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## ***The liminal role of the screenplay: Pre-production, the screen idea and the visual concept***

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***The liminal role of the screenplay: Pre-production, the screen idea and the visual concept***

Abstract:

The screen idea is a scholarly term used to describe the collective idea for a narrative screen project that exists in the minds of the collaborators as their concept for the work is evolving. The term has mostly been related to the script development phase of a project to elucidate the liminal form and function of the screenplay during that period. The screen idea can also be related to subsequent phases of conventional commercial screen production, such as the intensive planning period known as pre-production. One of the central activities during pre-production is the process undertaken by key heads of department – director, production designer and director of photography (DOP) – in conceiving a visual style with which to tell the story. This group is sometimes referred to as the visual triumvirate. The visual concept developed by the triumvirate sets out a plan for how the formal qualities of the work, such as colour, contrast, camera movement and lens choice, will be used to drive and enhance the expression of the narrative. During this phase, the imagery inferred through the words of the script begins to find tangible form, thereby contributing to the evolution of the screen idea as it progresses beyond the script development phase. Through examples taken from creative practice in recent Australian film and television, alongside the author's own industry experience, this article examines factors influencing the process of negotiation between the triumvirate as they develop a visual style for their screen projects.

Biographical note:

Juliet John has worked in the Australian entertainment industry since 1995 as an art director, production designer and contemporary music co-ordinator. She has been lecturing at universities in Melbourne since 2016 and is currently conducting research into the nature of creative process in Australian screen production as part of her doctoral studies at La Trobe.

Keywords:

Screen production, creative process, screenplay, the screen idea, visual style

## Introduction

The creative process in conventional narrative filmmaking involves the careful threading together of myriad ideas to tell a story, within the evident limitations of time and money. Ideas derived from the vast and varied personnel involved in a commercial screen project are shared and negotiated through the production process and eventually coalesce to create one unified vision in the final work. This article limits its focus to the pre-production period and within that, to the work of the creative triumvirate of director, production designer and director of photography. Elements such as colour, spatial design, composition, camera movement and lens choice comprise the overarching visual concept through which the narrative will be conveyed. Within the framework offered by the term the screen idea, the nature of creative negotiation between collaborators in building their visual ideas will be examined. Firstly, the nature of the interaction itself will be analysed and then catalysts will be identified that spur the collaborators on through their creative path. Productions surveyed include recent Australian film and television productions *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Ivin et al., 2016), *Riot* (Walker, 2018), *The True History of the Kelly Gang* (Kurzel, 2019), *Relic* (James, 2020) and *Berlin Syndrome* (Shortland, 2017). Findings from these productions demonstrate that the visual iteration of the screen idea is negotiated through a lively exchange of visual reference material and verbal discussion (Ivin, 2017). Methods revealed in this article that relate to storytelling through the use of imagery can, in turn, inform the nature of telling stories in many artforms, whether the medium be words, imagery, sound or movement. Interaction between the creative triumvirate during the pre-production process therefore provides insight into how collective storytelling functions in many collaborative disciplines within the creative arts.

## Extending the screen idea

The screen idea is a term that was extended by UK Scholar Ian MacDonald in 2004 from a concept introduced by Philip Parker in 1998 (MacDonald, 2004). The screen idea describes a shared vision for a project as it evolves from initial concept through to its final form (MacDonald, 2016). MacDonald aptly quotes Pasolini when he describes the abstruse nature of screenplay as a “structure designed to become another structure” (MacDonald, 2016, p. 10). The screenplay is a unique document in that it describes an idea for a story in words, which will be realised through audio-visual means. Whilst the screenwriter embeds the script with visual ideas on many levels, it is generally accepted in conventional non-auteur production that it is the job of the production crew to adapt these inherent visual suggestions into concrete ideas for the look of the work (Koivumäki, 2010).

MacDonald mainly uses the term the screen idea in the context of the screenwriting process; however, it can be extended further into the production process to include the evolution of the screen idea over the entire course of creating a screen work. Further to the documentary evidence produced alongside the script during the screen production process – such as treatments, outlines, production bibles and visual reference material – the screen idea identifies that there are other imperative elements at play. The screen idea allows for the inclusion of the intangible, the undocumented and/or the undefined material that exists liminally in the minds of the collaborators as ideas are formed and refined. MacDonald’s

screen idea can be extended to offer a broader account of how a screen work is holistically created. This article considers the dynamic social interaction between collaborators that supplements the formally documented material produced during the creative process.

### **The visual concept**

During *pre-production*, cast and crew make decisions under the guidance of the director that are based on their negotiated ideas for how the story will be told through dramatic means (Barnwell, 2004). Actors develop their characters; costumes, hair and make-up, sets and locations are designed, lit and photographed; and audio is recorded and enhanced. The production personnel's understanding of the story, and their decisions to tell it a particular way, govern their decision-making process (Barnwell, 2004). For example, Australian mini-series *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is an adaption from the 2017 Elliott Perlman novel that tells the same incident six times over from six different characters points of view. A visual concept arrived at for the series was that each episode would exhibit, albeit subtly, a different key colour that related to the main character's viewpoint for each episode. Director of Photography Bonnie Elliott described the concept as each character "seeing the story through their own tinted lens" (Elliott, 2017, p. 6); a visual iteration of how the story itself was structured. The approach used by the triumvirate to develop a visual concept is so intimately aligned with the intent of the narrative that it presents as a form of storytelling, albeit using images as its language, rather than words (John, 2017). The social factors that govern this collaborative interaction have notable influence over how the creative process unfolds and will now be considered.

### **Creative interaction: The perpetual pitch**

The screen idea is subject to continual creative and logistical refinement, which causes it to be in a constant state of flux. The creative triumvirate continues to bounce ideas back and forth within the framework of the story until a final concept for the film is arrived at (John, 2018). This is another reason why concrete documents can never capture the screen idea absolutely. Scripts are subject to regular amendment, reference imagery is continuously being edited, and ideas are in a perpetual state of refinement. The production process can therefore be described as a state of persistent negotiation and verification. For ideas to find their eventual finite concrete form, collaborators perform a kind of perpetual pitch to each other, which is integral to the way they interact in their daily practice. Each crew member contributes their ideas to each other through the lens of each one's craft, creating a dynamic exchange in which the script and its narrative provide the primary foundation (John, 2018).

Creative activity between individuals can be seen as a performance in which collaborators signal to each other that they have the capacity and will to develop a mutual understanding about the subject matter. To some degree, every time collaborators put an idea forward to other members of the group, they are using techniques similar to those required in a formal pitch session. Pitch sessions are typically held when a creator or writer presents a concept for a project to those who may be interested in funding it (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003). In a pitch

session, participants aim to entice their potential collaborators with their ideas that are then judged on their creative potential, but also on whether there is common ground, connection and desire to collaborate between the parties (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003). In a contemporary study of Hollywood pitch sessions, one anonymous scriptwriter stated, “You want to stimulate them, you want to get their curiosity going. And then you want them to be a team player with you” (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003). This statement could also be used to describe the perpetual pitch that occurs between members of the triumvirate when they share and negotiate their ideas during the development of the screen idea in pre-production.

### **Creative interaction: Getting on the same page**

Collaborators use the visual reference material they choose to converse in to signal to each other that they have similar, desirable and/or inspirational approaches to the subject matter. Through these presentations, members of the triumvirate indicate to each other that their contribution to the storytelling is thoroughly considered, researched, inventive and therefore of value to the project (John, 2018). This is often referred to as “getting on the same page”, and many filmmakers describe it as imperative to their working relationships, especially in the early stages. Collaborators who struggle to create a mutual understanding of the subject matter find that they are working at odds. Sometimes a difference of opinion can result in the formation of inventive ideas; however, most personnel report that an ability to “get on the same page” leads to the most productive outcomes (Cunningham, 2019). British director Mike Leigh said of his relationship with cinematographer Dick Pope,

Once I started working with Dick – no disrespect to anybody else – I saw that we just absolutely clicked and that we are absolutely on the same page and the same wave length. (Leigh, 2015, p. 70)

“Getting on the same page” can also be a functional imperative to the process which ensures everyone is seeing the screen idea in the same terms. Australian production designer Melinda Doring reported that she used visual reference material to find a shared vision with her collaborators on the Australian/UK co-production *Oranges and Sunshine* (Loach, 2010):

I created mood/colour palette boards from the research for the UK and Australia. We needed the colour palette to cohesively create the feel of the period (1986) something that both the sets and the costumes would follow. Costume designer Cappi Ireland and I collaborated on this palette and provided these ideas to cinematographer Denson Baker and Jim [Loach, director] so we were all on the same page. (Doring, 2012, para. 10)

The visual imagery exchanged at this time not only builds the collective notion of the screen idea, but also shows collaborators what they can expect to be delivered during the period of principal photography. All parties can therefore rest easy in the knowledge that there will be no surprises, that much of the conceptual negotiation is mutually understood by the time the camera is ready to roll. In turn this allows everyone to be able to go about their job efficiently

during the highly pressurised phase of principal photography, when costs and personnel swell to their largest numbers and the production process is at its most precarious.

### **Creative interaction: Trust and empathy**

In order to flourish, creative collaboration also requires trust and empathy for each other's viewpoint and many of the triumvirate members report a pre-occupation with establishing this early in each working relationship. Australian DOP Martin McGrath reflected on the early *pre-production* period in telemovie *Riot*.

Given the trust that existed amongst the core group of creatives, I knew anything was possible, even if it seemed impossible... Filmmaking of this intensity requires a great deal of trust across the board. The joy of knowing I am completely supported gives me enormous confidence, and equally, knowing they have done their job to a world top standard every time is a wonderful feeling. (Cunningham, 2018, para. 33)

Many of the interactions between the triumvirate during pre-production contribute to establishing and maintaining a sense of trust. Some crew members claim that feeling a connection with their collaborators is as important as feeling inspired by the narrative in the script itself. Veteran Italian production designer Dante Ferretti stated, "In Italy, I worked with the best directors and if they offered me a project, I never asked to read the script first" (Ettegui, 1999, p.54). In Ferretti's case he was guaranteed that his director would choose a script that would be creatively inspiring, but he also knew that they shared a creative compatibility that was more important than the subject matter itself. This further emphasises the creative benefit of an alchemic sense of trust and understanding between collaborators.

### **Creative catalysts: inside and outside the production crew**

Although the screen idea exists in the minds of everyone who contributes during the production process, it may mean very different things to different personnel at different times. For the triumvirate of director, production designer and DOP during pre-production, the screen idea begins to find shape through initial responses to the story expressed in the script (Nevin et al., 2020). To some degree it is primarily a private response in each crew member's imagination, but other factors are also at play that simultaneously influence the members of the triumvirate (Redvall, 2012). Many designers and DOPs report that they are conscious of the known creative approach of the director and/or other key collaborators when they are first appraising the script for a project (Elliott, 2017). Others also report extensive referencing of the historical work of other filmmakers that have provided inspiration (Kurzel, 2018). For example, Australian DOP Bonnie Elliott (2017) stated that director Glendyn Ivin made the provocation that they could try a "more formal" tightly structured visual style for awarded Australian drama series *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. She described this partly as a reaction against the looser, informal, hand-held style of the previous project they had worked on together but also as choice that made sense in relation to the unique structure of the story.

As described above, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* was adapted from a novel which told one incident six times, each from the perspective of a different character (Perlman, 2017). The incident involves the curious disappearance of a young boy, told from different characters' points of view, each time revealing further circumstances of the event through to its final resolution. As noted above, Ivin and his team visually enhanced the narrative's multiple viewpoint structure through their visual concept for the work. Elliott described Ivin's initial suggestion of this "formal" visual style as the filter through which she undertook her first reading of the script for that project (Elliott, 2017, p.1). Elliott's familiarity with Ivin's previous work and pre-existing knowledge of his creative approach were present in her mind at the time of her first private reading, and therefore also influenced the ideas that germinated during that activity. In an email written to Ivin around this time, Elliott commented on dramatic devices she had noticed in one of Ivin's previous projects: "I loved the way you used that repetitive gesture of Anna's counting fingers in *The Beautiful Lie* (Ivin & Salmon, 2015). I think these visual clues to the internal workings of the characters could be a powerful device" (Elliott, 2016, para. 3). She then aligns this idea with the work of Robert Bresson: "There is something in the obsessive details of the story, the obsessive qualities of the characters, that feels very real and true. I feel like there is some clue to the visual language in the hands, in that Bresson way" (Elliott, 2016, para. 2). Here, Elliott highlights one of Ivin's previous ideas and recontextualises it in the new project alongside the work of an influential filmmaker. Her choice of device and its placement in a new context creates an entirely new idea, which illustrates how the work of collaborators and their creative influences interweave.

Members of the triumvirate have stated that a part of their creative process is to consider other pre-existing works that share similarities with the project they are embarking on. Director Justin Kurzel cited the several major films previously made about the life and times of Ned Kelly as a strong influence in his attempt to develop an original approach for *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Production designer Jo Ford described similarities in the narrative structure of recently awarded production *The Slap* (Hobbs et al., 2011) as a primary concern in the formulation of a unique visual approach for *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Ford, 2017). Pre-existing works can therefore exert a tension on the creative ideas that emerge in the pre-production process. At this early stage when heads of department are undertaking the seemingly solitary task of reading and responding to the project's script, there are always external factors weighing in on the creative process of each individual (Redvall, 2016). External influences act like a muse in creative activity in that they provide the stimulus and momentum that propels the ideas into formation. Contemporary peers and historical influencers can therefore be seen to have an impact on how members of the triumvirate read and respond to the script, even at the earliest stages of the process.

### **Creative catalysts: personal connection**

Some filmmakers find that they relate strongly on a personal level to the material, through having had a shared experience to the characters in the story, and that this familiarity sparks their visual ideas. DOP Charlie Saroff spoke about his involvement with Australian feature

film *Relic*, which told the tale of three generations of women and the impact dementia had on them as a family.

Natalie [director] and I both had family members suffer from dementia, so when I heard that she wanted to make a horror film using dementia as a metaphor, it was really inspiring from the start. (Saroff, 2020, p. 1)

A personal connection such as this can also colour to how the heads of department believe the story should be told visually. Production designer Melinda Doring stated that, like the main character in *Berlin Syndrome*, she herself had made the pilgrimage to Berlin as a young artist. She stated that her connection to the circumstances and naïve state of mind of the character was a key entry point for her to the story and helped her in developing ideas for how the environment of the film should feel (Aquarius Films, 2016).

### **Creative catalyst: embodying the characters**

For some members of the triumvirate, circumstantial details found in the narrative can send them on an experiential and/or creative mission that subsequently feeds their ideas for the storytelling. For Australian feature *Berlin Syndrome*, DOP Germain McMicking described his commencement of pre-production in Berlin.

I spent almost every day with Cate (director), going through the script, absorbing the world in Berlin and living out the story... absorbing the light, observing the people and trying to get a feel for the characters. (Aquarius Films, 2016, p.14)

Doring also reports that spending days walking the streets the character walked, and visiting the flea markets and shops selling items unique to the area, helped to further shape her sense of the characters in the story (Aquarius Films, 2016). Often this process can inform the inclusion of details that were never considered in the pages of the script. For example, in *Berlin Syndrome*, the triumvirate saw a massage chair in one of the apartments they were surveying as a potential location. The image strongly resonated for them with the character Andi, so they included one in his apartment in the film (McMicking, 2017) which added a menacing presence to one of the scenes. Numerous examples also exist where locations described in the script are altered when the production crew undertake location surveys and find new kinds of settings in which to stage the scenes (Ford, 2017). These decisions extend the screenwriter's ideas, but within the framework the writer had initially conceived.

Triumvirate members often report that embodying the characters is imperative to the flow of their ideas for the visual style of the project (Doring, 2012). There are some definite similarities between the way the crew behind the camera and the cast in front of the camera both aim to understand the characters at a deep level. Veteran US production designer Robert Boyle recalled a set decorator he worked with, “who felt he could be a method decorator and put himself into the characters” (LoBrutto, 1992, p.15). In all the instances described here, responses to the story and its characters provide primary inspiration for the visual ideas that will follow. Responses to the story expressed in literal form are transformed into ideas that will



tell the story visually. As a group, the triumvirate act like writers in the sense that they embody the story and their characters, although they rewrite it using imagery in the place of words.

## Conclusion

During the production process, the ideas of the individual triumvirate members enmesh with those of their collaborators, peers and others that have provided inspiration for their work. The interplay of differing and/or shared points of view, of enacting the perpetual pitch, of pursuing compromise, refinement and invention, create a dynamic tension from which unique concepts arise. The process of creative negotiation is forever shifting, with each triumvirate member coming at the project from a different angle, until it coalesces into one finite work. Whilst the initial concept for a screen project is usually expressed through words and literary imagery, its final iteration on the screen will be in the form of an audio-visual moving image. In the final work, meaning expressed through the characters' dialogue is intertwined with a complex sonic and visual language to create an entire world within which the narrative is conveyed. The minutiae of detail that comprises this world is the culmination of a series of considered choices made through negotiation between colleagues under the influence of unique social codes that comprise creative collaboration in the screen production process (Koivumäki, 2010).

As they develop their ideas for how the film will be staged and photographed, the triumvirate are contributing to the writing of the story using a visual language unique to each project. The visual lexicon that is developed is deemed to be appropriate to the specific story being told. Existing works act as a touchstone from which the triumvirate members' own ideas may emerge. References proposed by each individual are combined with shared knowledge that is subsequently tempered by the group. All heads of department in the production crew act as storytellers, who interpret the intentions embedded in the script and rewrite them using sound and images inside a complex collaborative social structure. The script is acknowledged as a foundational document that captures refinements made to the story as it progresses through the screen production process. However, an examination of the script alone is limited in how much insight it can provide into the nature of the collaborative creative process. The screen idea is a broader frame of reference that allows us to capture and examine the less visible elements of creative interaction. Although they are never ultimately defined, since they are in a perpetual state of flux, the influence of these less visible interactions profoundly shapes the outcome of the creative work.

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