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The screenwriting canon and the industrial hidden curriculum: A case for educational activism

Abstract:

This article identifies a cohort of screenplays and screenwriters recurrent on university screenwriting reading lists – a “screenwriting canon” –dominated by hegemonic identities. We identify some reasons for the perpetuation of this canon and its implications and limitations. We are especially concerned by the “hidden curriculum” within tertiary screenwriting courses and seek to expose the industry biases that shape its content and distribution. We find that the screenwriting canon, as distinct from other modes of creative writing and media practice, is shaped by a specific set of industrial values originating in Hollywood, which are expressed through regimes of access to certain texts and not others. These effectively determine what is allowed to count as “good” screenwriting. We argue that if the reading, analysis, discussion, performance and rewriting of screenplays is to be a useful tool for students then access to a greater diversity of screenplays is sorely needed. As educators, it is our responsibility to interrogate and critique the values of the screen industry rather than reproduce them. We make a case for accessing a wider range of screenplays and for introducing students to industry in a way that emphasises “work-ready” values, such as analysing power relations and ethical representation.

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Keywords:

screenwriting, screenplays, pedagogy, canon, hidden curriculum

Introduction

In Literary Studies and creative writing, it is often joked – or lamented – that students will watch the film adaptation rather than read the assigned book. In the case of screenwriting courses, it may be the case that the film has been assigned in the absence of a reliable source text. This points to a pedagogical gap. While it is true that there is much to be gained from the analysis of a screen work, representing the medium for which your writing is intended, it does not replace the insights into craft, technique and language that the written artefact offers students, educators and researchers of screenwriting practice.

For this discussion, we outline some key claims. Firstly, and centrally, there is a canon of screenplays taught in higher education as part of a “hidden curriculum” – by which we mean “the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors [*sic*], and norms that exist in the educational setting” (Alsubaie, 2015, p. 125) that are conveyed as a side effect of the overt curriculum. Secondly, this canon is shaped by practical issues of getting access to screenplays, where relatively few are formally published. Those screenplays that are made available, often online, are dominated by produced and awarded screenplays, usually from Hollywood. This leads us to our third claim, which is that the screenwriting canon reproduces the biases of the screen industry, especially Hollywood.

Internationally, screenwriting education commonly identifies key practitioners, modes, genres and techniques through engagement with a range of screenplays – a range that is extraordinarily narrow. Although the idea of a canon might be more readily associated with books on the shelf in a university Literature department, in screenwriting studies, this manifests as reading lists that predominantly feature screenplays and screenwriters from Hollywood. The authors observe this commonality based on decades of teaching experience at multiple tertiary institutions across Australia and Aotearoa. Further, O'Meara sent a callout for reading lists to educators around the world through the Screenwriting Research Network's electronic mailing list in 2017 and received 12 reading lists from teachers based in Europe, North America, South America, Australasia and Asia, and a further eight comments from educators describing their reading lists.

From these sources, we have observed that a group of Hollywood screenplays and screenwriters commonly feature in screenwriting studies' reading lists and classrooms in institutions of higher education. Although there is some variety among the Hollywood screenplays selected, they commonly include writers such as Billy Wilder, Woody Allen, John Hughes, Cameron Crowe, Charlie Kaufman, Pete Docter, Aaron Sorkin and Christopher Nolan. While educators around the world frequently complement Hollywood screenplays with some local examples, there is remarkable consistency in the screenplays that reoccur across reading lists. The screenwriting canon almost exclusively comprises screenplays:

- ☐ For feature films that have been commercially produced
- ☐ Written in English and produced in the United States of America (USA)
- ☐ Written by and about people who are white, heterosexual, non-disabled, cis men

The canon of screenplays reflects the lineage of screenwriting “gurus”: an almost unbroken chain of Global North white men that includes Blake Snyder, Syd Field, Robert McKee and Christopher Vogler. Unchallenged acceptance of both the canonical texts and experts is an example of what Sara Ahmed terms disciplinary fatalism, being “the assumption that we can only produce the lines that are before us” (2017, p. 150). Such fatalistic arguments and citational privilege are not unique (Ahmed has no shortage of examples), but, for screenwriting educators and researchers, the gap in resourcing compounds the problem.

We are concerned that the canon may seem to be impartial, the terms on which these texts are collated may go unquestioned, and the implicit bias within will impact on wider industrial and academic expressions of good screenwriting. Literary canons are already understood to be “strategic constructs by which societies maintain their own interests” (Altieri, 1983, p. 38), but the emergence of the screenwriting canon brings with it added complexities around access and a very particular set of industry values, as will be discussed. We argue for strategies to address those challenges, while at the same time situating ourselves within a wider literary and creative writing scholarship focused on decentring the canon (Guillory, 1993; Marx, 2004; Truman, 2019). With these scholars, our intention is to “make visible what might otherwise remain the taken-for-granted traditions, discourses, and accompanying power dynamics in English language arts education” (Macaluso & Macaluso, 2018, p. xi). Canons have repeatedly been contested throughout history, but they are always products of their time. The contemporary counter-canonical movement grows specifically from “broad institutional changes [since the 1980s], general ideological shifts, and specific socioeconomic tendencies – [which] have all converged to undermine whatever confidence there once was in a singular and venerated literary heritage” (Kolbas, 2018, p. 24). This is a movement expressive of a culture at large, meaning that screenwriting is better able to speak to and for its time when it engages with this movement. The gendered and raced screenwriting canon is too easily shrugged off as being “just the way it is” when syllabus after syllabus is populated by the so-called “classic” screenplays of, for example, Robert Towne and Orson Welles.

Our approach draws on substantial scholarship critiquing how canons operate in education. In a meticulous study, E. Dean Kolbas (2018) shows that canons (and counter-canons alike) have consistently been shaped by presiding political forces whose values they then serve to perpetuate. This is the case whether shaped by dominant philosophies, as in Ancient Greece by burgeoning and exclusionary nationalist imperatives, as was the case in 17th century Europe; or by “the prescribed values and priorities of the [USA] state” (Kolvas 2018, p. 21). that supported literary criticism’s growth in twentieth-century universities Hegemonic groups have indubitably influenced what counts as good literature – but also, in the very same manoeuvre, who gets to count as human. As Will Bridges (2019) has argued, humanism’s “long-standing first crisis” is that it was founded on the disqualification of certain groups – originally, slaves, but also women, the poor and racialised others – from access to humanistic study, and therefore from access to the development of the very characteristics that would supposedly confer them humanity (p. 5). Canons have been deployed as tools in this exclusionary project for millennia. Contemporary reading lists arguably restrict universal access in a comparable way when they are curated to present an overly narrow definition of humanity’s creative excellence. Though

Sharon Crowley's (1998) review of first-year composition-course reading lists in the USA is admittedly due for an update, it is hard not to imagine, considering data we gathered from contemporary screenwriting colleagues internationally (see below), that her conclusion might still stand: namely, that these reading lists affirm that the "point of a Humanist education ... is to become acquainted with the body of canonical texts that humanists envision as a repository of superior products of Western culture" (p. 13). Thus, we argue for screenwriting teaching that critiques Hollywood's hegemony and its effects, that is actively inclusive of visions of humanity beyond Western culture's view of itself, and that reforms rather than bolsters the screen industry's attendant if "hidden" values. Crucially, we also argue for the resources required to achieve this pedagogical goal.

The aim of this article is to examine what shapes screenwriting reading lists and how we can make them better teaching tools. Our approach converts the practical scenes of canon formation into sites of critical activism, because we are concerned by the narrow selection of screenplays on many reading lists we come across and the difficulty of even expanding our own reading lists. Our approach is also emblematic of the push to change the top-down tradition in education, where curriculum is imposed upon students, to a more consultative approach, where student requests and social change may also be seen as critical factors in the revision of a syllabus (for example., Adsit, 2019). Ultimately, we aim to improve how screenwriting is taught to the next generation of screenwriters and how this will, in time, impact viewers.

Why screenplays?

Screenplays are the primary reading of a screenwriting subject, which anchors much of the activity and learning. They are used to demonstrate what good screenwriting looks like through reading, analysis, discussion, performance and rewriting. Screenwriting educators are adept at developing innovative methods for bypassing screenplay analysis, and therefore, the canon, by introducing practice-based strategies, such as improvisation (Senje, 2017), and making case studies of their own scripts in development (Batty et al., 2016; Ianniello & Ianniello, 2021). We propose that these welcome innovations should be considered complementary strategies rather than replacement ones given that screenplays, and the opportunity to critically engage with them, offer valuable insights into the writing craft. As a form, screenwriting has a unique set of principles for construction and expression. The ways in which these are observed, subverted and broadly executed – and how such applications can be analysed against different eras, writers, genres, production contexts and demographics – simply cannot be gleaned from finished screen works or how-to guides. Creative writing students and aspiring writers are frequently taught that to write, they must read (Crowley, 1998, p.13). That is why access to a broader range of screenplays is a pressing concern.

Scenes of canon formation

It is notable – and verging on stating the obvious – that there is no commensurate scarcity of novels, memoir, poetry and plays (Australian and otherwise) to which students have ready access through extensive library collections. Screenplays would appear to have much in common with stage plays, as they are both intended to be brought to life in another medium.

But even stage plays are more commonly published, sold in bookshops and collected in university libraries. This is in part because of the difference in history and age between the different writing practices. Screenwriting is in its infancy relative to playwriting, poetry and prose, which have all existed for literally thousands of years. While these canons have their own issues with diversity, there is at least a much larger collection on which to draw. Screenwriting educators do not have the luxury of that history. Further, a key rationale for publishing stage plays is the fact that they can go on to have multiple productions beyond the first in ways that screenplays typically do not. Nevertheless, screenplays are important as written artefacts for demonstrating techniques and conventions unique to its form, because “the lean sentences and strong verbs of the screenplay are hard won and delicately arranged” (Taylor, 2023, p. 71). To become conversant with the practical conventions of screenplays, it is immensely helpful to see examples, and examples of a range of possibilities. What creative and professional futures are inhibited, or even shut down too early, by this absence of screenplays from our catalogues?

Many of the unique, systemic issues that shape the screenwriting canon relate to the difficulties of gaining access to screenplays for use in teaching: few screenplays are “published” in the way that books are, so educators cannot readily rely on institutional systems to access texts. While the digital age has brought with it the ability to download some screenplays online (a comprehensive discussion follows), these screenplays are distributed in direct relation to Hollywood awards processes. While the range has become somewhat more diverse in recent years, the production contexts from which they arrive are still predominantly situated in the USA and UK. It is particularly difficult to access translations of screenplays originally written in languages other than English, since screenplays are rarely translated. The canons in disciplines such as Literature and Creative Writing are shaped in other ways, but can draw on a much wider range of published work readily available in bookshops and tertiary libraries.

A fundamental obstacle in obtaining screenplays for teaching stems from the screenplay’s status as a commercial document: most screenplays are primarily industrial documents that are commercially owned. They are rarely available outside the industrial contexts of script development and screen production. Within the screen industry, screenplays are considered to be commercially sensitive sites of intellectual property that must be fiercely guarded. People are sometimes even asked to sign a legal non-disclosure agreement just to read a screenplay, not to mention sharing it for discussion and critique. This logic of property ownership is pervasive in the screen industry and extends to small budget and guerilla-style projects that operate, at best, on the margins of commercial screen production. Although much screenwriting labour is not paid – or is drastically underpaid, devalued and/or insecure, as the Writers Guild of America this year sought to spotlight through strike action (Darcy & Isidore, 2023) – the screenplay itself is highly valued, sometimes more for its commercial potential than for its material use as a plan for production (Baker, 2013).

Scene of canon formation #1: Publishing

The screenplay does not enjoy the same literary status as other genres of writing, perhaps in part due to its standing as a technical document (Price, 2010; Sherry, 2014; Baker, 2013). Screenwriters, script editors and “how-to” manuals are often quick to assert that a screenplay should be a “good read” as well as serving industrial purposes (Aronson, 2010; Peterson & Nicolosi, 2015). Nevertheless, this attitude has not been embraced by book publishers, who seem to regard screenplays as attracting only a niche or specialised audience, meaning that very few screenplays are ever published in traditional ways. Within the wider context of a paucity of published screenplays, notable exceptions are *Newmarket Shooting Script* series (HarperCollins) and the Bloomsbury and Faber & Faber *Screen Studies* collection. University libraries do not commonly collect screenplays in the ways that they do other kinds of creative writing. Depending on the institution, students’ access to formally published screenplays may be restricted or non-existent. Published screenplays serve important purposes for research and education because they are legitimate, citable sources. Importantly, published screenplays are almost exclusively from USA and UK production contexts. At the time of writing, there are no Australian titles in published collections.

In this context, it is rare to gain access to unproduced screenplays or screenplays for films that are not already commercially successful. This is despite the growing field of Screenwriting Studies shining light on the value of screenplays as independent creative texts, valuable as literature on their own terms (Batty et al., 2016; Macdonald, 2010; Nannicelli, 2013). Indeed, *TEXT* is one of the few academic journals that intermittently publish unproduced screenplays, providing educators with alternative models of what a successful screenplay might look like. Even when screenplays for successfully produced films are locatable, it can be difficult to determine an authoritative version. As Kevin Boon notes, there are numerous versions of screenplays for some films available for download online and it can be difficult to determine their provenance and legitimacy: “screenplays usually pass through many hands and many revisions before reaching the screen. This results in a boggling number of versions, often by a number of different writers, some credited and some not” (2008, p. 40). These waters are muddied further by websites that provide transcripts of films – documents that are largely considered of negligible value as learning tools for screenwriters, as they do not represent the labour and craft of screenwriting.

Since screenwriting educators cannot rely on established systems of publishing and library collection to supply readings for their syllabi, the onus is on individual screenwriting educators to actively procure screenplays. In particular, screenwriting educators often leverage their own professional networks in order to procure screenplays to include on their reading lists. One key reason educators undertake this additional work is to include a few local screenplays from the culture in which they teach. To the extent that screenwriting educators share the canon’s demographics, there is a clear danger that relying on connections and idiosyncratic teacher choice only makes it more difficult for less dominant identities to break into the canon. This makes for piecemeal offerings for students and an inconsistency of supply depending on how well-connected their lecturers might be to industry. The severely limited canon thus impacts teaching design – not to mention teaching labour, given the extra degree of difficulty in obtaining course materials – because screenplays may be taught based on their availability

rather than their thematic relevance or aesthetic values. When the work of finding screenplays to read becomes more arduous, it reduces educators' capacity to spend time reading and considering the pedagogical value of particular texts. This also contributes to the concerning closeness between industry and education.

Scene of canon formation #2: Studios release screenplays online

Increasingly, Hollywood studios make screenplays available online as part of the massive marketing and public relations campaigns invested in ensuring a film's commercial success. For the last 10 to 15 years, Hollywood majors and minis have been releasing online screenplays as part of their lobbying campaigns to win awards, primarily the Oscars. A few dozen screenplays are released in this way each year in the lead-up to awards. This is an interesting move in itself, in an industry known for making the labour of writing invisible (Conor, 2014). But the release of a screenplay is intimately tied up with the corresponding film's production and commercial success. Access to screenplays is part and parcel of the Hollywood marketing machine: a film's production, commercial success and nomination for awards are perceived to provide proof of the screenplay's value.

In one sense, the increasing availability of screenplays in this way represents a kind of democratisation of industrial knowledge, and this practice has already made available more screenplays by and about people who are traditionally marginalised by Hollywood. Some of the screenplays we have set on our own reading lists as a result of this change are: Stuart Blumberg and Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are Alright*; Luke Davies' *Lion*; Armando Bo, Alexander Dinelaris Junior, Nicholas Giacobone and Alejandro Iñárritu's *Birdman or (the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*; Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird*; Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River*; Lulu Wang's *The Farewell*, Sebastián Lelio and Rebecca Lenkiewicz's *Disobedience*; Bong Joon Ho and Han Jin Wan's *Parasite*; and Sebastián Lelio and Gonzalo Maza's *A Fantastic Woman*. This has allowed some movement towards greater diversity within the range of Hollywood screenplays set on reading lists. However, the kinds of screenplays that are promoted for awards still represent a narrow range of writers and characters. Further, this leaves educators in the unfortunate position of having to trail a notoriously biased industry in its meagre moves towards greater diversity. Ultimately, greater access to Hollywood-produced screenplays would not equate to a more useful or exemplary canon for our students; the canon must extend beyond Hollywood.

Hollywood screen industry bias and its reproduction in the screenwriting canon

As educators, our role is to prepare students to shape and fulfill their own career ambitions with consciousness of the contested, diverse and increasingly politicised industry they seek to enter. In this context, giving students their best chance at success, whether commercial or critical, does not mean helping them to faithfully, even skilfully, reproduce the texts and industries to which we introduce them. In fact, equipping students to interrogate and critique received values is beneficial both to students' prospects and to the industry's. We have a pivotal role in shaping the creative and industrial values and practices of future generations of media practitioners, who will craft the stories that reflect, produce and define our cultures. When educators and

students seize upon the same small pool of available screenplays, the dominant ideologies they represent are reinscribed. This is true of the stories told, the characters represented and the structural techniques employed. The global screen industry is riddled with social inequalities, which many screenwriting educators are currently reproducing through the canon. Hollywood is far from a meritocracy that rewards good screenwriting, rather it is a global centre of extreme, unearned power and privilege, which plays a fundamental role in creating systemic inequality.

Writing from an Australasian cultural context, it is useful to look to a recent report (at the time of writing) for the Australian Communications and Media Authority which acknowledges that “stories influence us in many ways, ultimately reflecting, shaping, and challenging our perceptions of ourselves and each other” (ACMA, 2020, p. 14). It is clear that government funding agencies, at state and federal levels, aim to celebrate Australian storytelling and all the voices that contribute to what makes our screen stories uniquely Australian. The national screen funding agency states, “diversity and inclusivity are priorities” and that “we therefore expect that the diversity of the story world and characters are reflected in the creative team” (Screen Australia, 2020, p. 5). Screenwriting educators can contribute by exploring innovations beyond the Hollywood-led story models that privilege heteronormative, white, Western worldviews featuring individual protagonists on masculine-coded journeys of transformation (Hambly, 2020, 2021; Mullins, 2021). Granular studies of screenplays are crucial to such an endeavour. While Media Studies methods – including textual analysis – expose failings of representations, and industry initiatives work to increase participation, there is little attention paid to how the structural choices at the level of the script can exclude marginalised perspectives, while relying on so-called universal experiences. As Glenda Hambly reminds us, of the dominance of classic Hollywood narratives, “it is time the screenwriting discourse was expanded to include the Australian narrative form and other approaches” (2020, p. 58).

Screenwriting's hidden curriculum

A screenwriting canon that is circumscribed by Hollywood's influence promotes a set of values in both overt and covert ways. As already suggested, its screenplays perpetuate a narrow model of “good” screenwriting that, in the absence of challenges from diverse and alternative values, comes to be normative. This effect is seen in screenwriting curricula and how-to manuals that set forth what Janelle Adsit (2019) has called a “craft canon”, where approaches such as the three-act plot structure, complex characters and “naturalistic” dialogue are privileged almost universally. While troubling, the definition of “good screenwriting” can be productive in the classroom, but, given the regimes of restricted access to texts outlined earlier, it is difficult to avoid reproducing the values of a largely homogenous industry. The result is a self-perpetuating model of success, where educators distribute and reward a canon of screenplays that are almost always of films that have been produced, widely released and awarded.

But a curriculum that over-relies on Hollywood screenplays also absorbs and recycles that industry's values and biases in more subtle ways. Movements to diversify and subvert a curriculum's values arguably begin with diagnosing and identifying its “hidden curriculum”. While the formal curriculum describes the knowledge and skills that educators intentionally

teach to students through courses, lessons, materials and learning activities, the hidden curriculum includes the unwritten, unofficial and often unintended lessons in values and perspectives that students learn through the implicit and unacknowledged communication of social and cultural messages (Margolis et al., 2001). Structures of oppression that permeate the world beyond the classroom – such as racialisation, masochism, classism and colonialism – inevitably also enter and infuse university curriculum structures and content; that is, they determine which knowledges are taught and tested, and how.

This is arguably nowhere truer than in the case of screenwriting, given that its origins and practices are more deeply embedded in “real-world” industry than they are in academia. At the same time, Canadian First Nations scholar Marie Battiste (2005) points out that practices of generating scholarly knowledge, such as essay writing and textual analysis, are themselves technologies of the Eurocentric knowledge system. This would suggest that moving the self-reinforcing biases of Hollywood monoculture into the academic arena, where they can be iteratively reproduced through the curricular tools of scholarly knowledge production, represents a doubled attack on more equitable and representative screenwriting futures.

In talking with screenwriting teachers around the world about this phenomenon, principally through the Screenwriting Research Network, some distinct trends have become clear. The screenwriting canon’s hidden curriculum privileges:

- ☐ Commercial rather than independent or community production – in other words, the kind of representation that can satisfy the requirements of corporate funders
- ☐ The construction of stories in English, specifically a class- and race-privileged form of North American English
- ☐ Writing by people who are white, cis, heterosexual, non-disabled men
- ☐ Characters who are white, cis, heterosexual, non-disabled men

Furthermore, an emphasis on Hollywood screenplays encourages students to think along lines that are particularly driven by the commercial market. This emphasises a very narrow version of what a successful screenplay looks like: it must be popular on a global, mass scale, with little room for creative experimentation and engaging genuinely niche audiences, and its storytelling must aim to attract audiences, rather than challenge them. Indeed, some screenwriting teachers explicitly describe their method for selecting screenplays for teaching as based on the biggest box office, because they want to teach students to write commercially successful films (Velikovsky, 2016). But when students are reading screenplays that have commonly been produced with multi-million-dollar budgets and well-known stars, it implies that this is the kind of success that matters and that students should want to pursue. However, this practice can have the opposite effect: it can alienate students from seeing a future place for themselves as screenwriters, because the vision of success painted by their reading lists exists only in a rarefied and unattainable social stratosphere.

Globally, screenwriting syllabi heavily feature Hollywood screenplays, even in areas such as Europe and South America, where the focus is less on reading and teaching in the English

language. Our focus here is largely on Australian screenwriting teaching and so, to a certain extent, teaching lots of Hollywood screenplays reflects wider trends in Australian media consumption and production. Nevertheless, teaching Hollywood screenplays effectively reinforces that industry's position of global cultural dominance and its biases privileging a narrow range of writers and stories. In fact, in many ways, the biases of Hollywood, the screen industry and tertiary education overlap in their heavy investment in capitalism and patriarchal white supremacy. Though, screenwriting seems even more invested in these biases than the teaching of other creative writing genres, where there is often more focus on the local and "high culture" values of the literary. Historically, screenwriting pedagogical principles and practices have not developed in the same way, or at the same rate, as their formal counterparts, such as prose, poetry and playwriting. That is to say, screenwriting has not seen the same advances made in other forms of writing where feminist, queer and post-colonial critiques of subjectivity have prompted innovation. For instance, there has been no theoretical moment like *L'écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976), which invites writers of all genders to occupy marginalised positions as a disruptive force.

Tracing the flows of power from screen industry to tertiary education and back again demonstrates a circular, mutually reinforcing relationship and set of ideologies. This entrenched relationship stymies change. In this way, screenwriting teaching seems slower to change than other forms of tertiary creative writing teaching. Indeed, this can impede even the limited frame of creativity and innovation for which commercial media claims to be so hungry.

Rethinking the relationship between industry and education

We observe that if critical reworking has typically come more slowly to the discipline of screenwriting than to other genres of creative writing, then this is due to a fundamental debt to the former's industry machinations for the source of its canon. Compare this to, say, the literary canon, which is much less a product of the book publishing industry and more a product of the political-ideological forces outlined in our introduction – which have historically instrumentalised university literature departments to develop and affirm nationalisms (Guillory, 1993; Kolbas, 2018). There is a certain sense in this; after all, a key objective for most screenwriting courses is to prepare students for work in the screen industry. However, it is important to note that the process and event of screenwriting are intellectually and creatively rewarding in their own more-than-commercial ways, too (Batty et al., 2016).

The reasons for screenwriting's relationship with industry are also partly historical: screenwriting education occupies a contingent position in higher education, where it is variously aligned with screen production, creative writing, professional writing, Media Studies and Literary Studies. This varies regionally, where screenwriting is more frequently taught in film schools (USA) or in creative writing programs (UK), and sometimes appears in the curricula of English or Media Studies departments, though a thorough survey of the pedagogical field is needed to confirm these placements and establish their patterns. It also varies in different kinds of post-secondary educational institutions, where some are more vocationally oriented than others. These disciplinary associations carry attendant pedagogical

values and practices. In the context of disciplines such as Creative Writing and Literary Studies, screenwriting may stand out for its especially intimate connection with industry, whereas in the context of screen production, screenwriting sometimes carries connotations more closely aligned with artistic practice than technological processes. We highlight these comparisons and associations here for what they reveal about issues of canon formation and strategies for challenging accepted wisdoms and established practices. Notably, screenwriting subjects in higher education have grown enormously in popularity over recent decades, in part due to the screen industry's diminished role in providing training (Gulino, 2023) and the massification of higher education.

However, a key outcome of its more intimate linkage with industry is that screenwriting, as a discipline, can serve as a canary in the coal mine for other creative disciplines. Since at least the early 2010s, creative disciplines face increasing pressure to tie educational experiences and outcomes to industrial sectors and to renovate curricula towards producing 'work-ready', 'employable' graduates (Tomlinson, 2012). A decade later, this pressure has been carried forward into informing priorities in "research, policy development, metrics, university ranking criteria and student choice", now becoming "a key area of attention" for social organs including government bodies (Broadley et al., 2023, p. xxxiii). The danger we note is that a curriculum regulated by transnational market capitalism inhibits the flourishing of local, diverse and critical scholarship and the teaching of it. We argue that the screenwriting discipline's industrial embeddedness has diminished its ability to respond to critical movements: movements that have, in other disciplines, effectively shaped epistemology. Screenwriting has seemed at times impervious to these waves of critique, seemingly because of the discipline's entrenchment of the normative power that flows from market-driven Hollywood into the university. What, then, can creative university disciplines more broadly learn from screenwriting about the hazards of uncritically welcoming an ethos of job-ready commercial success?

Calls to action: Refusing the call of the mainstream canon

If activism implies breaking a power cycle – finding its softest spots and applying our deftest tools – then we will now argue for the importance of reforming the use of reading lists to make them more relevant, less market-serving, more affirmative and future-making tools. University classrooms are nodes in a circuit that reproduces power, and never more so when industry is explicitly invited in to regulate student outcomes. We advocate a rethinking of the screenwriting canon through making more diverse screenplays and writers more accessible, developing teaching practices that include the knowledges and aims students bring to the curriculum, and emphasising the complexity of power relations and ethical representation in and around screenplays, in ways that more explicitly open up viable, accessible alternatives to the hidden curriculum.

Addressing the many problems of the screenwriting canon will be a messy, tangled web of aims and processes – we have only begun by drawing attention to it and the "hidden curriculum" it represents. To clarify these aims and strategies for activism, educators can learn from the transformations of other disciplines and the arts more broadly. Griselda Pollock (1999)

usefully separates some of the possible strategies for intervening in the canon of art, including rejecting, replacing or reforming the canon. Fundamentally, Pollock argues for a more radical understanding of the relationships between power, knowledge and subjectivity with implications beyond the study of art in and of itself, facilitating new conceptions and practices of representation and difference in society. Given the enormous global influence of screen media in the production of difference and identity, activism around the screenwriting canon could have extensive implications. Although these ambitions may sound grand, we also suggest that activism can begin immediately with some fragmentary, piecemeal actions.

The two scenes of canon formation laid out above – traditional publishing and screen producers making screenplays available – are also potential sites for activism. We would welcome change from the publishing and screen industries themselves in facilitating access to a significantly greater variety of screenplays.

Site of activism #1: Government agencies publishing screenplays

Government agencies in many countries aim to foster equitable industrial cultures, creative innovation and authentic storytelling in their screen sectors (Moore & O'Meara, 2021). Supporting screen education can be an important part of achieving these goals. Government agencies that fund screen production could shift the range of available screenplays radically by making the screenplays they fund freely available online. Despite the limitations on the kinds of screenplays that government agencies fund, this could substantially alter the diversity of writers and characters represented in available screenplays and include screenplays for films that are not necessarily commercially successful. In this way, governments could increase the international influence and soft power of the films they fund. If a handful of the government screen agencies around the world made screenplays they fund available, this would not only contribute to a more diverse global pool of teaching resources, it would also enable more genuine localism in some screenwriting teaching. This would support teaching and learning around comparisons between screenwriting values and priorities in different nations and cultures, something that is currently rather limited.

For example, Screen Australia funds the development and production of around twenty feature films, ten television dramas and a handful of online projects each year (Screen Australia, 2022). There exists, then, the opportunity for government screen institutions to play a significant role by supporting the digital distribution of Australian screenplays, both for the purposes of learning and teaching, and to elevate Australian screenwriting for the broader population by encouraging a wide readership. Such a move would significantly enhance reading lists for educators of screenwriting and thus give them the resources with which to focus syllabi around the unique screenwriting practices of Australia and the Asia-Pacific. Such an initiative could see Australia leading the way for the screen funding agencies from other nations to make the scripts they fund freely available, which would, importantly, challenge the influence Hollywood wields on global screenwriting curricula and on the next generation of screenwriters.

Site of activism #2: Encouraging critical conversations around reading lists

We advocate a greater critical distance between industry and education, so we turn our attention now to the sites of activism most salient for screenwriting educators. Learning from the student-led “Why is My Curriculum White?” movement (Peters, 2018), screenwriting educators would be wise to listen to student desires for a greater diversity of writers and characters, encouraging a more explicit and fruitful conversation about what reading lists should look like and what role they should play in learning. Such conversations may help educators to recognise and engage with their increasingly diverse student body and ensure teaching is relevant and up to date. In particular, it would be useful to consider the relation between what students read for class and their “public pedagogy” – that is, the learning they already draw from the diverse, non-Hollywood media sites with which they engage beyond their study (O'Malley et al., 2020). When students and educators share examples of alternative and dissident storytellers and texts, it challenges and extends the fields of reference both groups bring to the conversation. Ultimately, reading lists might well include a few screenplays from the old canon, but situate and read them in more conscious and critical ways. A mutually beneficial conversation between students and educators could produce new reading lists and new frameworks through which to understand those readings, putting into practice a critical relationship with industrial values.

Screenwriting educators seeking guidance and peer solidarity in pursuing this site of activism might look to the contemporary discourse on Students as Partners. Arising from within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, research in this area allows for the possibility that learning is increased when teaching staff draw on students as consultants into the development of syllabi, assessment, research projects and curricula (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Kelly Matthews's (2017) sensitive exploration of what happens to power when critical conversations are encouraged around the way that knowledge is presented and taught highlights the fact that the Students as Partners movement does not pretend to eliminate power – this would be impossible and even undesirable. Rather, while encouraging more “horizontal” relationships between teacher and student, Students as Partners places at the centre of student consciousness the work that power does in unevenly constructing and distributing knowledge (Matthews, 2017, p. 2). Of even more pertinence to Screenwriting Studies and its industry-influenced canon, engaging students in collaboratively building alternative reading lists can act as a site of resistance to industry compromise. As Matthews notes, “[because] of its focus on dialogic practices, partnership provides a counter-narrative to current neoliberal agendas that translate into client-commodity-customer discourses of students and fee-for-service models of higher education driven by economic forces that trump broader social agendas” (2017, p. 2).

Site of activism #3: Designing engaging and rigorous syllabi

Listening to what students want is important, but there is also the need for educators to navigate the complexities of these preferences, because students are as vulnerable to the dominant ideologies represented by Hollywood as anyone else. The point here is not to rail against industry connection. Indeed, studies show that learning can benefit when a curriculum draws on and becomes relevant to the multiple industrial and civic communities to which a student belongs at any one time (Goodwin et al., 2019). At the same time, it is important to develop

measures and methods that safeguard scholarship and critical education from becoming mired in their debts to industry. While it is not unusual for students to question commercial exemplars, it is also not uncommon for students to have little interest in screenwriting beyond, say, the Marvel Universe. A broader, more diverse and contemporary canon enables educators to introduce story models beyond the classic Hollywood narratives, voices beyond the mainstream and more varied perspectives on the form. Most importantly, in the case of their emerging voices, resourcing students with Australian screenwriting in their libraries and reading lists facilitates the conditions for students to situate themselves within their immediate communities of practice, and develop understandings of the demands of the local industry and the appetites and trends of their potential audiences.

Understanding and envisaging professional futures within local industries is furthermore a productive way to reckon with the gravitation of university curricula towards developing students' "work-readiness". As noted above, one positive outcome of Screenwriting Studies' close relationship with industry may be its capacity to, as a result, offer a clarion call for activists working in this and other creative disciplines who are concerned by such apparent industry incursions into disciplinary study. Notably, one response to the pressure on universities to deliver measurable employability outcomes has been a growing discourse around "work integrated learning" (WIL). WIL refers to activities such as internships (Cooper et al., 2010, p. 1), but can equally reference classroom activities that rehearse workplace skills, such as interpersonal communication, teamwork, problem-solving, initiative, planning and self-management (Kaider et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2020). At first blush benign, these skills are nevertheless only a partial interpretation of what it means to sell and perform labour for industrial entities driven by the more-or-less regulated imperatives of neoliberalism.

The teaching of screenwriting can scaffold and embed teaching of screenplays with more explicit analysis of writers' relations within industrial structures and practices of power. For instance, at the time of writing, the Writers Guilds of America (West and East) recently concluded a strike lasting over four months, winning for their members better wages, residual payments from streaming services for their work and job protections against the use of artificial intelligence (Darcy & Isidore, 2023) – a cause for which the Australian Writers' Guild has pledged its solidarity (Vann-Wall, 2023). The most vulnerable members of those unions are those whose works are produced outside of the mainstream and/or for niche markets. Australian students at least are interested in these developments and what they tell us about how the screen industry operates, in the USA and locally. There is appetite for case studies that explore the relations between storytelling forms, working conditions and the practice of writing. Most importantly, students are interested in finding out what this means for the kinds of screenplays filmmakers want to produce. Extending the breadth of the canon has a direct impact by exposing students to screenplays that have aspirations beyond the commercial success promised by prescriptive Hollywood structures. The screenplays behind these alternative offerings supply students with new and often innovative ways to represent voices from the margins, thus serving to help students understand the value of solidarity for underrepresented and underserved communities. Understandings of screenwriting craft and, for research candidates, screenwriting practice research, can only be enhanced by extending resources

beyond the canon, which is dominated by racialised, patriarchal structures. The suggestion is not to abandon the existing canon but to provide exposure to contemporary alternatives, extending students' capacity for understanding the exercise of power and how to view the canon through that lens. Screenplays that disrupt and/or innovate entrenched models of narrative structure can be exemplars for ethical representation and bolster understandings of stories and voices beyond some of the life experiences of the cohort.

We note that, just as perpetuating the status quo demands additional labour for screenwriting educators in sourcing and compiling reading lists, these sites of activism also require significant labour. Further, increases in academic workload are frequently unevenly distributed, in a sector where teaching roles are still often precariously held and disproportionately held by female-identifying workers. As female-identifying academics ourselves, we accept that the pedagogy of care we promote works on the back of values traditionally ascribed to women, and we therefore encourage self-reflexiveness on the part of all our readers in determining their capacity to take up our call. For our part, all four authors are university workers with a teaching allocation; all of us have experienced, for more than ten years, the pressures of precarity on professional practice, and all of us having witnessed the feminisation (and thus undervaluing and under-resourcing) of teaching within academia.

Conclusion

Courting a sense of resolution through a neat conclusion to an open call for activism across three broad sites could only be disingenuous. What we would say, however, is that more systematic research is needed to consolidate and quantify the claims we have made in this article, which have extended primarily from our observations as participant-researchers and long-term educators in Screenwriting Studies (O'Meara, Taylor & Moore) and Creative Writing curriculum design (Are). It is hoped that in the process of gauging the extent and nature of industry's effect on screenwriting's practice in higher education, further studies in this area would simultaneously document the ways in which our infinitely talented and resourceful colleagues in academia, in Australia and internationally, are teaching new generations of screenwriting practitioners to engage critically with new reading lists that challenge, reckon with, diversify and put a local spin on the screenwriting canon. In view of our activist intent, part of our task in identifying the issues that characterise Screenwriting Studies' intertwinement with dominant screen industries is to offer, at the same time, some possible solutions – or at least, reasons to hope that, working together, solutions are imminent.

For this reason, we have looked to scholarship emerging from other creative fields embedded in academia, which demonstrates that there are well-established pedagogical approaches whose very nature inculcates values that connect students to professional communities in industry while offering alternatives to the neoliberal values of industry engagement that confront universities in the contemporary moment. Namely, we suggest that Screenwriting Studies attends more explicitly in teaching to power relations and ethical practices for developing collaborative writing. In particular, screenplays within the canon and beyond can be analysed productively in the classroom for what they reveal about the very real impacts of an uneven

distribution of representational power. Similarly, students are eager to learn about examples and limits of ethical representation, working through examples of screenplays that demonstrate the richness of writing from lived experience, the kinds of stories that emerge from positions of representational self-determination and the limitations to the right to represent other positionalities in imaginative writing. In contemporary screenwriting, these social competencies are becoming essential “workplace skills”, which tertiary teaching is particularly well-placed to cultivate. In effect, the critical approach to analysing a wider range of screenplays, and the industrial or community contexts from which they emerge, can help students to see the social relations that feed into the document of the screenplay. Additional research will see us investigating the extent to which teaching practice is currently – and could further be – realised in classrooms of screenwriting and other creative disciplines.

Reading lists are just one element in the design of a good syllabus, but given their centrality to the student experience, they should be re-evaluated and redesigned to better serve wider teaching and learning goals. It is gratifying to see relevant scholarly dialogue currently emerging among educators participating in the Comparative Screenwriting Teaching working group as part of the Screenwriting Research Network. This demonstrates intellectual appetite for pedagogical discussions, insights and reworkings. Yet, creating change is serious work and educators should be resourced and incentivised to do this, particularly since the standard systems of library collections particularly neglect the needs of screenwriting teaching.

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