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The model screenwriter – a comedy case study

Abstract:

Screenwriting is not an art form 'because screen-plays (sic) are not works of art' says screenwriter Paul Schrader, who describes himself as 'half a film-maker'; 'they are invitations to others to collaborate on a work of art, but they are not in themselves works of art' (Hamilton 1990, ix). His statement neatly articulates how the script functions in the filmmaking process, and also the act of screenwriting itself – that is, writing from a *space between*, as the medium between the story and its destined platform. Schrader's claim reinforces an interesting tension whereby, as Craig Batty (2012) pointed out, the creative writing aspect of screenwriting is often sidelined by dominant models favouring technical and industrial concerns.

This paper, then, discusses the process of faithfully following one of these models in writing a treatment for a female-centred comedy screenplay, with a view to contributing to the broader discourse around screenwriting, specifically creative process versus structure. Using Keith Giglio's *Writing the Comedy Blockbuster: The Inappropriate Goal* (2012), this article presents a case study of how this practice has manifested within a feminist methodology, the outcomes for my quest to develop funny, female protagonists, and how dominant models might inform or diminish the creative act of screenwriting.

Biographical Note:

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Introduction

If writing is an attempt to make oneself understood, each attempt, perhaps, is less about *what* the writer is trying to make understood, and rather more a case of understood *by whom?* In the case of screenwriting, 'by whom?' is a long list, of many readers, between the writer and the ultimate audience, including funders, producers, executives and directors. The 'attempt' is never read by the audience[1], but must be understood by those on the list of many readers, the committee, who become the disseminators of the information that makes up one's story. Because the audience sees the result, not the attempt, the hope is that this attempt, or at least its intention, is somehow present in the final outcome. But like the children's game, where a phrase is whispered from ear to ear, there is a high probability of misinterpretation. Unlike the game, which is built on the hope that the phrase will become unrecognisable from the original, with hilarious results, a screenwriter usually hopes that at least the spirit of what she describes is what makes it on to the screen. As Elisabeth Lewis Corley & Joseph Megel (2014) point out, the 'result has to be strong enough to survive the armies of people who will shape the project once it leaves the screenwriter's hands' (14). However, survival, at least in the mind of the screenwriter, is not always the outcome. As UK screenwriter Ricky Gervais confessed, 'the only reason I became a director is to get what I had in mind onto the telly' (Wurtz, 2009). There are countless other instances of screenwriters who become directors and/or producers for the same reason (many examples of screenwriters turning to other roles, specifically within Australian women's film history, can be found in Lisa French's 2003 article 'A 'team' approach'). Thus, I am interested in how dominant models of script development may reinforce or erode the screenwriter's intention, inform or diminish the creative act of screenwriting and, specifically, how these processes might impact upon the writing of comedies. I am especially interested in how these models accommodate comedic screenwriting for female protagonists, where added complications around default (male) perspectives, and gendered perceptions of humour, may be inherent in the processes themselves.

As part of a wider research methodology, in a practice-based PhD, I have turned to a commercial screenwriting guide, recently released by Michael Weiss Productions ('the world's leading publisher of books on screenwriting and filmmaking')[2], namely: *Writing the Comedy Blockbuster: The Inappropriate Goal* (2012) by Keith Giglio.

By faithfully following this guide as I develop my own screenplay, I hope to understand what benefits, and obstacles, might be offered by models that, as UK script development consultant Stephen Cleary points out, are designed for mass production. Cleary (2013) states:

> The story models and the story theories that have evolved over the past 40 years, that have really taken hold, that have given us a grammar, a vocabulary and a methodology for developing and understanding film stories come out of and are ultimately aimed at that US studio system […] their various ways of defining and understanding film stories all push stories into one kind of direction of uniformity, because a mass production system (and that's what the studio system is) […] needs uniformity (online).

I have completed the treatment for my screenplay following Giglio's guide, which assumes inclusion within these systems. Even when qualifying his consistent references to Hollywood, Giglio does not stray far: 'when I say 'Hollywood', I refer to anyone in any part of Los Angeles and neighbouring counties who is looking to make a studio-based, mainstream movie' (2012, xviii).

Ahead of progressing to the writing of the script, this essay reflects upon the processes of writing a treatment (the story of the film in prose) and of faithfully following Giglio's model, with a view of contributing to the broader discourses around screenwriting and, specifically, the notion of creative process versus structure. To this end, I also discuss my conflicting outcomes when following the classic three-act structure—the bedrock of most screenwriting manuals, including Giglio's—which is, in essence, the process of telling a story in three separate acts, each with its own function within the narrative and written over an often very specific page count. J. J. Murphy (2007) gives a useful summary of this structure:

> Rooted in the theories of Aristotle, this audience-oriented model tries to keep the viewer continually engaged in the narrative by making the story

varied and interesting through the incorporation of major turning points that spin the story in a new or different direction (16).

As I will later discuss, this paradigm is fundamentally at odds with a feminist framework, a tension I examine as part of the reflected experiences when writing to a model that incorporates this structure.

The creative act of screenwriting

Francis Ford Coppola proposed that 'a screenplay, of course, is not a finished work of art; it's only the blueprint for a film' (Baker and Firestone, cited in Maras 1999, 147). Furthermore, French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carriére suggests, 'the destiny of a screenplay is that it is never complete – or rather that it is only complete when it vanishes or disappears into the film' (Carriére; Gassner and Nichols cited in Maras 1999, 147). But should the artistic merit of a text be contingent upon where it stands chronologically in the series of incarnations that result in the public object? Considering what is required of screenwriting, it would seem to demand skills with language that would qualify, in any other writing practice, as an art form. For instance, screenwriters must first produce a treatment which, as Linda Aronson (2010) warns is 'notoriously difficult to write because at the same time as being meticulously precise and economical [treatments and outlines] must be 'a good read' – a piece of prose that jumps off the page' (469). They must then deliver a script in a completely different format (that is to say, not prose but a combination of elements including big print, or screen directions, and dialogue), within the industry conventions. Craig Batty (2012) suggests that a 'screenwriter is a creative writer after all' (12), and even if it is true that 'often in screenwriting training there's a lack of attention paid to the creative process – it's all about craft, technique and industry' (12). Like the visual artist, poet or novelist, screenwriters aim to recreate their vision within the minds of others, even when, as I have said, the receiver of their rendition is not the final audience, but the committee who will deliver it to them. And, although the aforementioned blueprint comparison is ubiquitous in discourse about screenwriting, the analogy is flawed, because scripts, unlike blueprints, are never applied precisely. A script,

is not a blueprint, which is by definition a technical drawing created in order to be reproduced with scientific accuracy; it is more a recipe where the results will vary according to the availability of ingredients and the inventiveness of the cook and those who work in the kitchen (Nash 2014, 104).

In starting this project, I brought to the process a suspicion that some of the traditional conventions of screenwriting may hinder the reader's access to a character's perspective; therefore, a screenplay may be vulnerable to an unconsciously assumed default perspective based in the inherent cultural beliefs of the reader. Moreover, in the context of comedy screenwriting, I also suspect that for a protagonist to be funny they need to, as I will later discuss, own the point-of-view – that is, to have the story told from their viewpoint. In other modes of fiction, the narrative point-of-view determines through whose perspective the story is read. But the discourse around screenwriting makes it challenging to achieve this perspective in script development. Aronson (2010) warns 'the writer must be completely invisible because nothing, including an awareness of the narrator's sensibility, however unique or acute, must distract readers from the film or telemovie screening in their heads' (469). And although Aronson acknowledges 'the audience needs to walk each step with this protagonist, in their shoes' (55), she reminds us of the conventions of screenwriting which dictate that we must 'never mention the camera by name… Do not 'direct on paper'' (472). Giglio agrees, shouting, 'INCLUDE ONLY WHAT IS ESSENTIAL TO THE PLOT (emphasis in original) […] Cut camera direction. Be stingy with dialogue directions. Don't act for the actor, don't direct for the director' (2012, 197). Thus, screenwriting conventions dictate that the apparatus crucial to providing character viewpoints at other stages of the filmmaking process are not available to the writer, even though the writer must 'depict simply, vividly and without any ambiguity, not only what the camera is seeing but also the order in which it sees it' (Aronson, 2010, 469).

These standards are not without merit and legitimacy and, as Corley & Megel (2014) point out, 'we do not need to hear about dolly moves if we can create a rhythm on the page that makes the film unspool in the mind of the reader as it does in the mind of the screenwriter' (11). Screenwriting conventions have arrived to facilitate an ease of

reading essential to any writing, including screenplays and, most screenplays' predecessor, the treatment. In other words, traditional models of screenwriting dictate that the screenwriter be as dexterous with prose as they are with the action/dialogue combination of writing scripts and, in both cases, that they should not put any obstacles in the way of the reader's experience of the story. But the art versus craft debate around screenwriting, which is usefully emerging in academic screenwriting discourse, is but one aspect I want to focus on here. I wish to explore, whilst the screenwriter is writing from this place *between* the story and its chosen platform, what this might mean for the writer's intentions and values. Corley & Megel suggest that:

> For high-concept films or tent-pole movies that are built on familiar characters and themes, it may not matter as much *how* (emphasis in original) a story is written on the page; but for stories that are more delicate, and that emerge from the individual consciousness of a screenwriter, everything matters, not just to whether it is successfully made into a film but in regard to what kind of film it turns out to be (2014, 26).

It is this notion, of 'what kind of film it turns out to be', that concerns my research. I would counter-argue that high-concept[3] screenplays are just as vulnerable, if not more so, to becoming a different 'kind of film' than the screenwriter intended, because of the assumptions demanded by mainstream premises regarding what is 'normal' and what people are like. Especially, perhaps, when that screenplay is a comedy.

Comedy screenwriting

Simply put, the problem with comedy is that it is subjective, yet it has to be unanimous. In other words, creating (for example) a comedy feature film involves a chain of collaborators; each with their own notion of what is 'funny', working towards an outcome that unites an audience in laughter. Ideally, as Frank Krutnik (2013) puts it, the 'affective release of laughter transforms the cinema audience from an assembly of individual viewers into members of a provisional community, who are able to enjoy the same experiences and respond to them as one' (90).

If, as Andrew Horton (1991) suggests, 'so much of comedy does depend on perspective' (15), then my earlier proposition—that traditional conventions of screenwriting might hinder the writing of perspectives—has further repercussions for specifically comic screenplays. Steve Kaplan (2010) takes the idea further, insisting that what the protagonist sees 'is everything to the comedy'. Eminent screenwriting guide author Robert McKee (1997) likewise acknowledges the importance of point-of-view:

> It enhances the telling to style the whole story from the protagonist's Point of View – to discipline yourself to the protagonist, make him the center of your imaginative universe, and bring the whole story, event by event, to the protagonist. The audience witnesses events only as the protagonist encounters them (364).

However, he then goes on to point out that 'this, clearly, is the *far more difficult way* (added emphasis) to tell story', noting that:

> If in the two hours of a feature film you can bring audience members to a complex and deeply satisfying relationship with just one character, an understanding and involvement they will carry for a lifetime, you have done far more than most films (1997, 364).

If perspective, to define it for our purposes, is 'the protagonist's view of the world of the film', why is it, as McKee acknowledges, so difficult to write, at least within the confines of screenwriting conventions? One possible answer is that the writing of perspective—or what the writer wants the audience to see and through whose eyes—is often achieved in the 'big print', that is the screen directions or action. Screenwriting guides will often suggest this is kept to a minimum, even while insisting the writer show, not tell. As Giglio notes, 'executives talk about white on the page. That's a script that tends to be dialogue heavy and is a quick read' (2012, 85). This has a particular impact on comedies, which are expected to have fewer pages

than other screenplays (and therefore, if Giglio's logic follows, more dialogue and less big print); 'Comedic screenplays are shorter than dramatic screenplays. Comedies tend to run anywhere from 95-110 pages. That's it. If an exec is reading a 122-page comedy, chances are she is not buying it' (2012, 85).

Equating dialogue to reader's flow is not exclusive to screenwriting discourse. Of prose, novelist DBC Pierre (2012) suggests, 'readers will fly through dialogue – it's one of the great pleasures of reading and one that puts them at the heart of the action' (17).

Another potential difficulty with communicating perspective in screenplays is that screenwriters are limited in their tools for assigning point-of-view by unwritten rules and writing conventions. For example, Corley & Megel 'argue that common filler phrases like 'we see' and 'we pull back to see' […] are as distancing as direct references to camera angles and movements' (2014, 26). Meanwhile, readers of the screenplay are bringing their own perspectives to the characters, which is not discouraging in and of itself. However, with only implied camera shots within minimally used big print, there is perhaps increased room for the (intended or otherwise) hijacking of the point-of-view.

Writing funny female protagonists

Giglio, in breaking down his 'sub-genres of comedy' (2012, 15-25) goes some way to acknowledging gendered perspectives, describing Boy's (sic) Club films as those that 'give us a view into the psyche of the male mind' (19) and a Girl's (sic) Club film being 'from the female point-of-view' (20).

However, in describing the third comic sequence that, in his model, begins the second act of the screenplay, Giglio gives this sequence a sub-sub heading (following the 'A.K.A'):

Comic Sequence (C)

The Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World

A.K.A. *Sometimes Girls Throw Up On You* (2012, 139) (added emphasis).

Giglio has described this example of an incident that might happen within the chaos of this third sequence as something that happens to 'You' – the assumed 'you' being a male protagonist. It suggests the male comic protagonist is still an insidiously assumed and default subject position. As Ken Dancyger & Jeff Rush (2007) write bluntly of mainstream film comedies, 'the central character is more often male than female' (207).

If, as Helen Jacey (2010) noted, 'none of the screenwriting guides have paid much attention to the differences between men's and women's lives and to what happens if the hero is a heroine' (xv), perhaps this oversight is rooted in the persistence of what feminist theory calls mainstream political thought. Chris Beasley (1999) writes that these ingrained Western beliefs present:

> a conception of women as **different but complementary** (emphasis in original) […] Man is the norm and woman is defined negatively in relation to that norm. Man becomes the standard model and woman the creature with extra and/or missing bits. (The alternate view, in which women are seen as the starting point, is expunged – even though this perspective is just as possible.) (7)

Beasley's observation has further resonance when it comes to comedy, when considering that 'in order to be marked out as comic, the events represented—or the mode of representation—tend to be different in characteristic ways from what is usually expected in the non-comic world' (King 2002, 5). And, as Tim Ferguson (2014) puts it, 'to create out-loud laughter, writers must create a surprise which accords with the audience's perception of truth'. Therefore, defining the protagonist's perspective is crucial to a comedic screenplay, because a reader and eventual audience need to know from whose 'usually expected' events, from whose 'truth', we can expect to experience those comedic departures. If, as Beasley pointed out, women are already defined outside of the 'norm', then it follows that a male centrality might be assumed in comic screenplays' points-of-view. As Brett Mills (2005) suggests, 'if

comedy results from the deviancy from accepted norms, how can a woman be funny if femininity is in and of itself seen as deviant?' (120).

Larissa Sexton-Finck (2009) believes that female perspectives[4] suffer from,

> […] commercial cinema's assumption of this universal subjectivity [and thus] female characters, who do not possess the privileged attributes of traditional masculinity, are not generally agents in the narrative, and consequently hold little authority on mainstream screen' (65).

Taking on these marginalised expectations of Hollywood versions of women, screenwriter Diablo Cody has said, 'there are so few good roles for women out there and I give them an opportunity to do a different kind of character; [they] get to do more than play Adam Sandler's wife' (Freeman 2012). The 'different character' to which she may be referring is that of the comic protagonist, which is all too often defined in gendered (masculine) terms. Kaplan offers this definition: 'An ordinary guy, struggling against insurmountable odds, without many of the required skills and tools with which to win, but never giving up hope' (2010). Although Giglio by no means always defaults to a masculine pronoun throughout his guide, he does within his comparable definition of the comic protagonist:

> We want to laugh at characters. We want to see the flaws … Your comedic hero was going through life as best he could. He had flaws he was dealing with, but for the most part he was *resigned to be who he was* … (emphasis in original) (2012, 130).

Writing the treatment

Her Oscar-winning screenplay for *Juno* (2007) notwithstanding, Cody claims to have avoided the usual hallmarks of the mainstream, publicly eschewing the ubiquitous three-act structure, saying 'people don't have these tidy little redemption arcs in reality the way they do in movies' (Ashlock 2011). As Dancyger & Rush might concur, 'suppose the world we know is more likely to be marked by small missteps,

unexpected tenderness, and, most of all, a lack of overriding predetermined purpose or clarity?' (2007, 29). So is it possible to maintain female perspectives, particularly funny female perspectives, through a mainstream model?

According to Margot Nash, 'How-to books inevitably become the grail for aspiring screenwriters, yet those who dutifully follow the rules all too often produce formulaic screenplays that fail to ignite the imagination' (2014, 97). In writing my treatment, I would agree that the process of following a model deliberately chosen for its mainstream, formulaic nature was not without it challenges. However, the result has left me optimistic that Nash's concern is not necessarily the destiny for my screenplay. Though the process was by no means simple, nor quick, the resulting treatment reads as something I happily stand by in terms of its centrality of female perspective, and the protagonist's clear ownership of the comedy. I agree with Sexton-Finck, whose critique of the three-act structure includes its 'restorative final act [that] fixes female characters (and spectators) into a continuity of subjectivity by enforcing their reinstatement as an 'acceptable' semblance of femininity' (2009, 65). However, I have not yet regretted pushing up against these counter-intuitive structures, which have challenged my imagination into working out how to take my protagonist through them, or have her respond to them.

Giglio writes the following about commencing on the eight sequences of his model:

> The scriptment is made up of eight comedic sequences. Within those sequences are usually *five events.* Within those events are *scenes.* We're going to be carding out your story as you progress. When you're finished, you will have forty index cards. Each one will have an *event* on it. Events are a series of scenes strung together around the same context (emphases in original) (2012, 90).

A 'scriptment', undoubtedly Giglio's neologism, is part of addressing his belief that 'Treatments are boring. No one reads them. They don't reflect the tone of what you're writing. You want to write the script' (2012, 90). Thus he prescribes one page per sequence, resulting in eight pages each summarising the five events of each sequence. Though this brevity comes with its own restrictions, his advice that one should be

'*writing in the moment.* The protagonist is only concerned with the *objective of the scene*' (emphases in original) (92), facilitates rather than hinders a protagonist's perspective. Given the fact that this essay is not a review of Giglio's book itself, it is perhaps not useful here to describe and critique each step of the process according to its value or coherence. Rather, I will discuss how the sequence model potentially works against the journey of a female protagonist.

Script developer and theorist Stephen Cleary describes a sequence as 'a unit of story structure, composed of a series of scenes with a single, coherent dramatic spine [that] ends when the problem is resolved [...] the solution to that problem creates another, further, problem, that then begins to be set up for the next sequence' (2013). It is this unrelenting escalation of problems, within a traditional three-act structure, that I struggled to wrestle my characters through, in a way that seemed somehow difficult to maintain a female perspective. This might recall feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's (1975) concerns around a structure reliant upon 'forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end' (43). As Jacey puts it:

> […] why is it that a dramatic principle union is so overwhelmingly overlooked? Read most of the screenwriting books, and the mantra are conflict, conflict, conflict, or, obstacles, tests, and challenges. From Aristotle to today's screenwriting gurus, no conflict equals no story (2010, 139).

Also Giglio's observation that we bond with characters when their desires are primal (2012, 155), a term he references often, is not always convincing when the escalation of problems demanded by the sequencing model feels like it lacks coherence or motivation. In the early stages of my explorations, at least, the sequence model seemed to shoe horn protagonists into behaving badly and/or learning lessons in ways that felt diminishing to the themes, character or story. An event I wrote for Sequence D complied with the model by leading well into a new raft of problems, but put me, as a screenwriter committed to writing a female-centred comedy, in the awkward position of casting men as the underdogs in my narrative. The resulting sequence was

more aligned with those previously mentioned, highly gendered, definitions of comic protagonists – in ways that might read differently if the genders were reversed. Of the primal aspect of screenplay discourse, Jacey offers that:

> The primal argument would say that men's stories symbolize the male need to create, protect and defend the tribe [but] Primal doesn't explain the rise of the bromance or bromedy […] It doesn't explain why genres evolve […] Primal seems to me to be a good excuse to give a biological explanation for the way things have been, but it's a little outdated for heroine's stories (2010, 162-3).

Conclusion

As I have said, to write a screenplay is to write from a space 'in between'. Of comedy, Horton suggests another possible in-between space:

> A work that is identified in any way as comic automatically predisposes its audience to enter a state of liminality where the everyday is turned upside down and where cause and effect can be triumphed over and manipulated. Comedy thus can be partially described as a playful realm of consecrated freedom' (1991, 4).

Perhaps one way of considering a sequencing model, such as the one I have been researching, is to look for new ways to 'triumph over and manipulate' cause and effect. It is true that in the titular moment of Giglio's model – the second sequence that establishes of 'the inappropriate goal' (2012, 128-38) – I seeded reasons for the character's decision by considering union over conflict, in line with Jacey's aforementioned response to the ubiquity of the latter. But it is also true that in taking my protagonist towards her inappropriate goal, I was inspired to take a bigger leap with the character than I otherwise might have, and made a breakthrough in the narrative as a result.

Of course, it is possible that I am as colonised by the seductive three-act structure as anyone, and thus satisfied by the way it unfolds story, but whilst I agree with Cody's previously mentioned observation about the folly of fitting characters' lives into 'tidy, redemptive arcs', there is also a case to be made against storytelling that goes too far the other way; 'when we talk about writing from the complexity of experience, we are not talking about transcribing reality. If you attempt to merely copy the disorder of direct experience […] then all you'll create is disorder' (Dancyger & Rush, 2007, 31). However, in considering screenwriters who eschew such structure, it is useful to note Melissa Silverstein's (2010) celebratory observation that, 'to me a new film from writer/director Nicole Holofcener is a reason to rejoice. One reason is because she unapologetically tells stories from a female perspective'. This perspective is not achieved through following dominant screenwriting models, as Holofcener is quick to point out:

> I don't outline my scripts and while it's kind of scary, it's also liberating and fun. I used to fight this process because I was taught never to write this way, but the way I was taught − index cards, outlines, naming the purpose of every single scene − killed the joy and never amounted to a completed screenplay (2011, v-vi).

Even so, given my own experience working with one of these processes, and in line with a feminist perspective influenced by postmodernism, I wonder if it is possible to propose new screenwriting models without rejecting all that has gone before. As Cleary says, 'I want to see what happens when we take this relatively simple story idea and pull it apart a little and customize it, and see if we can use it, for our own uses, for our own purposes' (2013). Sexton-Finck, for example, as part of her own practice-based research, discovered advantages to the three-act structure despite its pitfalls for women:

> the familiarity and affectivity of mainstream cinema's three-act structure enables female filmmakers to (re)humanize woman and the female condition on screen, making it possible for a larger audience to understand

and empathise with woman by seeing the world from her perspective (2009, 272).

Seeing the world from the female protagonist's perspective is, as previously mentioned, perhaps crucial to an audience finding her funny; it is also potentially useful in exploring new ways into those existing models.

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Endnotes:

1) I am ignoring the commercial sale of published screenplays in this instance, because they are released as a byproduct to the screen object, and are often a transcript of what made it to the screen, rather than the screenplay itself.

2) See the publisher's website at http://www.mwp.com/

3) High-concept is industry jargon for a simple premise with an obvious hook that is easily pitched and/or marketed.

4) It is perhaps useful here to acknowledge that the idea of a 'female perspective' is a problematic one, even and perhaps especially within feminism. For the purposes of this research, the idea of female perspective is offered not in a biologically determined essentialist way, but as one component of female subjectivity – whereby subjectivity is understood as one's lived experience, or way of being in the world.