-of-consciousness composition. In this way, a script was produced that refers to the notion of fluid sexuality whilst telling a dramatic story.

Stayci Taylor's pilot webisode, from her series *Mounting the Men's film festival*, is set in a world where male filmmakers bristle at being called 'male filmmakers', where men are tired of being asked how they balance work and family and where women might take their privileged position for granted. As part of wider doctoral research into female perspectives in screen comedy, particularly the relationships between comedy, point-of-view and gender in dominant screenwriting models, this script speaks to the satirical device of using gender switch narratives – and its limits – as a creative and scholarly approach to questions of gender.

In *Lola in the bathtub*, Anne Harris uses the form of the script/monologue – the written word on the page – to represent and give feeling to the concerns of her story. As her protagonist 'arcs', dramatically speaking, the work fragments and almost 'crumbles' on the page. Not only does this speak to the critical contexts that underpin her work, namely feminist writing and subjectivity, it also demonstrates how the look of the work on the page performs its own narrative, not reliant upon an actor to bring the script to life.

Theme 3: Scriptwriting practices, research and affect

Dirty talk: Scriptwriting, script editing and the creative process is a multi-narrative work that weaves together the screenplay, the writing of the screenplay and the editing of another writer's screenplay, and in doing so draws attention to the creative and pragmatic decisions that influence the creation of a script. These include inspiration, writerly interactions with characters, peer review and the pressures of industry conventions. This script by Craig Batty also operates as a good story well told.

Employing similar strategies to *Dirty talk* is Kath Dooley's *Night bus*, a creative exploration of relationship between the screenplay, affect and bodies. This short film script re-imagines contemporary, real life events to produce a dramatic narrative concerned with themes of public violence, individual intervention and responsibility. Dooley's script focuses on the creative use of narrative content and the description of aesthetic dimensions such as colour, light, sound, movement, rhythm and texture to affect the reader.

Motel chronicles by Linda Hassall is a creative exploration – a poetic and episodic work that draws on the influence of Sam Shepard and American Outlaw poets to depict the empty 'culturescape' of seedy motels and the socially marginalised. It also reflects the gothic stylistics of a growing body of contemporary work. The scenes are like small snapshots and fragments, but then contribute to an overarching narrative that also contemplates the enduring cultural fascination and obsession with the icon of the motel.

Stephen Sculley's script *Stringer* uses a novelistic approach to develop a multi-episode high-end television drama. The work experiments with formatting and utilizes literary, cinematic and theatrical elements common to the 'high-end' format to present multiple storylines and complex characterisation. Through the creative writing process, *Stringer*

extends the traditional skeletal approach to series development by framing the drama as a *television novel*.

Artistry and Academia by Linden Wilkinson and Michael Anderson is an original script that certainly raises a number of challenges and dilemmas facing creatives using practice-based research methods and performance in the service of other purposes and disciplines. The main characters clearly, and perhaps rather cynically, demonstrate the difficulties facing researchers whose work relies on the support or endorsement of major bureaucratic organisations. The script also investigates how we tell and how we receive ‘the truth’ in different contexts and mediums.

Conclusion

It is the intention that this second special Scriptwriting as Creative Writing Research issue of *TEXT* responds to the challenges faced by academic scriptwriters in inculcating discussion and debate around scripts as texts in themselves, and the difficulties in having unproduced radio plays, stage plays or screenplays published and counted as research outcomes. The editors hope that this issue goes some way in consolidating the idea that scripts can and should be treated as research outcomes, and that scriptwriting itself, in the right context, can be seen as a legitimate and important research practice.

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